

School of Arts & Culture

Mexican Heritage Plaza

The School of Arts and Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza Announces Shared Leadership Model, Appoints Jessica Paz-Cedillos and Vanessa Shieh Co-Executive Directors

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San Jose, CA – The Board of the School of Arts and Culture (SOAC) at the Mexican Heritage Plaza (La Plaza) announces a shared leadership model and appoints Jessica Paz-Cedillos and Vanessa Shieh, Co-Executive Directors.

Through its dynamic mix of offerings and events, SOAC has become an inspiring hub for creativity and social action. For the Mayfair community, La Plaza is a symbol of resilience, community, and culture.

During the pandemic, La Plaza became a community hub for essential resources and information. And, during the year when arts and cultural organizations like La Plaza were supposed to shut down, SOAC doubled the number of people served (from 70,000 a year to 150,000). When it was all said and done, SOAC fed over 50,000 residents, tested 15,000 individuals, and vaccinated 25,000 people.

“Over the past two years Jessica and Vanessa guided the organization through the challenges created by the pandemic. Now, SOAC is poised for growth and greater stability. It is with a spirit of transformation and innovation that we adopt a co-leadership model,” says Board President, Miguel Salinas.

Jessica Paz-Cedillos says, “I’ve been thinking about Co-Leadership before joining SOAC. In part because the best work I’ve accomplished has never been on my own, and so I’ve learned to value working with others, building teams that do good work together, and ensuring all feel tied to the big picture.”

“Consensus building and collective thinking breaks the isolation that we face as leaders. Co-leadership recognizes that we do not have to do the hard work alone. Rather, Jessica and I confront, together, the isolation so many cultural and nonprofit leaders face,” says Vanessa Shieh (Co-Director).

The newly appointed directors spent the past year working closely with the board of directors. The appointment is the result of a year-long planning and implementation process facilitated by cultural strategist Janera Solomon and supported by the Hewlett Foundation through the Adaptation Grant Program, a one-time grant designed to support organizations exploring new operating models to strengthen capacity to meet community needs.

About Jessica

Jessica is the daughter of immigrant parents from Mexico and El Salvador. She was born and raised in East Oakland and knows firsthand the impact that arts and culture can have to build pride, preserve heritage, and fuel community and economic development. Jessica has dedicated her career to the public sector, working for agencies like the ACLU. Prior to joining the School of Arts and Culture at MHP (SOAC), she served as Director of Resource Development for SOMOS Mayfair, doubling its budget from \$1.5M to \$3.4M. Over the years, Jessica has refined her leadership, fundraising, and operational skills and received training through the Center for Excellence in Non-Profits and On The Verge. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College. Jessica has been with SOAC since March 2019.

About Vanessa

Vanessa lives, works, and plays in San Jose. She has served as the Associate Director for the School of Arts and Culture at MHP since 2012 and is now the organization's longest serving employee. During that time, she has helped to transform the Mexican Heritage Plaza from an underused facility into a trusted community hub and anchor. With over 15 years of experience in nonprofit accounting and organizational development, Vanessa continues to ground the Plaza's team and partners in strategic perspectives that seek answers to the question: how can we create a better normal?

In the coming months, Jessica and Vanessa will share a series of leadership stories on the journey to co-leadership.

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About the School

The School of Arts and Culture at MHP is the long-term operator of the Mexican Heritage Plaza, a six-acre facility owned by the city of San Jose. The organization is a vibrant arts and culture center, rooted in the largely Mexican American Mayfair neighborhood that provides visual and performing arts classes and community events for more than 150,000 people each year. It also provides leadership development, fiscal sponsorship, and professional training to approximately 100 East San Jose artists and cultural leaders each year. The School shares a bold vision to establish the city's first cultural district in East San Jose for preservation, activism, creativity, and cultures located in the heart of its community, La Plaza.