



Challenging violent cultures in gangs and communities

Challenging violent cultures in gangs and communities was the theme of two recent seminars supported by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland under the Peace III Reconciling Communities funding stream.

Organised by the UNESCO Centre at the University of Ulster, these seminars provided a fresh comparative forum for local youth work practitioners to reflect on current practice and consider the issues being addressed by it. Through the exploration of youth work models developed to challenge violent cultures in a different context, their aim was to reinvigorate those who have been involved in similar work locally, to encourage the celebration of the good practice which this work has produced and to inspire creative new possibilities for young people here and for the wider community as a whole.



Opening the seminars, Dr. Derick Wilson (Assistant Director of the UNESCO Centre NI) outlined his vision that they would provide local practitioners with a valuable space to share experience, to learn from others and to think more clearly about 'reconciliation'. He encouraged conversation and hoped that participants would feel re-nourished in their practice and able to contemplate new ideas to drive their work forward in their own particular setting. Commenting on how living in Northern Ireland is 'a serious business' Derick invited the more experienced workers to use the encounter to embark on a new journey of discovery, and for newly qualified workers and/or those new to developing programmes in this field to be conscious that there is something more fundamental to this work than simply applying 'techniques'.

New Mexico is a state located in the South Western region of the USA. It has the third largest percentage of Native Americans. There are 28 different tribal peoples living in New Mexico who were never relocated¹. New Mexico is one of the poorest states of the USA.

The key note speaker, Albino Garcia, was part of a delegation from the University of New Mexico who had travelled to Northern Ireland to learn about youth work models developed here, as well as to share their experiences of working with young people, particularly young people involved in gangs and gang violence, in New Mexico and in other parts of USA.

Albino Garcia is the founder of La Plazita Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico: a grassroots organisation that uses Native American traditions to engage local marginalised young people experiencing difficulties. He became involved in working with young people following his fifth spell in a drug rehabilitation centre when Albino made a conscious decision that he wanted to make a positive contribution and give something back to his community.

Many of the workers within La Plazita Institute are self named BTD's (been there, done that's) familiar with life on the streets who act as non-traditional role models for young people who do not necessarily engage positively with formal education and mainstream provision. Drawing on their own experiences they try to motivate and inspire young people who may have fallen on difficult times, to work alongside them and to learn about their

1. Relocation: the resettlement of people (as a family or colony) to a new settlement (as after an upheaval of some kind). In this case relocation was approved by congress as the solution to land disputes in Central America and often taking people away from life on their traditional reservations. Those who were not relocated, continue to live on reservations.

Native American roots, helping them develop a strong sense of identity, so that they grow in confidence and self-assurance.

During the seminars Albino spoke at length about the **Making a Change Youth Programme**. Originally developed as part of an intervention strategy after a summer of heavy violence between rival gangs in a small town in New Mexico, this programme is now an integral aspect of the local community with schools, community groups and other agencies linking into this project. The programme targets key gang leaders, as identified by Albino and other outreach workers, and invites them to seek out alternative paths to current violent and other activities that they are engaged in. These activities tend to be the cause of tension across the local community and, more than likely, have begun to impact negatively on their young lives.

Once the leaders of opposing gangs have been identified and approached, the first goal for Albino or the outreach worker leading the programme is to encourage them to reach an agreement on the creation of a neutral space. In this case, the school grounds are negotiated as the safe space where both gangs consent to temporarily set their hostilities aside; an agreement reinforced by the mantra 'what happens on the street, stays on the street'. It is an agreement that must be publicly announced by the gang leaders to their peers at the school assembly.

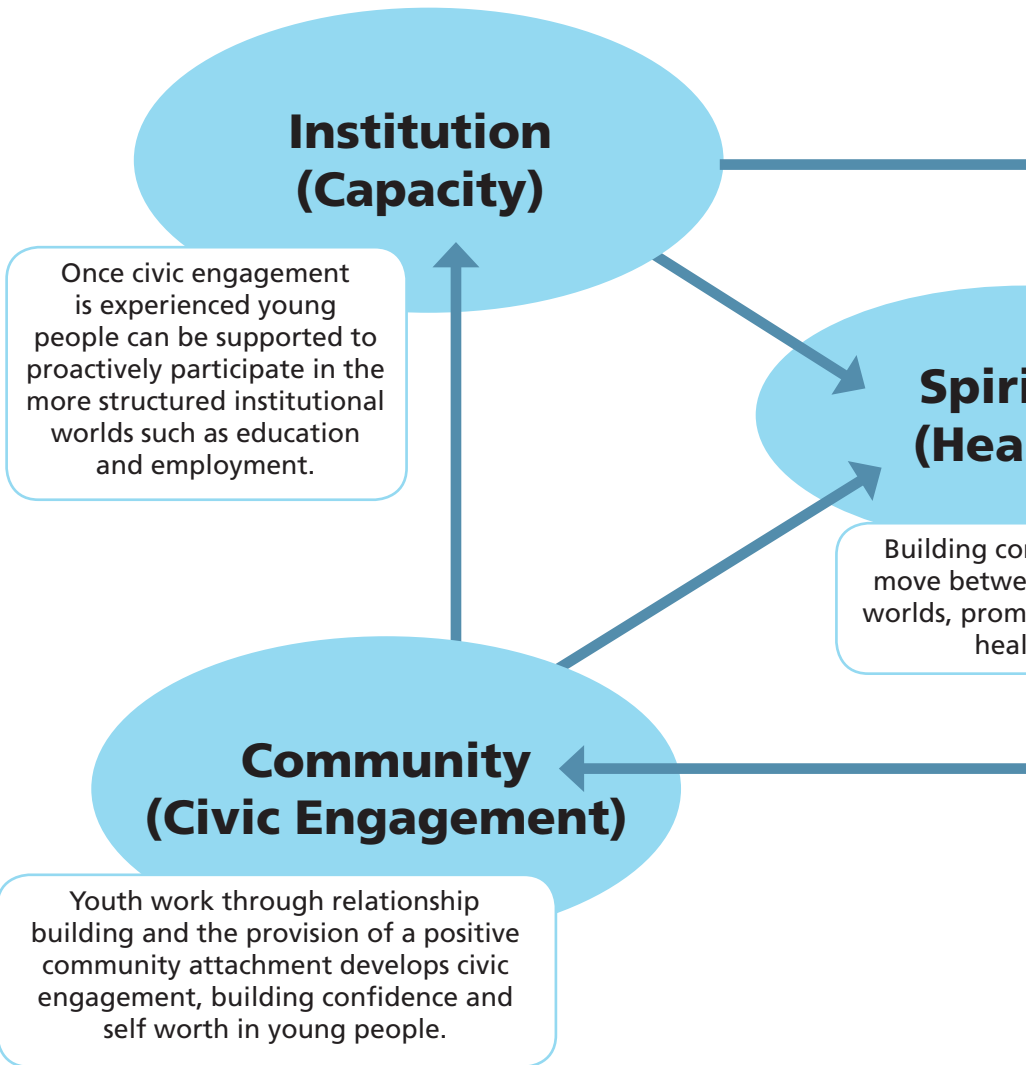
Without successful completion of this process (or ritual as Albino prefers to name it as) the programme cannot move to its next step.



Albino Garcia is a Kellogg Leadership Fellow who is a leading thinker and activist in confronting gang cultures in America.

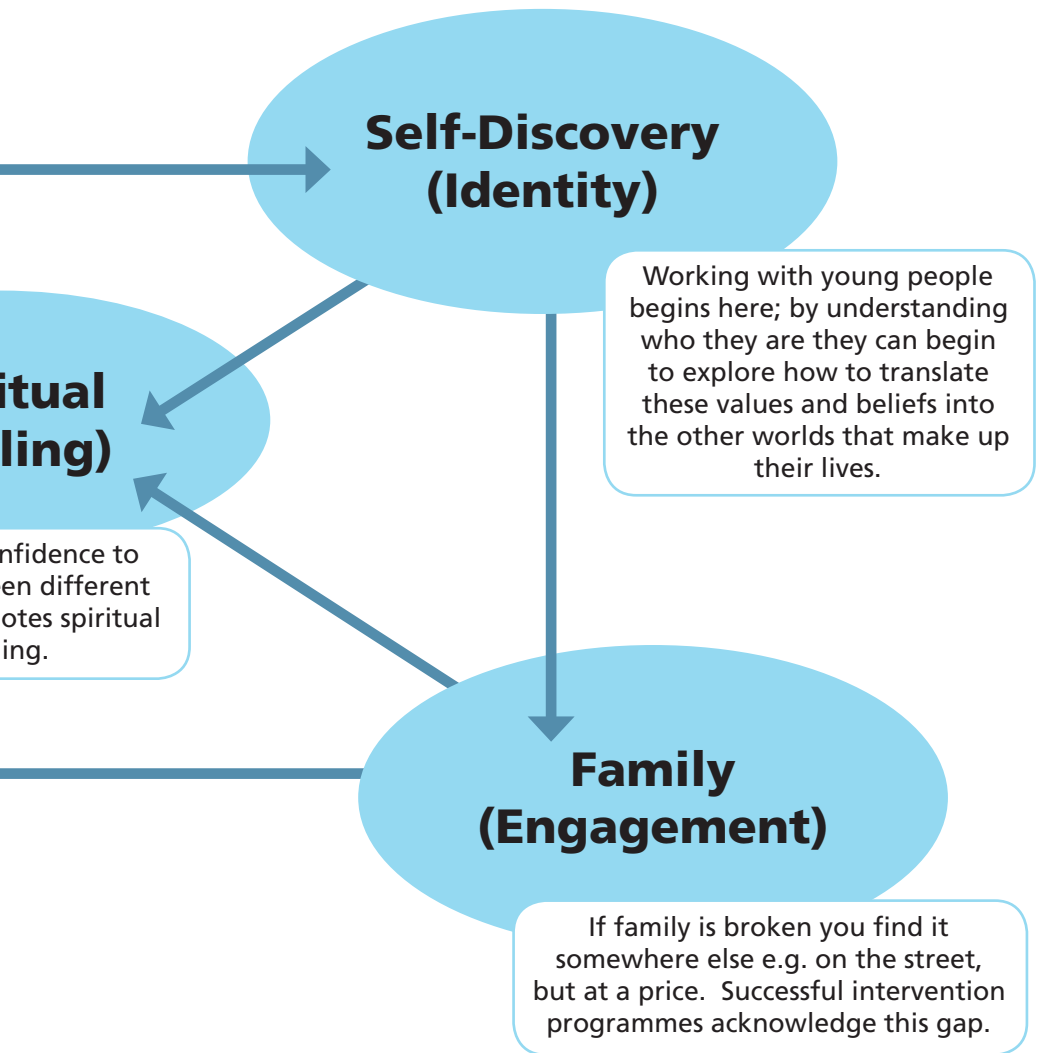
He was a gang leader who now puts himself on the line in confronting young people and their gang culture.

"I have multiple degrees. I went to the University of Hard Knocks and graduated at the top of my class. I got a Masters in Streetology, and a Ph.D. in Barriology." Albino Garcia



The role of the Youth and Community Worker is to help young people to move successfully between the family, to community and finally institutional worlds.

Models Framework



is to develop the transitional skills that enable young people to navigate the worlds that make up their lives (from self, to family, to community) and thus promote spiritual healing.

Along with working on site at the school, the programme takes opposing gangs on camping trips. As Albino says, 'It is important to strip away the constructs of day to day life. The gang members have familiar ways of being that is difficult for them to move out of unless these things are completely removed.' Local practitioners likened this process to going on residential, but in some ways the experience Albino described was much more than this. It did not include bedrooms, or beds or walls for that matter. It was a back to

nature experience that was concerned more with stripping away what Albino referred to as the bling of the capitalist world, and assisting the young people to rediscover their lost Native American values than with the décor of the bedrooms or a complex programme of activity.



For Albino, this process is simply about assisting the young people to get back to the issues that really matter through the experience of having to live in the wild together, and through this shared experience to reopen lines of communication and rebuild relationships between individuals from rival gangs. As Albino noted when engaged in a conversation on community relations work here, 'I do not and would not work with the rival gangs on their own; they must come together. It will not work unless the young people have shared memories so that when they return to their school environment, or their local community, they have a shared story and a commonality that links them.'

Ceremonies and rituals play an important part in the work. The gangs that the young people belong to provide a strong sense of belonging through their own ceremonies and rituals, and as Albino points out, 'If you are going to encourage young people to move away from the gang culture you must replace what you are taking away. Activities such as passing around the 'staff of life' and requesting that young people speak openly about how they are feeling, form regular aspects of our meetings; and everyone must take part in these.'

Many of the activities used by Albino and his co-workers are drawn from traditional Native American ceremonies and rituals. By applying these in a positive context, the programmes aim to offer the young people a valid alternative to gang culture, where similar methods are often exploited. In this sense, 'La Cultura Cura' or culture cures is the core philosophy of La Plazita's work — providing the framework for workers to engage more effectively with those who do not respond to more mainstream services. The ethos is founded on the belief that if young people do not have a strong sense of their own culture – it's language, values, beliefs, history – and know how to apply it constructively and with dignity, then they will inevitably adopt negative and often harmful 'sub cultures' such as 'gang culture' to compensate.

The importance of working with young women, and encouraging respect of women by young men, was also highlighted and the '**Sisters Making a Change**' programme is considered a vital component of the work within La Plazita. In addition, young men and women meet up monthly to participate together in a staff of life ceremonial ritual.

On-going support for workers is also important, and Albino emphasised the importance of quality training and reflective practice to sustaining this work for the long haul.

For Albino, the names given to the programmes of activity are as important as the rituals he builds into them. '**Hoods in the Woods**' is the catchy title assigned to the camping aspect of La Plazita's programme. Albino challenged local practitioners here to think about the titles they were using, and ask are these really speaking to the young people? In some examples he had come across during his visit he believed there was too much focus on the negative issues these programmes were attempting to address – including the use of the titles 'anti-sectarianism' or 'anti-drug' programmes.

In theorising La Plazita's ethos and the role of the youth and community worker, Albino presented the **Multiple Worlds Framework**. Outlined on pages 4 & 5, it regards the role of the youth and community worker as paramount in preparing young people to participate successfully in the various worlds that make up their lives. Supporting and developing the skills required by young people to successfully move between these worlds is a key task. From this perspective, interventions aim to build young people's confidence to realise the potential contribution they can make to each of these worlds while maintaining a true sense of their own values and beliefs in each.

With the recent surge in racist and sectarian attacks here in Northern Ireland, and reports indicating young people's involvement in all but a few of these incidents, the framework provides a tangible reference for those wishing to articulate the role that youth and community work can play, reinforcing the importance of engaging with young people where they are at and, as Albino phrased it, **'begin to peck away, make changes and be a part of a genuine change process.'**

When asked to comment on what he felt were the greatest challenges facing this work, Albino noted the negative impact that some adult leaders can have. Adult role models, whether positive or negative, have powerful influences on young people, who may aspire to be like them. Trying to challenge and compete with negative role models from street culture is difficult. Their allure is appealing and credible to many young people who may look to them with admiration and respect.

In response to this La Plazita has developed a strategy that offers young people real opportunities to learn practical skills and earn good money. 'Nothing stops a bullet better than a job' and Albino's message was clear; successful youth development programmes do not happen in isolation of grass roots economic development that provide opportunities for young people to provide for themselves.

For further information on the seminars and/or the delegates from New Mexico, please contact the UNESCO Centre, University of Ulster, COLERAINE.

**T: 028 7032 4550
F: 028 7032 4674
W: www.unesco.ulster.ac.uk**

Please contact the Youth Council for further information on work supported by Peace III Reconciling Communities funding.

**T: 028 9064 3882
F: 028 9064 3874
Textphone: 028 9064 4801
W: www.ycni.org**

