

Fellow Reflection: Pablo Cruz-Ayala

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Written by: Pablo Cruz-Ayala



Building a Garden for Community Resilience

When I began my fellowship with Voices for Utah Children, I couldn't have imagined just how transformative the experience would be. As an undocumented immigrant navigating higher education in Utah, I've faced the relentless challenges of limited resources, fast turnover in accessing help, and a persistent sense of isolation.

My time with Voices felt like planting seeds in a community garden—one that my younger self desperately needed and that I hope will flourish for those following a similar path.

Creating Spaces for Stories

One of the most profound aspects of my fellowship was creating spaces to honor and preserve the stories of immigrants and families who raised me, shaped my identity, and continued fighting for belonging in a system that often excludes them.

Through this work, I was reminded of my own story—growing up as an undocumented immigrant in Utah, yearning for opportunities that usually felt out of reach.

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Every story I collected during this fellowship reflected a piece of my journey, but it also revealed something more significant: the resilience and strength of our immigrant communities. These stories were not just words on a page; they were lifelines, reminders that we are not alone and that our voices matter.

Preparing a Garden for My Past and Future Community

Much of my work involved collecting and verifying resources for a DACA and Mixed-Status Families Contingency Plan. Working to collect and verify local resources felt deeply personal. I imagined my younger self, overwhelmed by the complexities of navigating higher education without documentation, desperate for guidance. I thought about how much easier it could have been if I had access to a comprehensive, reliable set of resources—spaces where I could find information and a sense of belonging.

In creating this plan, I was preparing a community garden. Each resource, whether related to health, education, or advocacy, was a seed. I hope these seeds grow into something more significant to support my community in flourishing despite the systemic challenges we continue to face.

Stories That Shape Us

Among the stories that impacted me most was that of Rosa Isela, a mother of three who immigrated from Mexico. Rosa survived two separate battles with cancer, all while navigating life as an undocumented immigrant in Salt Lake City. Her story was one of immense strength and sacrifice. Rosa spoke of the challenges of accessing care and how culturally informed treatment and community empowerment played pivotal roles in her journey.

Her story mirrored my parents' sacrifices—the quiet yet profound acts of love that carried me through the waters of immigration. Rosa's resilience reminded me of the power of our communities to adapt and thrive, even in the most challenging circumstances.

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I also reflected on the stories of mentors like Fanny Guadalupe, a trailblazer in the arts and cultural scene in Salt Lake. As the first director of Artes de México en Utah, Fanny faced the personal tolls of reshaping systems that weren't built with us in mind. Her energy and determination have guided me, showing the importance of relying on our communities and refusing to let ourselves become isolated.

Recognizing and Building Resilience

As I worked on collecting resources for the community health toolkit, I was struck by how much I had to learn. I found myself reflecting on experiences I haven't yet lived but have been surrounded by—stories of undocumented families navigating healthcare systems, education gaps, and economic instability.

This work taught me to think beyond my own story and recognize the interconnectedness of our struggles.

The resources we created today could be lifelines for someone tomorrow, a bridge between fear and empowerment. I understood the importance of building a network of support that grows and adapts to the evolving challenges we face as a community.

Passing the Flame

My time with Voices reassured me that I am part of a larger story—a story of resilience, adaptation, and advocacy. I've learned that those who came before us, like Rosa and Fanny, have passed their flame to us, and we are responsible for carrying it forward. This flame burns brighter with every story shared, every network built, and every act of advocacy that brings us closer to equity and justice.

As an undocumented immigrant, I've experienced firsthand the isolation that comes from navigating a system not built for you. But through this fellowship, I've been reminded of the strength that comes from community. Together, we are stronger.

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Together, we can create spaces that honor our stories, reflect our experiences, and provide the resources our communities need to thrive.

A Hopeful Future

Looking back, I realize that this fellowship has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. It has reaffirmed my belief in the power of storytelling as a tool for advocacy and change. It has shown me that our voices, when amplified together, can create lasting impact.

The work we've done—the contingency plan, the storytelling project, the resource collection—is just the beginning.

These tools are seeds that will grow into something more significant and support our communities for generations.

To my younger self and others like me: You are not alone. A garden is being prepared for you, one that will help you navigate the challenges ahead. And to my community, thank you for your strength, stories, and unwavering resilience. It is an honor to be part of this journey with you.



Pablo Cruz-Ayala

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