9-3-2022

San José's Eastside: Forever My Home

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Prepared talk for the East Side Dreams Exhibit
The East Side's Impact in San Jose: A Conversation with Scholars
https://library.sjsu.edu/eastsidedreams

September 3, 2022
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library
San Jose State University

San José's Eastside: Forever My Home

Sal Si Puedes,
get out if you can,
they said, and I did
but not by choice.

Chemo Candelaria
and the Dominguez brothers,
Jesse and Henry,
stayed for the love of our people,
to fight against KJ and police brutality,
defying cultural, psychological,
economic, and political constraints,
contesting borders imposed by those
who sanction rules and laws
because they can,
forever seeking ways
to keep us in our place.
Sal si Puedes!
Get out if you can.

In San José,
despite relentless work,
community activist leaders remain
hidden and unacknowledged:
Jackson Kings,
Black Berets,
Oaxinas de Paz,
Mujeres de Aztlan,

Chicana Coalition,
Youth Getting Together,
Youth Defense Coalition, and
the UFW Eastside Organizing Committee
cloak forgotten *Raza*
who struggled
for the love or our *gente.*
Sal Si Puedes,
get out if you can!
For the love of our people,
inspired by César, Dolores,
José, Blanca, Sofie, Elisa, Ernie,
and Chicana poet, Lorna Dee Cervantes,
who wrote "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway"
saw it as a "blind worm, wrapping the valley up
from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes,"
as Chela Sandoval theorized knowledge
in *Methodology of the Oppressed*.
Sal Si Puedes!
Get out if you can.

Some stayed, others left.
As for me,
no matter where I'm at,
I carry San José's Eastside
in my heart.
Sal Si Puedes!
Get out if you can.

For the love of our people,
inspired by César, Dolores,
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Sal Si Puedes!
Get out if you can.

Some stayed, others left.
As for me,
no matter where I'm at,
I carry the Eastside of San José
in my heart—*por vida.*
Sal Si Puedes!
Get out if you can.

San José's *Sal Si Puedes* neighborhood became my home—a red-lined and controlled community where Mexican immigrants, Natives, Blacks, and Mexican American or Chicana/o workers lived, keeping poor, working-class, people of color out of exclusive areas.

We lived on Summer Street in a shotgun duplex before the *barrio* was wrecked to link Highway 101 with the 680 and 280, a few blocks away from Community Services Organization (CSO), where I once worked.

Sal Si Puedes and its mud sliding streets without sidewalks became my *barrio* where I avoided potholes on brief walks to attend weekly catechism at the old Guadalupe Church on Kammerer Street, now relocated and named McDonnel Hall in honor of Father Donald. In that small church, sister Sandra and Father Gabriel were our comfort. It was there that I painted Christmas scenes on windows and enrolled as a sixth grader at Lee Mathson—now named César E. Chávez Elementary, in recognition of the child who moved to San José with his family in the 1930's, who grew up to revolutionize farmer worker rights. In that *barrio*, it wasn't only language that made us feel at home, we shared a common culture and saw ourselves in each other. In *Sal Si Puedes,* I felt welcomed and supported at school, especially when Mr. Smith recognized my love of books, gifting me a copy of *Gulliver's Travels* to inspire my reading, although my language skills were limited.

For my family and me, when dilapidated houses were no longer available or had been sold, the Eastside became the place of our return. When The Alameda house was sold, Amá put me in charge of finding a new place. It was because of Rosie Davila, my friend, that the Zavalas rented us a three-bedroom house on Jerilyn Street, near the corner of Story and White Roads. Our stay was shortened when the owners sold the house to return to Texas, and we moved to Candler Street, then when Amá's name got to the to the top of the section eight list, she rented a house on Mt. Frazier, staying there until my youngest sister graduated from Mt. Pleasant. There, my siblings excelled as athletes—the San José Mercury-News even published a feature story about my younger sister's baseball skills; my brothers wrestled—one made it to all state—and all played football. When that house was sold, my mother, brother, and sister-in-law bought a place on Alum Rock near White—they now live in the East Foothills.

When I drive through the old neighborhoods, names of people who lived and worked in the area come to mind—Josie Sanchez, Lino Covarrubias, Carlos Gutierrez, Rosie Davila, Michal Mendoza, and many more. As I drive through the Eastside, I take note of the businesses that remain and grieve for those no longer there—MACSA, La Confederación, Project Intercept, G.I. Forum, and ARCC, for whom I was its first employee—I pass by the Grail and Somos Mayfair, and I mentally thank them for their services, as I recall Veronica's smile. At Jackson and McKee, I stop to buy a Lee's sandwich.

Fortunately, my return to the Eastside appears to be closer. My husband and I purchased a house—the same one we could've gotten in the mid-'70s had we qualified for a loan, redlining or covenant clauses aside. After living in San Antonio, Texas, for nearly thirty years and now retired, despite warnings against the cost of living and the expensive real estate, I can't wait to come back. Rooted

in the Eastside, I have a place to stay because the people who rent our property have reserved a room for us when we visit, in exchange for a discount.

The Disneyland of Barrios

My husband, who was born in Compton, California and lived in the greater LA area until the age of eighteen when he came to Stanford, dubbed *Sal Si Puedes* "The Disneyland of Barrios." For him, San José's poor neighborhoods were not comparable to those communities with which he was familiar. He had no clue, as most of us, that *Sal Si Puedes* had been established in 1911 or that it was an entry point for migrants and immigrants employed in canneries and agriculture.

With the stories of two people who shared their personal histories—Kathy Chavez Napoli, a self-made millionaire and third-generation resident of San José, and Anthony Soto who proudly claimed his ranching Arizona tradition, I continue.

Kathy and her family lived on Summer Street in a four-bedroom house remodeled by her father. "When the freeway came through," she said, "there was no fair market value … and the city relied on imminent domain to push us out." To connect the Highways, homesowners were underpaid for their houses. When the city took their properties, "all got the same buy out, regardless of size and upkeep." Unhappy with the process, Kathy's father took the case to court but he "lost his fight … [and] from having lived in a home that was completely paid off, he got into debt … with a two-bedroom house that was all the family could afford."

Communities change even when they appear to remain the same, and tract homes were built to attract buyers, using street names such as Bambi Lane, Peter Pan, and Cinderella. A new school, Mildred Goss Elementary, was built in the old neighborhood, and Kathy transferred to Goss where she learned about class, race, and ethnic differences. As she saw it, "the school was a white school … in brand new tract homes" with middle-class kids where she was an outsider, "even though the housing development was in our neighborhood." Children who lived in the new

homes regularly picked on students who lived in the old neighborhood, calling Kathy "a beaner," something that never happened in her old school. When she was sent to the principal, Kathy "got in trouble … and the other girl didn't."

In our *platicas* Chavez Napoli linked her activisms and involvement with the family's forced relocation. In her own body, she knew what it was like to be displaced. Then, when city government condemned the Guadalupe Auzerais neighborhood to build the convention center, urban renewal reared its ugly head when city officials contemplated extending eminent domain to where her parents lived. Kathy didn't think her parents "would survive another relocation, a second displacement." So, she asked her parents if they went to the Studio Theater, and with their "yes," Kathy took on the fight to preserve the space as a way of fighting for her parents "when there was no one there for them."

Born into an educated family with economic means, Anthony Soto moved to *Sal Si Puedes* when the family migrated from Arizona and stayed for about two years. It was "a small house with a very small lot … a small kitchen, a dining room, a living room, and one bedroom." When he was ordained as a Catholic priest, Anthony "returned to the Eastside and became involved with Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, with youth, and the cursillo movement"—a movement that prepared activist leaders such as Richard and Dolores Ponce and Hermelinda Sapien.

Soto became active in the community and was co-founder of the Chicano Priests whose main objective was to hold the Catholic Church accountable to meet the needs of the poor and most needy. Its members included "Father Casey, Jim McEntee, Reynaldo Flores, and a few others—mostly Anglos—who congregated at Sacred Heart Church" to figure out ways to work in Chicano communities, as the San Francisco Dioses has failed to address the needs of its parishes in San José. Then, when the archbishop announced an aggressive campaign to build a $15

million dollar cathedral with a high school and rectory in San Francisco—the Chicano Priests, who had been undecided about that move united against it and boycotted their event on May 5, 1970. Unlike Anthony's involvement with the demonstration against the *Fiesta de las Rosas*, Soto was not arrested or incarcerated.

After leaving the priesthood but still invested in the spiritual life of the community, Soto, and his wife Phyllis Armas—organized a grassroots alternative to the traditional church they called *La Comunidad*. They didn't want to replace the institution, their aspiration was to create an option for those who didn't go to church. *La Comunidad* was led by women who were key participants and shared "the word" with those who came. Founded in the Eastside, men, and women of all ages and from throughout Santa Clara County became active.

As Soto had worked with poor people, braceros, and immigrants, his quest was to become involved in the Chicano movement, and to continue supporting farmworkers, thus his involvement as a founding member of the board of directors for Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC), which was later renamed the Center for Employment Training.

Where is Mayfair and Sal Si Puedes now?

Many businesses and organizations have been formed to promote San José—and the Eastside in particular—however, the city's contributions to the state of California remain invisible, unlike those of Los Angeles to the South and San Francisco to the north. Still, resident of San José didn't remain silent and activist leaders emerged to create change, including the foundation of a city housing department and a medical clinic, as well as changing at-large elections.

Historically, San José has been fortunate to have an invested community of activists who have toiled for its betterment. The city has produced writers and playwrights, musicians, and scholars who grace the universe of higher education.

There were and are many that unselfishly continue to give of themselves, including men and women of the depression and baby boomer generations who left their mark and about whom I wrote *San José Activist Leaders: En sus propias voces*.

Residents of San José's Eastside continue to fight for their rights, and struggling against houselessness, securing a living wage for workers, fighting for educational rights, and creating employment access remains their focus. Most recently, the city council unanimously repealed an unjust law imposed on the Eastside in 1992 against the expression of culture through low riding. Although some may see this as a small victory, I cried when I heard the news and imagined my friends, Paul and Emma Belluomini, and other lowriders, celebrating that justice had been done.

Sal Si Puedes Mayfair continues to be the entry point for those who move to San José. Even so, past practices of covenant clauses and red lining influence access to housing and rentals in exclusive communities, as buyers and tenants are re-directed to poor neighborhoods.

San José offers cultural alternatives, artistic expressions, and culinary options that reflect the multicultural make-up of the community. East San José is alive with hope and desire for change, and presently in *Sal Si Puedes*, Somos Mayfair inspires a generation of activist leaders to carry the banner for social justice and social change. They build leadership and nurture resident-based solutions, as they seek and secure resources for their community.

With my words, I hope to have inspired you to write and document one of the many stories you have heard—one community, one family, or one person, and one situation at a time. *Que viva* San José's Eastside *¡Por siempre!*

Thank you for your attention.