

Lift Every Voice

Crisálida Community Arts Project

By Jeffrey Norman



David Gonzalez, right, consults with poetry workshop students at the North Shore Community Center in Mecca.

In March 2014, the McCallum Theatre was honored to receive a grant from The James Irvine Foundation to discover, support, and share the artistic voices so richly imbued in the Eastern communities of the Coachella Valley. The Theatre enlisted the leadership of David Gonzalez, a noted New York-based storyteller/actor/writer/arts activist, who had made frequent appearances over the years on the McCallum stage and in the community in partnership with the McCallum Theatre Institute, the Theatre's education division.

The resulting initiative, the Crisálida Community Arts Project, called for Gonzalez to learn about the participating communities (Indio, Coachella, Mecca, Thermal), survey the existing cultural landscape, cultivate relationships with artists, cultural and social service organizations, and community leaders, and create forums to support, promote, and showcase local talent and stories.

The two-year program will culminate on May 14 when the McCallum Theatre proudly will present on its stage, ***East Valley Voices: OUT LOUD***, a dynamic evening showcasing the vibrant talents of singers, rappers, poets, storytellers, musicians, actors,

playwrights, and visual artists from the East Valley.

"Audiences can expect to experience the joy and power and full range of human expression from love poems to pointed monologues, from rap to *corridos*, from spoken-word rants to tender ballads, visual artwork, videos, and a staged *Ten Minute Play* from the newly emergent East Valley Repertory Company — and all of it is the voice of the Eastern Coachella Valley," said Gonzalez.

It has been a whirlwind and wonderful journey for Gonzalez and the many partners he has enlisted. Gonzalez spent more than six months over the last two years on the Crisálida project. "It is a personal joy to be involved with so many talented artists and original thinkers," he said. "I have found a new home for my art, and my heart, in the Eastern Coachella Valley.

"The East Valley has a 'can-do' optimistic attitude and so do the artists — they make art for the love of it, they find time, resources, opportunities, and they give generously of their talents," he said. "Many more well-off communities could learn a lot from the way these artists and arts groups are involved in civic activities, and respected for it."



Scene from *Tacos, Teardrops and Tequila*, a *Ten Minute Play* festival entry produced by East Valley Repertory Company and Crisálida.

Among his personal highlights, Gonzalez points to an event hosted by Crisálida that celebrated the naming of Mexican-American poet **Juan Felipe Herrera** as U.S. poet laureate. Gonzalez invited East Valley poets to share their own words and read one of Herrera's poems before an enthusiastic audience while Herrera participated in a live Skype session with those in attendance. "It was an amazing opportunity to meet, greet, and share poetry together," said Gonzalez.

Crisálida has published its first book of poetry from first-time writers, *Cascada de Palabras*; co-produced the very first production by the East Valley Repertory Company, *Tacos, Teardrops and Tequila* (and published those plays in a book);

brought noted storyteller **Olga Loya** to the East Valley for an extensive tour; and initiated a story project with Pueblo Unido in Thermal to share the voices of the community leaders in many of the mobile home parks.

Over the course of the grant period, Crisálida has curated, sponsored, and/or presented an array of community events, courses, concerts, workshops, seminars, film screenings, poetry, and play readings and performances. Crisálida has collaborated with a great cross-section of community partners including Coachella Valley Art Center, Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, Indio Teen Center, Indio Senior Center, College of the Desert, Indio Performing Arts Center, Mecca Farmworker and Family Service Center, CULTURAS Music and Art, Pueblo United, North Shore Community Center, Amistad High School, Galilee Center, Coachella Valley History Museum, and more.

Along the way, Gonzalez and Crisálida have won over new fans.

Mario A. Garcia (aka Mario the Giant) was invited to perform at the event honoring Juan Felipe Herrera, and also participated at a National Night Out event held at the Indio Teen Center under the auspices of Crisálida. "There have been creative relationships built that are raising awareness throughout the community and connecting with a range of ages to motivate and inspire," he said. "David Gonzalez and

Crisálida are exposing our local art and artists to the surrounding communities and giving a platform to artists that have not always had the opportunity to share our passions."

Playwright and teacher **Carlos Garcia**, founder of the East Valley Repertory Company, has interacted often with Gonzalez and Crisálida. "David made several presentations to my high school drama students, serving as a role model for aspiring artists. He has mentored East Valley Rep through table readings of new plays, playwriting workshops, and our first *Ten-Minute Play* festival," said Garcia. "David provided invaluable assistance with preparation of a three-year plan of action for East Valley Rep, which includes the application for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. His interaction, along with Crisálida and the McCallum Theatre, has provided hope for sustainability for East Valley Rep and the future plays we hope to produce."

One of the first people to recognize the value of Crisálida was **Jacalyn Lopez-Garcia**, an artist and adjunct instructor at College of the Desert, as well as Riverside Community College and the Institute for Arts and Multimedia. She attended the very first informational meeting about Crisálida in 2014.

"David graciously accepted several invitations to visit my classroom as guest lecturer and performer at the Coachella Valley Art Center and/or on the Indio



U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera participates in a Skype session with poets of the East Valley.



Left to right, Crisálida artist Francisco Rodriguez, Leonardo Espinosa, a 40-year veteran of working in the fields with Cesar Chavez, and David Gonzalez. Rodriguez was commissioned by Crisálida to write a poem about Espinosa's extraordinary life.

campus," said Lopez-Garcia. "Many of my students became quickly enthralled in the magic of his 'larger than life' theatrical presentations and he profoundly inspired some of them to get involved with the Crisálida projects. One of them, an aspiring playwright/actor named **Reggie Davis**, revealed his love of art and theater to David. Their conversation led to a private coaching session which allowed Reggie the opportunity to discuss his ambition and desires to overcome obstacles relating to educational funding and programs for students with disabilities."

"Working closely with David has been an invaluable experience," she added. "Together we helped bridge relationships between students and the local art communities."

A quintessential example of Crisálida's relationship-building is **Bernadino Ramirez** who approached Gonzalez after a poetry reading at the Indio Senior Center and said he dabbled in writing lyrics and poetry. "When I asked him to share

something with me, he opened his heart and voice and began to sing one beautiful original song after another," Gonzalez recalls. "I was floored and immediately suggested that we make time to play together and record his songs (which had never been done). After three rehearsals, Bernadino is now forming a band with friends from the Senior Center and I just offered them a slot at *East Valley Voices: OUT LOUD* — amazing beauty."

Gonzalez holds out hope that Crisálida can continue in some form after the Irvine grant period expires in June. McCallum President & CEO **Mitch Gershenfeld**, who came up with the original concept for Crisálida, is open to the idea and has committed to including *East Valley Voices: OUT LOUD* on the annual McCallum calendar subject to interest and potential new funding.

"Crisálida Community Arts means something in the community," said Gonzalez. "People know that we provide excellent arts experiences, that we respect

the creative voices of local artists, and that we have done a good job. I hope we can find a way to continue a few of our core projects: the East Valley Rep, our workshops series with the Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, poetry workshops, and our story gathering/sharing projects, and book publishing. Crisálida has touched a lot of people — its impact has been real, and all that we've done to enrich individual's lives will remain and grow — that is how culture is sustained."

Perhaps the whole Crisálida experience is best reflected in the words of **Charmaine Jefferson**, an arts consultant and former executive director of the California African-American Museum, who recently spent a day with Gonzalez touring the East Valley as she prepares to help the McCallum comprehensively evaluate the Crisálida project and determine what future it may indeed have.

"It was the spirit of the Crisálida Project and the lives it has touched that brought me in to meet an inspirational group of artists and community leaders, consultants and staff that have dedicated themselves to foster and promote everyday creative and cultural exchange between the McCallum Theatre and the Eastern Coachella Valley," she said. "I returned to Los Angeles, bragging about the special opportunity I had to explore directly the varied demographics of the valley and to meet and hear firsthand how engaged the East Valley residents and artists are in participating in the services and programs offered through the Crisálida Project."

"As we anticipate all of the engaging experiences that the arts will bring into our lives in 2016," she concluded, "I urge you to take a moment to be proud of the McCallum Theatre and applaud the Crisálida Project for making a difference. BRAVO!"

And while you're applauding, get your tickets before they sell out for East Valley Voices: OUT LOUD on Saturday, May 14 at 8 p.m. It will be a night unlike any other at the McCallum. And may just encourage you to lift the artistic voice that lives inside of each of us.