

Community Needs, Scholarly Imperatives, and the Art of Regional Change

What is a media activist like me doing leading a new academic program at a top-notch research university? This is a question I ask myself a lot as I struggle with the challenges posed by doing university-community engagement projects involving scholars from a variety of disciplines and residents in far-flung locales.

For twenty years I've helped social action groups around the globe use media tools to explore issues and develop solutions for the places they live. These projects amplify underrepresented voices, spotlight overlooked histories and galvanize civic participation via the big screen, the airwaves, gallery walls and the worldwide-web. This kind of work has always been hard to fund and it's only getting tougher with today's economy.

Meanwhile, universities are looking for creative ways to reach out to the communities that surround them and have the resources to do engagement projects. It occurred to me, living in a college town, that I could design the kind of participatory, social-change-oriented media projects I'm passionate about in a way that meets the university's needs. Around the same time, two of my colleagues on campus—Carolyn de la Peña who directs the Humanities Institute and Jonathan London who directs the Center for Regional Change—were exploring innovative ways to involve students and scholars in community projects. So we put these puzzle pieces together and created the ART OF REGIONAL CHANGE (ARC) at the University of California Davis.

ARC is a university-community engagement program that brings scholars, students and artists together with local groups to collaborate on media arts projects that strengthen communities, generate engaged scholarship, and inform regional decision-making. These projects take place in UC Davis' home region: Northern California's Central Valley and Sierra Nevada mountains.

Because I have a deep background in program development, have managed multiple community projects and taught at UC Davis as a lecturer for almost a decade, I thought establishing a media arts program within an academic setting would be smooth sailing. As it turned out, while I may be uniquely qualified for the job, creating and implementing a community-centered project from within the university has been bumpy. The kinds of skills that made me successful in the past—collaborative planning, collective decision-making, popular education, creating media with and for community change agents—do not translate gracefully into the bureaucratic systems and professional standards of academia.

This piece opens with an exploration of the origins of ARC, paying close attention to the unique and universal qualities of this collaborative work between university and community groups. Next, it provides a case study illustrating the benefits and challenges in carrying out projects that partner humanities-based scholars with "real"-world community advocates in new and compelling ways. The value of ARC, as I see it, is not only in promoting the role of engaged humanities in our everyday lives but also in developing mutually beneficial partnerships that lead to effective policies and practices improving the lives of those we serve.

Program Rationale

More than ever, universities want to be seen as active and responsive to local communities, scholars want their research to be more relevant to the public, students want opportunities for field-based learning, and taxpayers want to see that their money is making in a difference outside the ivory tower. Engaged humanities programs within academic institutions can be designed to meet these diverse goals.

Communities, on the other hand, are searching for ways to communicate their issues and experiences to decision-makers, to allies and to each other. They want resources to document and present their cultures, histories, struggles and strategies for change. They need cultural workers, like me, equipped with the facilitation skills and equipment to help them craft their stories in aesthetically compelling ways and get them out to target audiences.

Communities also need academics to help ground their stories in research that connects their daily life to historical trends, current data and future forecasts. Ultimately, research is what shapes policy and influences decision-makers. Scholarship that is informed by community voices, linked to social movements and historically grounded can be particularly powerful in effecting social change.

In 2008 we created the ART OF REGIONAL CHANGE (ARC),¹ an engaged humanities program designed to support public scholarship, student research and community development. We were able to secure institutional seed funding by articulating how ARC offered a strategic means to meet both university goals and community needs.

As a new program, we are experimenting with institutional structures and academic norms. Institutionally, for example, ARC is a joint initiative of two centers located in two different colleges: the Davis Humanities Institute (DHI),² in the College of Letters and Science, and the Center for Regional Change (CRC),³ in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. This cross-college partnership, while unusual, is intentional. It

necessitates a trans-disciplinary approach to our research and community engagement work and helps us tap into wider social action networks, funding streams, publication opportunities and communication outlets.

In terms of academic norms, another innovation is to bring a practitioner like me in to direct the program. I'm not a scholar and I don't have an advanced terminal degree—which makes me an outlier in most quarters of this research university. My career thus far has been in the non-profit sector. So bringing me in to lead an academic program is a highly unusual step, one that recognizes that community-centered projects require skills not typically found on a scholar's resume. I was brought in because of my ability to facilitate collaborative media projects that result in individual, organizational and social transformation. In particular, university administrators were attracted by my track record in forging effective cross-sector partnerships, negotiating complex community processes and engaging citizens in producing their own media productions. It didn't hurt that I am a nationally recognized expert in community media with a few awards under my belt.

Program Model

In ARC, we bring folks together who have very different ways of understanding the world, engaging with it and representing it. Specifically, we bring humanists, artists, social scientists and residents from a particular geographic location together to collaborate on projects that can generate community change and produce university scholarship.

There are four key components to ARC's approach: Our work is place-based, interdisciplinary, story-centered, and utilizes the media arts.

PLACE-BASED PROJECTS Having a geographic location gives us a container to focus our efforts. Examining a place and what that place means to residents and academics alike creates common ground for all project participants. It enables communities to reflect on their history and struggles and embeds scholars in the process of community construction and collaborative research. Telling stories by, for, with, and about a place creates a connection between the past and the present that enriches both.

INTERDISCIPLINARY EMPHASIS Bringing together different disciplines and experiences leverages perspectives better to identify issues and develop solutions for the places we live. The interaction of humanists, artists, social scientists and residents helps forge the knowledge and alliances necessary to effect change. The convergence of such a diverse group challenges all to consider, to translate, to stretch, and ultimately to sharpen their thinking. It

also tends to strengthen the connection among project participants to a place and heighten their investment in making it better.

A FOCUS ON STORYTELLING Telling stories is something we all do every day in the course of our interaction with each other. The distinction comes with the tools and methods we use to do so. Humanists produce narratives by studying history, literature and culture. Social scientists generate reports using empirical evidence, maps and models. Artists render experiences utilizing canvases, cameras, and clay. And community members relay accounts of daily life, personal experiences and political struggle through conversations, meetings and dialogues. A focus on storytelling acknowledges diverse ways of communicating experiences while valuing different kinds of expertise.

USING MEDIA ARTS Video, audio, photography and websites are versatile storytelling tools. They can be used for documenting process, conducting research and communicating findings in creative and compelling ways (e.g., photo-blogs, do-it-yourself google maps, audio slideshows, video documentaries). Mediamaking is relevant and engaging to wildly diverse groups—youth, community leaders, academics, organizational representatives—who have something to say and generates products that can be distributed through multiple platforms such as radio, television, the web, exhibitions, DVDs, and community screenings.

With these core components as a foundation, we design ARC projects to address a community question, need or aspiration. Sometimes the projects are initiated in community settings and other times they result from my connecting the dots among local issues, groups focused on those concerns and funding opportunities. Either way, they are planned and implemented in partnership with a community organization. These endeavors involve faculty and students who want to engage in a community-based project and residents who are game to learn how to use the tools of technology to tell their stories. The projects generate community media (public-access TV, community audio tours, local screenings/dialogues), social media (YouTube, Facebook) and public media (NPR and PBS programs, museum exhibits) to reach different audiences. They also produce educational materials that accompany the media productions or essays and research papers based on the project. I co-direct the projects with a community partner, university scholar or advisory group and facilitate the media production and distribution efforts.

Case Study

Let me turn now to how ARC's model played out in one of our pilot projects, *Passion for the Land*.

Passion for the Land focuses on the Sierra Valley, a spectacularly large alpine valley surrounded by majestic forests located in the Northeastern Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Valley is about 200 square miles, roughly four times the size of San Francisco. At an elevation of 5000 feet, it is sparsely populated with a few thousand residents living in and around a few scattered small towns and vast tracts of open space in the form of ranchlands, farms and wetlands (twenty-five percent of water for the state comes from this watershed). There is only one incorporated city, Loyalton (population 862), and the county seat is fifty miles away, over a 7000-foot mountain. Most residents are livestock ranchers, loggers and former loggers.

Over the past decade, residents of this remote area have begun to feel that their land and rural way of life is under threat. Sierra Valley is located just thirty minutes from Reno and the Tahoe/Truckee area—a growing metropolis and burgeoning recreational mecca. Urbanites and boomers attracted by country living and priced out of their hometowns have started to relocate to the quieter, less expensive Sierra Valley. This has led to both planned and speculative residential development, creating pressure to change zoning laws to allow vacation homes and subdivisions to be built amongst ranches. Housing tracts and livestock ranches don't usually mix well. While newcomers like the nostalgia of country living, sometimes they see routine agricultural activities as nuisances and complain or take steps to stop them. Recently, local government officials have started to question whether agriculture, one of the main industries, is the most viable use of the land. Some see growing homes and golf courses as a more viable economic strategy to boost the ailing rural economy.

On top of that, new state environmental regulations require that Sierra Valley ranchers monitor water quality on streams that flow through their property. These regulations are based on pesticide use hundreds of miles away in California's Central Valley. The new rules apply to all Ag operators in the a region that runs from Kern to Modoc county (an area larger than the state of Kentucky) regardless of the type of agriculture, actual pesticide usage or genuine threat to water quality. Because Sierra Valley is remote and at the top of a watershed, it is unclear to residents why they need to monitor their water in the same way farmers do downstream, where water has moved through hundreds of miles of agricultural fields sprayed by pesticides and through cities that discharge pollutants in the groundwater. Water testing, analyzing and reporting is costly and no state funds are provided to comply with the new rules, creating an economic strain for family farms. Since there aren't hydrologists and labs in Sierra Valley, money paid out for doing this

water-quality testing is left to the local economy, which is still reeling from a string of mill shutdowns.

All this has caused Sierra Valley residents to feel that land and water use decisions are being made by people who are out of touch with local needs and practices. They sensed that decision makers were uninformed on the benefits that working landscapes provide to people, wildlife, and the local economy. Residents wanted to have a greater voice in decisions that directly impact them in order to preserve the community's heritage while protecting agriculture and natural resources for future generations. To do that, greater communication between rural residents and decision-makers locally and at the state capitol was needed.

The person who was hearing directly from ranchers and residents about these issues is Holly George, the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Director for Plumas-Sierra Counties, the two jurisdictions that make up the Sierra Valley.⁴ UCCE is set up to do outreach and education around rural development needs and issues. Holly's job involves listening to concerns on the ground and providing technical assistance to residents around issues like land use planning, water monitoring and livestock health. The other part of her job is to share those issues, concerns and stewardship practices with researchers and policymakers. She often finds herself speaking on behalf of rural residents about their needs and land management practices.

Holly wanted to find a way to be less of an information broker between parties and more of a convener of dialogue among residents and decision-makers. She had participated in a regional media project⁵ I co-directed a few years back and since then had been intrigued by the possibilities of community-produced media to foster public dialogue and motivate citizen engagement in policymaking. So she approached me about doing a media project that could help Sierra Valley residents engage with decision-makers about the contributions and challenges of preserving agriculture, open space and rural lifeways.

Since Holly was looking to do a place-based media project and was excited by the idea of bringing diverse scholars and students to the effort, her pitch was a great fit for ARC. So we secured a grant and co-directed a collaborative project involving rural residents, academics and artists. Because Holly has long-established relationships in the valley, she was able to recruit a diverse group of ranchers and farmers (ages 25-85) to participate. On my end, ARC recruited two scholars, a historian of the West and a geographer focused on agricultural sustainability, and a graduate student studying community development. Through the geographer, we also brought in a small group of his undergraduate students studying rural change.

From this evolved the *Passion for the Land* project which aims to amplifi-

ty the voices of rural residents in dialogues about policy, land use and community development. The idea was to produce digital stories designed to spark discussions with policymakers, legislators and diverse audiences about resource stewardship, agricultural viability and sustaining rural communities. The process was fairly simple. Collectively, project participants spent about a year thinking together about storylines and producing twelve digital stories—short, first-person videos that combine a scripted narration with still images and a soundtrack.⁶ We did this through a series of production workshops. In one series of workshops, storytellers voiced contributions and challenges to agriculture and resource stewardship, shared story ideas, drafted scripts and got feedback from others on framing, accuracy, and tone. In another series of workshops, Cooperative Extension staff learned how to record and edit the pieces. We also held a *Community Recording Day* where storytellers recorded the audio for their stories and brought in images to go with their narratives; UCCE staff learned how to make the recordings and capture images; and UC Davis faculty and students got to meet with storytellers, discuss research they could do to add to the project, and go on ranch tours to hear first-hand from locals about their places and concerns. UC Davis scholars and students had a chance to work with the storytellers again by viewing their works-in-progress and sharing feedback on strengths, areas for improvement and any concerns they had about how ideas were presented. This feedback was folded into the final editing of the stories, which was divided up among UCCE staff, the graduate student, and myself.

It's one thing to produce the stories. It's another to make sure they are seen by the decision-makers the project was designed to reach and used by educators and community leaders who want to deepen the dialogue about agricultural viability, rural sustainability and resource stewardship. To reach these audiences, Holly and I held a series of planning meetings with storytellers, faculty, project staff and representatives from statewide organizations that work on related issues to discuss who should see these stories and how to reach them.

As a result of these meetings, we created a DVD compilation of the twelve stories, a discussion guide and a plan for how different project stakeholders would integrate the stories into their outreach, education, and community development efforts. Over the past eight months, we have implemented the plan, circulating the stories online, over the airwaves, and in educational, community and public-policy settings. The stories have been seen by 4652 viewers through social media outlets (YouTube, BlipTV, Facebook), by an estimated 60,000 viewers through community television channels and by roughly 1000 people at twenty public presentations.⁷ These screenings and associated dialogue sessions occurred at community meetings (Rotary, Soroptomist, Slow Food), regional events (County Fair, Home-

grown Festival), conferences (Western Folklife Center, California Cattlemen's Association, Rangeland Coalition Summit), workshops (California Preservation Foundation, California Council of Resource Conservation Districts) and government meetings (Plumas County Planning Commission, Nevada County Ag Commission).

In addition, educators, state agencies and business organizations are distributing DVDs to target audiences. For example, the California Teachers Association provided copies to all Northern California high-school agricultural teachers (about 100) to use in their classrooms while the Sierra Nevada Conservancy gave out 200 copies to participants on Ag Tours in El Dorado and Placer Counties—two of the fastest-growing in the Sierra Nevada dealing with land use and ranching issues. The California Beef Cattle Improvement Association is giving out 100 DVDs to attendees of their upcoming tour of Sierra Valley involving Val Dolcini, the Executive Director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Although we are still in the process of evaluating this project, there are a number of outcomes that have clearly emerged:

- Our community partner, UCCE, developed the capacity to produce and use media as part of its outreach and education work. UCCE staff report having greater media literacy and ability to craft and distribute digital stories for rural development purposes.
- Regional and statewide organizations dealing with agricultural viability, natural resource management and rural sustainability such as California Rangeland Trust, Defenders of Wildlife, and Sierra Business Council gained access to unique, relevant media pieces and are using them in their outreach and policymaking efforts.
- Rural communities in and around the Sierra Valley have stories to use in their local problem-solving and change efforts. The project videos, for example, are being used in land use planning workshops and are being presented through briefings at the Capitol.
- Sierra Valley project participants feel more able to communicate with power brokers about concerns and make a difference in doing so. And they have signaled increased commitment to engaging in civic affairs.
- Students got to apply classroom learning in real-world contexts. As a result of farm visits and interviews with the Sierra Valley storytellers, a group of undergraduates produced a research paper outlining land use options, alternative ranching approaches and proposed economic development strategies. The graduate student involved in the project generated a series of papers and presentations on digital storytelling as a tool for

community problem-solving.

- Scholars connected their teaching to community concerns. The geographer who participated in the project, for example, organized the field trip and research support for the undergraduate students mentioned above and now shows the project videos in his courses to illustrate rural development issues.

One thing that did not emerge from this project is a deep and sustained interaction among scholars and Sierra Valley participants, the kind of networking and knowledge sharing that creates strong relationships across geographic/class/cultural divides, ensures that products are shaped by multiple perspectives and generates a shared ownership of project outcomes. This lack of interaction may occur, in part, because of the gaps in time between initiating community process, securing funding and recruiting scholars and because of the three-hour drive from UC Davis to Sierra Valley. But it also has to do with how faculty members prioritize their time. It was often harder to organize meetings with scholars on campus than with residents who lived hours away. I'd hear back via email from ranchers on dial-up sooner than from faculty on-line in the next building. And while Cooperative Extension staff pulled all-nighters to whip out the videos in time for the first public presentation and storytellers drove hours to participate in subsequent screenings and associated dialogue sessions, neither faculty member has found time over the past year to write about the project.⁸ This is not at all to say that the scholars weren't committed to the project. It is just that the their teaching and research obligations and the structure set up to reward their work doesn't line up well with community process and community-generated products.

Lessons Learned

ARC just turned two, and like other toddlers I'm still finding my land-legs in the engaged humanities terrain. Based on my experience with *Passion for the Land* and the two other projects we've completed to date,⁹ here is what I've found:

In terms of benefits, ARC gives the university a platform for doing innovative campus-community engagement projects while generating media products that support university research, classroom teaching and community development. ARC provides communities with access to university resources (scholars, students, artists), which entice local groups to participate. At the same time, it creates the means for university faculty (humanists, scientists and artists alike) to do public projects. Above all, it helps the

university make good on its commitment to serving the broader community through generating stories (a.k.a. research) that are relevant and useful in both university and community settings. In this way, ARC is a highly successful engaged humanities program.

At the same time, managing ARC poses a huge challenge. Involving faculty, students, artists, residents, university administrators and organizational partners creates a lot of moving parts. It's a steep learning curve for everyone involved since it requires learning new languages (every discipline has its own) and/or doing a lot of translation. Structurally, universities and community-based organizations operate at different ends of a continuum—with universities taking mind-boggling bureaucratic approaches while community groups make collective decisions and move forward quickly. Scholars, students, artists and activists have wildly diverse needs and work styles. Project-funders and university administrators have their own goals and strings attached. And timelines for the different project phases and participants' availability are hard to sync up. It's a messy, complicated and often tiring endeavor.

Why do I keep at it? Because it's clear to me that engaged scholarship is a way forward for both academia and the wider public. It is these kinds of efforts that effectively leverage diverse expertise to generate new ways of looking at issues, addressing problems and understanding the places we live. This multi-faceted approach to interpreting community life provides dynamic opportunities for action research, artistic practice and organizational capacity building—not to mention personal and professional growth for all those involved. They give community partners the tools and confidence to stand up for their needs and demands. They give scholars the chance to make their research relevant to current affairs. They generate products that positively impact how and what decisions get made inside boardrooms, council chambers and regulatory offices. In other words, programs like ARC wield terrific potential to effect positive social change.

That said, there are some key questions ARC, and probably other engaged humanities programs across the country, will need to address in order to thrive and survive within the university context. We need to figure out, for example, how to develop projects that have meaningful products and outcomes for both community members and the faculty who participate. The needs, cultures, and approaches to addressing questions are so different for scholars and activists. It will take creative problem-solving to discover how best to construct initiatives that are reciprocal and mutually beneficial to everyone involved.

We also need to determine when in our process to engage scholars to ensure their experience is brought to the table at the most useful moment and in meaningful ways. Faculty are hyper-busy and under intense pressure to

perform in order to move up the academic ranks. Is it optimal to have them participate in selected activities or does it make more sense to involve them throughout project development and implementation? Will they feel ownership of a project if they don't participate in its conceptualization? Can we really have a collaborative process if scholars drop in and out while community members keep plugging away? Or will it make the process smoother all around?

Whenever we determine it is best to involve faculty, we have to learn how to introduce scholars into community processes in a way that helps residents realize the benefits and make use of academic expertise. The term *scholar* often puts residents on the defensive, because traditionally it has been used to value classroom learning over lived experience. For many community members, what goes on in the ivory tower is far removed from daily life. Yet access to these thinkers could really help communities in their change-making efforts. Scholars are seasoned problem-solvers. Their careers are built on the ability to take a question, gather information about it, critically analyze it and share what they find in accurate and persuasive ways. They can translate seemingly everyday events and conditions and contextualize their greater significance and connection with previous practices. Humanists in particular are skilled at exploring questions related to ethics, justice and democracy—the concerns at the heart of most community struggles—and coming up with new interpretations that give greater meaning to experiences and histories. How do we convey to community members the utility of partnering with academics in ways that don't come off as “high-brow” or condescending?

On the flip side, how do we get scholars to invest in a process that they can't control and in which their voice is only one of many instead of the one framing the narrative? Most faculty are used to being the information brokers, not co-creators. How can we set up a different system where scholarship and lived experience are placed side-by-side and all partners have shared authority in producing knowledge through their particular form of storytelling? And how do we do this so that different ways of thinking and communicating form a dialogue with no one style being valued over another?

In addition, how can we expand what counts as scholarship? Most of the UC Davis faculty who got involved in ARC did so to explore the process of doing engaged scholarship and were game to figure out how to make the experience sync with their research. And they all reported benefiting from the experience. But because they operate within a merit system that doesn't recognize the type of products we create as bona fide scholarship, any time they spend on ARC projects competes with time for producing “real” research. To keep scholars engaged on a significant level in community pro-

jects, we have to push forward a different vision for what constitutes valid research. And to ensure that folks like me employed to bridge the campus-community divide can likewise move up through the academic system, we also need to make the case that products produced by, for and with communities (videos, trade-journal articles, exhibitions) count as scholarship.

Finally, we have to find a way to get funding for program operations and not just for projects. Like many humanities endeavors, ARC is supported mostly through a smattering of small grants. That means that while we are completing a given project we need to shift our focus to what's next and start generating proposals, creating tension between project wrap-up and project start-up. Because we do university-community projects, we want to involve community organizations and faculty in project conceptualization. But the resources for generating proposals don't usually line up with the timeline needed for creating a cohort and collectively developing a project. As a result, we end up putting in grants/before or outside of a community process and without the input of scholars. Then once we get the grant we have to start negotiating (with community participants, funders, scholars, administrators) how to align what we said we would do and what the group wants to do, which can be a tricky business. In order to engage in the slow, methodical processes necessary authentically to involve diverse stakeholders in forging a shared vision of project needs, activities and outcomes we need to become less dependent on grant funding.

What's Next?

Though I bristle at the intense bureaucracy of my new university home and the academic research paradigm often rubs me the wrong way, more and more I am feeling called to the engaged humanities work I've taken up. This powerful combination of activism, art, and inquiry has great potential to effect institutional and political change. It bridges my hopes, creative aspirations, and intellectual curiosity. And I think it creates the same kind of linkages for my colleagues—inside and outside the university.

ARC is a work-in-progress. Despite the many challenges that come with juggling the multiple tasks and stakeholders needed to realize the larger goals of ARC, I think we are off to a solid start. But we have a lot to do in terms of building our resources, improving our practices, articulating our value and developing structures and processes within the university really to support engaged scholarship. The long-term goal is to make ARC a viable project and a model for other university-community collaborations across the country. When we get there, maybe I'll start looking for my next job.

NOTES

1. The ART OF REGIONAL CHANGE was co-founded by a team comprised of a humanist, social scientist, and artist: Carolyn de la Peña, Professor of American Studies; Jonathan London, Assistant Professor of Community Development; and myself, a media artist with twenty years' experience creating collaborative projects around the globe that generate media literacy, community documentaries, and civic engagement.
2. The UC Davis Humanities Institute is an interdisciplinary research center that supports UC Davis faculty in the humanities and humanistically oriented social sciences through Intellectual Collaborations, Grant Assistance, and Event Support. <http://dhi.ucdavis.edu>
3. The UC Davis Center for Regional Change brings together faculty, students, and communities to collaborate on innovative research to create just, sustainable, and healthy regional change in California's Central Valley and Sierra Nevada.
4. UCCE is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension Service designed to help people use research-based knowledge to improve their lives. The service is provided by the state's designated land-grant universities. In most states the educational offerings are in the areas of agriculture and food, home and family, the environment, community economic development, and youth and 4-H.
5. The project, *Saving the Sierra: Voices of Conservation in Action*, used public radio, citizen storytelling and the internet to showcase community efforts to conserve the culture, economy and environment of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. <http://www.savingthesierra.org>
6. To see these digital stories visit http://artofregionalchange.ucdavis.edu/?page_id=53
7. Community television programs, provided over cable channels, do not have the resources to conduct audience surveys. They report only the number of cable subscribers in their system or their estimated viewing audience for any given program they broadcast. 60,000 refers to the total of potential viewers of *Passion for the Land* stories based on the three community TV stations who have aired them.
8. Faculty participants receive a modest stipend in exchange for participating in project meetings, engaging in project processes and contributing an essay reflecting on either their experience in the project or a research paper linking the project to their field of study.
9. Please see companion articles in this journal by ARC scholars Miroslava Chavez-Garcia and Michael Ziser.

A Chicana Scholar's Long Road to Engaging in Public Scholarship

Shortly after my thirteenth birthday, my parents and grandmother died in a freak car accident on our return to the United States from Christmas vacation in Mexico. My only brother, a year older, and I were the lone survivors of that tragic event. We had the fortune, however, to move in and live with our aunt and uncle who raised us, administered our small but precious inheritance (our parents' humble home, a bit of insurance money, and Social Security payments until we reached the age of eighteen), and provided us with educational opportunities. Despite most of our needs being met, I recall feeling empty during my high-school years, largely, I imagine, as a result of the loss of my parents. I also remember feeling unsure about the future, about what kind of life I wanted and what career I wanted to pursue. Normally, it is our parents who are the ones who shape our life decisions—for better or for worse—but when they are not around to help you make those decisions, many like myself, doubtless feel lost or at least a little unsure. I knew that my aunt and uncle, who had confidence in me, would support any decision I made for what to do after high-school graduation. Without having a clear sense of what I wanted to do, I knew, however, that I wanted to “give back” to the community, that is, assist in the Mexican and Mexican American community in particular. When I was accepted at the University of California, Los Angeles, nearly 300 miles from my hometown in northern California, I assumed I would do just that. But I had no idea what my commitment to working with the community would involve or what it would look like.

After finishing my bachelor's degree in history, I knew I wanted to continue in this field, partly because I had not made any really firm plans about what to do in the future, and also because of several professors who inspired me to work in recovering the history of my “community.” While I had engaged in some community work as an undergraduate, I dedicated much of my time to studying and playing sports—I was on the women's rowing or crew team, a sport I pursued for four years and that helped reshape my life in many ways. Contrary to my goals, I had done little for the “community,” though I had developed a strong community of friends, most of them on my team. My decision to pursue a Ph.D. in history and become a professor was based on my belief that I would then be able to make a difference in the “community,” by studying “our” history and making it available to Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and other minorities in the United States in general. Only then, I rationalized, would I be able to work toward making