

gardner perspectives

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PUBLIC SERVICE & COMMUNITY COLLABORATION IN EAST PALO ALTO



**ALEXIS WOOD
TRUJILLO**

This summer, I worked with the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities as the [Cardinal Quarter Fellow](#) for the East Palo Alto Youth Arts and Music Center (YAMC) project. On paper, my task was to work with community partners in creating youth-centered, community-oriented projects that gave momentum to the YAMC over the course of 10 weeks. My work was cut out for me; it's one thing to develop projects like this when you work, play, and live in the community you're serving. But I don't live in East Palo Alto (EPA), and had not spent significant time in the community prior to my fellowship. I entered my assignment armed with lots of readings, an overview of the Haas Center for Public Service's [Principles of Ethical and Effective Service](#), and little experience. As the summer progressed, I found that I built accountability and trust through the commitments I made and kept.

After living in Palo Alto for four years while completing my undergraduate degree, the town only 3 miles from Stanford seemed worlds away and the numbers (*see sidebar*) attest to some of the neighboring regions' differences. However, East Palo Alto has personality, culture, and history more rich than can be described by statistics alone. EPA remembers its history as a community, as a people of unique cultural heritages, as hard-workers and trailblazers and artists and entrepreneurs. While immersed in the local arts scene, I came to learn about the stories of Miss Kalamu Chaché, East Palo Alto's poet laureate, Braulio Gonzalez, a self-made photographer and up-and-coming barber, and many others. These were people I wanted to know and co-create something valuable with. If my work was to contribute to the rich history of East Palo Alto—present and future—my community presence had to be rooted in mutual trust and respect of the people I was collaborating with and serving.

EPA at a Glance

- A majority-minority city, EPA residents are 17% Black, 8% Pacific Islander or Polynesian, and 65% Latino/a.
- 19% of residents live below the federal poverty line.
- 40% are immigrants, and 70% speak a language other than English at home.
- 31% of residents are 18 years old or younger.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

However, I struggled with being perceived as a white-passing Latina from an elite university because it could evoke understandable resistance from community members. Encountering resistance like this is familiar for college students in service-learning experiences (Adelabu, 2014). How was I to help facilitate and design creative projects in EPA that would have long-lasting value to the community in the course of a 10 week fellowship? In reality, I come from a low-income, first-generation, Mexican-American family and multiethnic community much like East Palo Alto; as such, I felt uniquely positioned to work in both worlds: the community and the university. I realized that—in accordance with best practices in service learning—to show my dedication to the community, I needed to make commitments to the people with whom I worked. And so I did.

If my work was to contribute to the rich history of East Palo Alto—present and future—my community presence had to be rooted in mutual trust and respect for the people I was collaborating with and serving.

Commitment #1: Show Up. The first commitment was to show up. To show up means to be present and engaged in the community, not once or twice, but consistently at every event and gathering possible. To participate in community events that didn't relate to my project indicated that I wasn't working in the community simply for my own or the University's benefit.

Commitment #2: Communicate. Another commitment necessary for building trust was to communicate. To bridge the distance between the community and university, I practiced listening, asking questions, and acting responsively rather than dictating inflexible expectations. Communication relies on dialogue rather than monologue. Engaging in honest dialogue better translates into responsive programs, planning, and projects that uplift East Palo Alto by and for its residents.

Commitment #3: Practice Humility. The third requisite commitment for building trust and respect was humility: to put ego aside. This meant prioritizing the needs and wants of the community above any recognition I might receive for my contributions of art or service. I had to acknowledge that the community knows what it wants and knows how to achieve that. In return, my community partners trusted that I had something positive and practical to contribute to their conversations.

Commitment #4: Share Goals. A fourth commitment was to find shared goals. To be clear, the project was not, *my* project, nor was it *their* project, but *our* project. Each goal and final outcome we planned for came from the minds of many people in the community and survived many revisions, iterations, and additions. These goals had to be organic and central, so that all have input and ownership and all want to see positive outcomes carried through to better the whole community.

Commitment #5: Reflect. In my final week, I pondered my fifth commitment: to reflect. In my summer as a Cardinal Quarter Fellow, I have found that showing up, communicating, practicing humility, sharing goals, and reflecting are essential tools to authentically entering unfamiliar communities to serve. Together, these practices helped to break down the barrier of real and perceived differences separating me from the community I served. Through collaboration, we built relationships founded on mutual trust, and shared values that enabled us to co-create projects that will live on much longer and contribute much more to East Palo Alto than I alone ever could.

The [Haas Center for Public Service's Undergraduate Fellows Program](#) is part of Cardinal Quarter and engages students in full-time public service experiences to integrate academic learning and field-based service.

Cited References

Adelabu, D. H. (2014). Confronting Resistance: Addressing Issues of Race and Class During Community-Based Research. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*.