



Why we do this work...a reminder

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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Recently, I was in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to attend a presentation by several members of the Dominican Yorkⁱ Proyecto Gráfica and the closing reception of their exhibit, *Manifestaciones*. This exhibition of 12 works on paper by 12 Dominican artists living in New York was at the Museo de Arte Moderno. The exhibit and artist presentations and serigraphy workshops with local artists and school children had been sponsored principally by the U.S. Embassy. The Smithsonian Latino Center was also a sponsor.



At the reception, hosted by the U.S. Embassy, we were graced by the presence of U.S. Ambassador Raúl Yzaguirre, a giant in the U.S. Latino community. Ambassador Yzaguirre is the founder of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). After touring the exhibit and listening to explanations of the works by the artists, he delivered some remarks that I will never forget. They were some of the most poignant I've ever heard during my 30 years in the arts and cultural business.

I'm going to paraphrase and do my best from memory and from Spanish, and, importantly, let me add that he was not reading from prepared remarks: *I stand before you today a convert, a convert to the arts. For most of my career, I addressed housing, health care, education, immigration and other issues impacting the Latino community. The arts weren't on my agenda. I used to think artists were, you know, those kinds of people who didn't have anything better to do. (Talk about a startling icebreaker with an arts crowd!) I've since had a revelation. I've come to understand that man doesn't live by bread alone. I now appreciate that it is the arts that can help us learn about ourselves. They help us understand our past, put the present in context, and anticipate the future. They are critically important in identity formation. If you are not clear on your history and who you are, it's hard to be effective in whatever kind of work you do. Let me add that, like in religion, becoming a convert is a powerful transformation. I believe that the convert, compared with a current follower, can be more of a fervent believer.*

I was dumbstruck! I took a quick glance at my Dominican York friends and I could see that they were likewise stunned. It is rare to hear this kind of rap from a public official of the stature of Ambassador Yzaguirre. I immediately thought what a wonderful thing it would be if more public policy makers at the local, state and federal levels "got it" about the arts in the same way he did.

For years, many of us in the arts and cultural business have been advocating with decision makers—for them to take note of the impact of the arts in advancing educational achievement, contributing to economic development (including cultural and heritage tourism), and promoting neighborhood revitalization (through public art programs and the like). There are countless examples where the work of artists and cultural organizations has improved educational curriculum, added to hotel/motel tax coffers, transformed how neighborhoods look and function, and generally improved the quality of life in our diverse communities. I think it is important for all of us in the field, and our supporters, to continue to work hard to deliver quality, relevant, diverse and accessible arts and cultural services to our deserving communities, and reach what I hope will be a tipping point—soon.

Culture and arts are more than wine and cheese. As Ambassador Yzaguirre suggests, they are more like meat and potatoes, or if you're a Dominican, like *pollo guisado y mangú*.

ⁱ *Dominican York* is a term to describe Dominicans residing in New York City. In some contexts it is used pejoratively by Dominicans from the homeland.