

Peace work

Turning out t-shirts, piece by piece, Barrios Unidos teaches youth how to hope

BY [KATHLEEN KASTILAHN](#)

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Larger than life, the image of Cesar Chavez at *Barrios Unidos* inspires Daniel Alejandro, who started the organization.

Daniel Alejandro wasn't expecting any help from the church when he went to President Clinton's 1993 Peace Summit in Kansas City, Mo., to talk about the work he'd started 20 years before in the Latino *barrios*, or neighborhoods, of Santa Cruz, Calif.

But that was before he met Gaylord Thomas, ELCA director for community services.

Thomas listened to Alejandro's presentation about youth caught up in gang warfare. He heard about the fledgling production shop that teaches these youth to screen-print T-shirts. It was the skill that kept Alejandro going after he came back from Vietnam service addicted to heroin and despairing over the deaths of two brothers to the lethal mix of gangs and drugs.

He heard how the man who was raised in migrant worker camps got a college degree, then a master's — and then got sober — all while he was reaching out to keep kids on the streets from following the paths that, he says, "lead only to the graveyard or to prison."

"I wrote Alejandro saying we'd be interested in a relationship. No promises, just possibilities," recalls Thomas, who wanted to support the summit's charge to provide resources to local groups with leadership that traditionally isn't recognized. "Those who can work best with people on the street have been there."

When the county supervisor learned that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was interested in *Barrios Unidos* — which had never received outside support — it prompted the county to donate a building for the enterprise and \$1,400 for rehab.

Thomas soon went out to discuss a loan of \$25,000. Instead he recommended \$100,000 for equipment. He also put in hours working with the staff of eight on a business plan. "Their vision was clear," he says. "But not the steps to get there."

Four years later the vision is reality. More than 50,000 T-shirts were individually silk-screened at *Barrios Unidos* Productions, bringing in a revenue of \$180,000 in 1997.

"But volume isn't as much our purpose as training people," points out Jimmy Montes, manager. This summer 15 youth are learning the exacting skill. Some also work during the school year. "The rule," he says, "is that to come to work, you have to go to school."

These youth will become the core staff, able to train others as the company grows.

And growing is what's happening at *Barrios Unidos*. Based on that original ELCA loan, Alejandro put together a revenue base from private foundations and government that brought in \$1.7 million for 1997. Forty staff members provide services far beyond the youth employment venture.

There is the Cesar E. Chavez School for Social Change, where about 20 high school students get another chance after being put out of city schools. From computer literacy to cultural dance, the classes offer a mix of what's needed to succeed in the world and to restore self-esteem. The first two seniors graduated in June with diplomas that are



Red blue, yellow, black—each color is applied separately on T-shirts made by youth learning silk-screen skills at Barrios Unidos Productions. A \$100,000 loan from the ELCA helped buy equipment.

recognized by the state.

Community outreach ranges from clubs for grade-school youth and groups for parents to work at the juvenile detention center and continuing street outreach. This year the juvenile center became gang-free territory, with authorities no longer having to keep young offenders apart according to gang allegiances — a big step to ending violence.

"When I left the war in Vietnam," Alejandre mused, "I came home to a street war. Our young people were dying in the streets. I said I've got to do what I can to stop the violence, for the love of our children. At *Barrios Unidos* we're warriors for peace."

The Santa Cruz organization helped found 26 other chapters and maintains the national Web site: www.barriosunidos.com. Now it's planning an expansion into property with several buildings bought this year for \$800,000 that will include a community center.

Meanwhile the youth keep printing T-shirts. Perhaps this year's best job was the order to accompany the publication of *Stone Soup for the World* (Conari Press). The book, 100 stories about making the world a better place, is by and about such people as Nelson Mandela, Steven Spielberg, Mother Teresa, Jimmy Carter, Paul Newman — and Daniel Alejandre.