OUR MISSION

To advocate for economic and social justice in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles by building grassroots leadership, developing affordable housing and neighborhood assets, and providing access to economic development opportunities for low and moderate income families.

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Many thanks to the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory for helping us find excellent talent, to the California Endowment for their vision and support of a healthy Boyle Heights, Ellen Wu at Urban Habitat for making this comic come to fruition and Angela Tannehil of Tannehil Design for bringing it all together.
We were segregated
People of Color
Owned by whites
We were used
To clean the house
Made to feel less than
Changing our religion (spirit)
They abused privilege
To control our minds
Exploiting labor
1 job, 2 jobs, 3 jobs
And it’s still not enough

But we’re still here
Fighting back
Resisting
Reclaiming our importance
Our art, music, language
Our spanglish
Luchando para mantener
Sostenes
Sobre pasar
Humildes trabajadores

Low Income
High Heart
Collective intelligence
If you need something
Ask a neighbor
But they might not be there tomorrow
Cuz the rent’s too high
1 job, 2 jobs, 3 jobs
And it’s still not enough
But we’re still here
Knowing our rights
Standing our ground
Imagining

Written by Legacy LA’s Youth Council

THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

When it comes to your health, your zip code is more important than your genetic code. Place matters for health because where you live determines how you live – whether you have access to healthy food, quality jobs, affordable housing, and high performing schools, and so forth. Place also shapes your sense of belonging, particularly for children. Neighborhood conditions can affirm one’s sense of self-worth or reinforce feelings of hopelessness and second-class citizenship. That is why The California Endowment launched Building Healthy Communities — our 10-year investment in 14 low income communities designed to begin undoing the root causes of poor health and build agency to change the odds for low income Californians.

Every person and every place has a unique story. This graphic novel is a story of people in Boyle Heights. A story of different histories coming together to form one community with multiple experiences and yet a linked destiny. As this graphic novel illustrates, unhealthy neighborhood conditions are the result of discriminatory policies by decision makers and long-term disinvestment of public and private dollars. But, the future is not yet written. Despite all of the challenges facing Boyle Heights, this is a story of hope. As these illustrations so beautifully depict, residents are coming together to change the story, because everyone deserves to live in healthy neighborhoods.

This story is part of a series profiling each of the places partnering in BHC. Together, they are the story of California’s future — a story of dignity and inclusion, where everyone belongs and has the opportunity to live to their full potential.

URBAN HABITAT

The first How Did We Get Here? comic book was created by Urban Habitat in 2005. Urban Habitat provided project support to the East LA Community Corporation in the creation of their How Did We Get Here? graphic novel. Urban Habitat brings race and class to the forefront of transportation, land use, and housing policies to create a Boyle Heights where low-income people and people of color can live in just and connected neighborhoods.

www.urbanhabitat.org
When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best...

They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us.

Tía, is what that orange guy said TRUE?

Hell, no.

They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.

Put this on.

Why?

I want you to meet somebody.

Who?

The neighborhood.

And some, I assume, are good people.
You're clenching my arm so hard I'm scared I'm gonna lose circulation.

What are you afraid of?

Strangers.

Those aren't "strangers," Mijo. Those are our NEIGHBORS.
Tía, no! What are you doing?

Oye!

It's good to see you, Rudy.

You too! And who's the shorty?

I was.

You were?

Trying to meet people. To show me not everybody is a gangbanger, or...

Sure, but what's a "gang"? A group of people who band together to for safety, wear a uniform, jump people who had the poor luck of being born elsewhere?
Then my dad was in a gang for sure. It was called "The United States Military".

But where were they when he got home?

He put his life on the line for our country, and Uncle Sam couldn’t care less. He couldn’t even take advantage of his GI Bill and other housing benefits, because the banks classified Boyle Heights a "low grade" zone, and refused to lend him any money.

Dad was always a drinker, but he took it from a hobby to a whole lifestyle after the war. One night, at the bar, he got in between a bunch of white sailors and Mexican Zoot Suiters. He thought, being the missing link between the two, he could negotiate some sort of peace.

What happened?

Six against one. What do you THINK happened?

Whoa.

Yep. And the guys who did it? Walked off Scott Free.
I took the hint. There's strength in numbers. I threw in with the first squad that'd have me.

It was a rough time—and not just for me, but for Boyle Heights as a whole. It was right around the time they started building freeways in the 'hood. The politicians said they were built to move people throughout the city, but it sure seemed like the point was to SURROUND and CONTAIN us—another arbitrary border line that The Powers That Be drew in the sand, and dared us not to cross.

It felt like nobody had our backs. So we banded together.

If mainstream society didn't want us, then we didn't want them either. We forged our OWN culture. Played by our OWN rules.

I don't think that instinct, to "gang up," is inherently negative. Vandalism, drugs, violence—sure. Those are pretty bad. I'll give you that. Hard to defend those.

Why was everyone so separate? Why wasn’t Boyle Heights just part of ONE big gang?

That’s a very good question, with a very depressing answer: it was on purpose.

Es verdad. In a lot of ways, the city was designed that way.

Wealthy white business owners and landlords refused to serve any community except their own, making opportunities scarce for people of color, and pitting them against each other for basic human necessities, like work or a place to live.

It wasn’t just small business owners, either. The banks were some of the worst offenders around. They got up to some shady business called “Red Lining,” where they literally color-coded the various neighborhoods in LA, and only did business with people who set up shop in the areas that were primarily white.

Historically White communities.
Integrated communities of People Of Color and poor Whites. Yellow = “Caution.”
People Of Color Only. Red = “Stop,” or “DO NOT GIVE THESE PEOPLE A LOAN.”
Times were tough. It was a struggle just to survive. A lot of my friends didn’t make it. I was lucky. Life took me in a different direction. I got a job at the Norris Thermador Vernon factory, manufacturing fire extinguishers.

At the height of The Vietnam war we switch from fire extinguishers to making arms for use in Vietnam.

As it turns out, starting fires is much bigger business than putting them out. At the height of the War they had 3,000 employees per shift, working 3 shifts per day.

Lots of the workers were Latino. Being bi-lingual, it was natural for me to step in as an intermediary between the Real People and the Suits.

I learned to be the peoples’ VOICE—in more ways than one.

It was like being in a new gang—only this time we weren’t just surviving, we were THRIVING.
Automation came in, and it was like some crappy science fiction movie—a bunch of dang ROBOTS were taking all the good jobs! It created a lot of tension among the workers, forcing guys to fight each other for new spots that were becoming MORE and MORE limited.

In May 1989 I was pulled out of the plant to work for the UAW full time in their labor assistance programs. And it was a good thing too, ’cause The Norris Thermador Vernon plant closed its door in June 1997.

The human turd they got to replace me as the new Head Of The Union didn’t know who I was, or where I’d come from. He tried to [censored] me out of my pension.

He eventually changed his mind.

What can I, uh, do for you gentlemen?
I had my boys’ backs for years, and in my hour of need they repaid the favor.

That’s the power of communities. Doesn’t matter how tough a mother you are—you can accomplish WAY more as a group than by your lonesome.

Try not to judge people so quickly, youngblood. We’re all we’ve got out here.
I don’t really have that. Mom’s always worried about my safety, so she doesn’t let me play outside without her supervision.

And Dad didn’t want me to learn Spanish, ‘cause he wanted me to fit in better with the rest of the kids at school. But the White kids don’t like me ‘cause I’m too “Latino,” and the Latino kids don’t like me ‘cause I’m too “White.”

Whatcha thinking about?

Just what Rudy said. That part about “Community.”

I know how you feel.

You do?

I felt the same way when I was your age.

Sit. Let me tell you a story.
When my parents were young, being of Japanese descent meant being ostracized by the rest of the community. Japanese-Americans were locked away in Internment Camps FOR YEARS for being different.

(...) Allegedly it was to keep the U.S. safe from the threat of enemy saboteurs. But where were the German camps, then? Or The Russian?"

But when I was a kid, Boyle Heights was one of the most diverse places in the country—welcoming folks of all different walks of life. It never occurred to me that my home was a particularly "diverse" place...Because it didn't occur to me that there was any alternative!

I had wonderful German next-door neighbors growing up. Mrs. Blossate, and her son Adolf. They had heavy, almost cartoonish accents.

Adolf and I were inseparable. We used to climb knock ourselves out climbing the fig tree in his yard.

(This was DECADES before video games and the internet—we found our fun where we could).

We met up with our Russian neighbors, the Kolosowys, for dinner once a week. They introduced me to all kinds of stuff: pickled EVERYTHING, Borsch...even snails.

And when it got hot outside we'd hang out on the Romero family's huge patio and chill.
I never felt any discrimination as a kid. Everyone in my 'hood treated one another with respect. We knew we were different—but we CELEBRATED those differences.
...And I mean, CELEBRATED.
Weirdly enough, it wasn’t until I studied a year abroad in Japan—surrounded by my own people—that I first felt the alone.

I learned a lot—but, because of the unconventional way I grew up, I felt alienated from my own culture.
The experience changed me. I returned home unrecognizable. Severely depressed.

I almost dropped out of school.
I felt disconnected from my heritage. So when I was introduced to the Asian American Social Workers, I jumped at the chance to engage my community in a meaningful way.

Are you interested?

Very much so. Yes.

It was wonderful. I was connected. I was useful.

I was no longer alone.

Of course, there were other perks...
And it was a time when our community really needed us. In 1971 we started to see a lot of kids overdose on “reds” (downers produced by Eli Lilly Company).

Japanese students—who lived under constant pressure from society over the high standard expected of them—were hit particularly hard.

I got involved in that campaign to stop the drug production.

Later in 1973 I began working at Hollenbeck Middle School, focusing on preventing the root cause of drug abuse, rather than waiting until these kids were in the throes of full-blown addiction.

I later teamed up with a minister at Evergreen Baptist church, and a Japanese counselor at Stevenson Middle School. We started a youth group called “Young Spirits,” dedicated to helping kids navigate their Japanese American identity.

It was exactly the kind of thing I could have used, back when I was their age.
I went from someone who felt completely ostracized by her culture, to helping dozens of kids feel accepted by theirs. Life is funny that way.

That’s really cool.

Speaking of “culture,” have you had elote? Your mother and I used to LOVE it when we were little girls.

It’s DELICIOUS.
HURRY!

ANDALE!

What are we--?

QUIET.

¿Que Pasa?

Evening officer.

Nice weather we're having.

Grunt.
What just happened? Why would the police not want us to eat corn? It doesn’t seem right, does it?

I’ve been a street vendor since 2007, used to sell on Cesar Chavez and Breed, where the Big Buy Grocery store was (now a Walgreens) but other vendors moved me so I set up next to the Bank. It was ugly back then, big empty spot, and this is where I set up alone to sell posole and tostadas.

Then Big Buy store kicked out all the vendors on that side, and because of the bad economic in 2008-2009, many vendors came to this area by the bank to sell.

Vendors started fighting over space because there were too many of us. Eventually we were removed, because it was just too many of us.

And then the police told us “you can’t vend here”—But I didn’t have work so I HAD to vend. The police would show up, give us tickets, the city would show up and take our equipment.
It can be. The fear of all of us who vend is that the city is going to show up. On Saturday when I vend, I am SO stressed, I don't show it because it's my work but I'm exposed.

That's terrible.

Because when they show up and they take everything it's terrible because they're taking my work. Once Saturday is over I thank God he let me work. Once I have my permit that fear will be over. But for now we are in fear.

They let outsiders come in and do whatever they want, displace whoever they want—but the people who actually live here? We have to jump through hoops to do business with our neighbors.
But we’re trying to legalize vending and show them we are hardworking people.

Folks like me, undocumented people, have a harder time finding work.

But we vendors love what we do. We love making and selling our traditional foods—especially to people from our homeland.

It’s a joy to remind people where they’re from, and to make them feel more at ease in their new home.

And it’s a service no “Walgreens” or “Taco Bell” will ever be able to provide.
But things are getting better now. Instead of fighting amongst ourselves for territory space, we’ve started to work together. To organize.

We’ve been fighting for five years, we finally have the backing of an organization, and we’re making traction.

All we want is a path to legitimacy. A way to do things legally—paying taxes, paying for a permit, whatever. When the city takes our things, when some people experience it for the first time they get scared and don’t want to vend again. It is terrible. We are asking to be allowed to work.

I didn’t come for the American Dream. I came because of domestic violence. I came running away from the violence in my house.

When I got here I had to think “What am I going to do?”. They only thing I know how to do is cook. So I decided to start vending on the streets.

I didn’t come because of an American Dream, but I’m still trying to make something out of myself.

Let’s get to work.

I’ve never received any financial help. I’ve never asked for any. I’ve always worked for what I have; I’ve lost material things, but PERSONALLY? I’m fine.

My daughters and grandkids live with me. We are okay, but we HAVE to work.
Things aren’t like they used to be. Back in the day, I was a homeowner. I had a three bedroom, one bath home that I shared with my three daughters AND my grandkids. My mortgage was $1200.

During the Foreclosure Crisis of 2008 I lost ownership of my home, and became just a tenant. My rent went up to $1600—$400 more than my MORTGAGE had been.

Within months the new owner of my home displaced me and my family, DEMOLISHED the building, and built 2 smaller homes on the lot where it formerly stood.

Because he HAD to, the new owner offered me “first right of refusal” on one of the new homes... a two bedroom, one bath, at $2,000 a month.
It’s **SHAMEFUL**.

Hey, Gemma.

The government can be so **LAZY**. They only want to invest in **BIG BUSINESS**, not **INDIVIDUALS**.

I hear that.

**Tu sabes.**

When I was a teacher, it was the same way...
Rules are SUPPOSED to be put in place to help our kids succeed...

Instead of working with the students they were there to serve they upheld stupid, arbitrary rules that either got them expelled, or forced them to quit.

I'm not exactly what you'd call a "stickler for the rules". If one of my kids—by the Grace of God—made it to graduation I'd help them fudge their records to get them into a 4 year university.

(This was before now, when computers would catch that kinda thing in a hot minute)

Thanks, teach. I can't believe I actually did it!

Never doubted you for a second.
Years later, those students paid it forward.

With every generation we seem to get things a little bit more correct. I swell with pride to see my kids getting involved with organizations like ELACC. Young people are invested in their community more today more than ever before.

When Metro tried to sell-out Mariachi Plaza to a bunch of private investors and turn one of our most cherished cultural centers...

...into a glorified strip mall with a parking garage attached to it...

...the kids showed up in full force, and MIRACULOUSLY got them to change their minds.

With the younger generations taking care of things, old folks like me can kick back and CHILLAX. And thank God, 'cause we EARNED it.
It’s the responsibility of the young to keep this tradition going.

It’s true. You benefit from the actions of those who came before you. But that privilege comes at a cost.

It’s your turn to carry the torch.
And make sure **THIS**...

...Doesn't turn into **THIS**.
Think you can handle that? It's a big responsibility.

TOTALLY.

‘Cause I've got my whole neighborhood behind me.

HECK YEAH!

Thattaboy!

¡Claro Que Sí!
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Tia take Shorty (main character) into the neighborhood?

2. What was Rudy's explanation for joining a gang?

3. How did Boyle Heights become so diverse?

4. How do the neighbors describe their sense of belonging to Boyle Heights?

5. How did/do laws negatively affect characters in the story?

6. What did the youth do to stop Metro from developing a strip mall at Mariachi Plaza?

7. What compels Shorty to change his mind about talking to strangers in his neighborhood?

8. Did you feel connected to this story? How does it relate to what is happening in your neighborhood?
HOW CAN YOU TAKE ACTION TO MAKE POSITIVE CHANGE?

1. Ask your family members about their story. How did they get here? Learning about our history helps us understand what is currently going on around us.

2. Talk to your family and neighbors about the changes in your community. Are there things that are happening to many people? Get together and start documenting what is happening. The more people that get together and start sharing stories, the more power you will build to make changes.

3. Attend city, county, community meetings. These are spaces where decisions are made about how our neighborhoods are developed, and you and your neighbors have the right to be heard.

4. Join a local organization and/or neighborhood groups:

   ELACC’s Right to the Land Workgroup (RTL) in Boyle Heights meets every month to strategize ways to protect ourselves from displacement. To get involved with the RTL, Contact Carmina, 323-269-4244.

   The Invest In Youth Coalition is advocating for the establishment of a youth development department in the city of Los Angeles. Join us in urging LA City to prioritize funding for positive youth development! Contact Ruby, Ruby@laacyla.org.