



**P**arks and schools have a way of defining a neighborhood. In the case of Lincoln Park, a small neighborhood park just west of downtown Denver, the community redefined the park, which is now called La Alma/Lincoln Park. “La alma” is Spanish for the word soul or spirit. It’s also the word a community started using decades ago to describe the neighborhood around Lincoln Park.

Historically, the area has been populated with similar demographics to its current make up: mostly Hispanic, mostly women, and mostly low-income. Situated near the railroad tracks emerging out of downtown Denver, La Alma/Lincoln Park isn’t the prettiest park, nor is it the most popular, but it stands as green space in the middle of an old neighborhood that’s only partly gentrified. At its center is the mural-covered La Alma Recreation Center,

with an outdoor pool where kids can cool off in the heat of summer and indoor facilities where adults can work out year ‘round.

That’s just one reason why the La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhood was named one of the nation’s Ten Great Neighborhoods by the American Planning Association in 2014. It’s also a reason that these residents cling so tightly to their history and memories of the “old neighborhood.” It’s around these memories and impressions that a community project congealed to become “The Heart, The Soul” – an immersive theatre experience that was created through a two-year residency project with Mirror Image Arts in association with the Denver Parks and Recreation Department, that endeavored to put to voice and non-verbal expression to a diverse sampling of impressions that characterized this unique urban community.

According to Corey Jones of Colorado Public Radio, “La Alma-Lincoln Park has strong ties to the Chicano rights movement. Here you’ll find reminders of that history, like murals and the La Alma Recreation Center. But you’ll also see the forces of change. Just like other parts of fast-growing Denver, a lot of newcomers have moved in, and new buildings have sprouted up.”

“There were a lot of things done here that need to be documented historically, so that people can see there’s hope,” longtime resident Esequiel “Kelly” Lovato, Jr. said. More than 40 years ago, Lovato helped establish the neighborhood’s first recreation center inside a small maintenance shed the city handed over to a group of Chicano activists. They started out with arts and crafts, a few weights, and ping pong.

They wanted a space to keep young people out of trouble, and “to help them make the changes they needed to make in their lives,” Lovato said. “We saw recreation as being a really important key.”

It wasn’t easy for this mostly low-income community to do that. They demanded the city give people from the neighborhood jobs at these facilities. They had a fight on their hands, Lovato said. “It was a struggle on the part of the people, and it took a long time,” recalls Lovato, who remembers community takeovers of the pool and clashes with police.

When Mirror Image Arts program director Meghann Henry first stepped inside the La Alma recreation center a year and a half ago, she felt like an outsider. “You’re sort of feeling this anxiety like the first day of school,” Henry said.

Mirror Image Arts uses theatre as “language to inspire dialogue, encourage awareness, and promote action in order to build a stronger, compassionate, and empowered community.” The nonprofit collaborated with the “MY Denver” after school program to find a particular community that was in transition. “It just took showing up, being there,” Henry said. “We had to give it time and sort of build that trust.”

Once they established that trust, the project evolved. They recorded 45 interviews with La Alma-Lincoln Park residents of all ages and backgrounds. They learned about La Alma’s history, the plethora of public housing, and the influx of middle class and refugee families.

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*—Larry Mitchell  
Playwright-in-residence*

There’s so much change around Denver and La Alma-Lincoln Park that, “people are feeling disconnected from the neighborhood,” Henry said. Those interviews inspired “The Heart, The Soul,” a full production with professional actors, dancers and community members.

The starting point of the project was technically “exploring the social determinants that affect healthy eating and active living”. But according to Henry,

“that’s not a very sexy sell to teens or anybody without an advanced degree in grant-speak. Acting classes proved a better place to start. And the tentacles extended from there.”

One of the artists associated with the project was Larry Mitchell, a playwright-in-residence who helped put to words some of the experiences revealed. “I’ve lived in twelve different cities in seven different states, and La Alma is one of the deepest, most open and most welcoming communities I’ve ever experienced,” said Mitchell. “The neighborhood is going through a major transition, with development moving into the area. So, when the youth advisory board chose to explore the health angle through the lens of community, coming of age, and change, it felt right to me.”

One neighborhood character kept being mentioned: a woman called “The Candy Lady.” They found her and scheduled





an interview and she showed up with her whole enterprise: a snow-cone machine, funnel cakes and fried Oreos. Turns out, what started as a way for her and her son to meet people after they moved into the neighborhood, made the Candy Lady into a sort of “neighborhood mom” — and for a brief moment, they all felt like her kids.

There were so many great stories in La Alma to tell; the hard part was letting most of them go. The Candy Lady made the cut, and La Alma’s “badass 2014 pool remodel” was there, too. Also the story about how the rec center started out as a shed full of lawnmowers that not-so-mysteriously all ended up in the pool? The teens didn’t just collect interviews. They had stories of their own. And in a way, they became the story.

“It was important that we tell the story in different ways because people consume information differently,” Henry said. “Maybe English isn’t your first language, so you can enjoy that piece that has no language.”

When it was finally performed, area residents and community leaders wandered through different parts of the recreation center’s community space, where different stories unfolded. One performer portrayed a range of characters who use the nearby Lincoln Park, like a homeless person sleeping on a bench or a jogger. That vignette was followed by audio of people describing what it’s like for them in the park. It’s a good reminder that we must coexist in our public spaces. Another no dialog scene captured what it’s like to lose a longtime neighbor and the awkward tension that comes with meeting a new one.

Post-performance, the audience broke out into groups to share thoughts stirred up by “The Heart, The Soul.” Some spoke about simple solutions, like making an effort to learn neighbors’ names. Others, like 15-year-old Alicia Garcia, reflected on the past. Garcia used to live in what’s known as the “Red Projects.” The old, brick buildings came down a few years ago to make way for the Denver Housing Authority’s

Mariposa District for mixed incomes. She remembered outdoor movie nights and when families would gather to share food with others who couldn’t afford it.

“The play made me happy because I feel like we’re being heard as a community,” Garcia said. And that was the whole point of the project: to use theater to not only engage audiences and create dialogue, but also foster empathy, problem solving, critical thinking, and effective communication.

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