



## BUILDING A MORE INCLUSIVE PRESERVATION COMMUNITY

### RE-ENCUENTRO: SEEING EL PASO THROUGH NEW EYES TEACHING AND TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION

El Paso, Texas



*The El Paso Museum of History “Neighborhoods and Shared Memories” project, initiated in 2009, seeks to preserve and interpret the heritage of the city’s neighborhoods through personal photographs, stories, and mementos of residents. Chihuahita and El Segundo Barrio, the city’s oldest neighborhoods, located just across the border from Mexico, were the project’s initial focus. These neighborhoods, long a gateway for immigration from Mexico to the United States, boast a rich architectural heritage and social history. The project offers museum visitors a chance to experience the residents’ connection to place.*

A Preserve America grant, managed by the National Park Service, (NPS) and matched by the El Paso Museum of History, allowed “Neighborhoods and Shared Memories” to expand its reach beyond the walls of the museum and involve El Paso youth in exploring the city’s heritage. The resultant program, called “Re-Encuentro: Seeing El Paso Through New Eyes,” ran two sessions beginning in January 2011 using this funding. For Session I, students were recruited through area public and private high schools, chiefly those located in the Chihuahita and El Segundo Barrio neighborhoods. The neighborhoods, the oldest in El Paso, are working-class, immigrant neighborhoods and residents are predominantly Mexican American. Session II recruits came primarily from an early college high school in El Paso. Vanessa Camacho, program coordinator, did outreach to involve a population that understood the importance of neighborhood history, but would not likely enroll in a program like Re-Encuentro.

Re-encuentro means “meeting again,” and the program focused on enhancing students’ familiarity with their city while teaching history, architecture, cultural awareness, and preservation. Before being accepted into the program, students completed an application requiring an essay indicating their interest in the program, their favorite aspects of El Paso, their favorite community activities, and a letter of recommendation.

#### ***The Student Experience***

Participants came away with new knowledge of architectural history and an understanding of the connection between El Paso’s architectural heritage and tourism opportunities. Using that knowledge, participants in both sessions researched, photographed, and evaluated a downtown building of their choice and conducted an oral history with a community member who had first-hand knowledge of that building. The students documented a wide range of historic buildings and public spaces, from the grand Camino Real Hotel (built in 1912) in downtown El Paso to the Blue Seal Bakery (a landmark family-owned bakery in the Segundo Barrio). In the first Re-Encuentro session, students produced building histories, photographs, and their preservation ideas in a glossy brochure of their own design. Session II participants selected quotes from the oral histories they conducted and produced short write-ups on the buildings’ histories.



Though the second session of Re-Encuentro ended in 2012, the program’s impact is still felt at the El Paso Museum of History. The museum distributes the brochures produced by Session I and Session II participants in its lobby. Equipment, like cameras, purchased for the project bolsters the museum’s other educational programs.



Vanessa Camacho, a public historian and assistant professor at El Paso Community College, designed the curriculum for Re-Encuentro and managed the program in addition to working on “Neighborhoods and Shared Memories.” She considers the program a success.

“It was exciting to see the students see value in things we talk about all the time,” said Camacho. “These are good students with bright futures who can hopefully advocate as they grow up about historic places.”

### Curriculum

According to the final report submitted to the National Park Service (NPS), the program’s curriculum was designed with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements for social studies in mind, in particular two high school-level benchmarks: “Student applies critical thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources” and “Student creates written, oral, and visual presentations of information.”

Participants left the Re-Encuentro program fluent in several methods of historic documentation including conducting oral history interviews and photography, and gained skills in graphic design. Program coordinator Vanessa Camacho created a comprehensive curriculum for the program, which ran on Saturdays, and she made a point to distribute it to students in advance of their beginning the program. “I thought it was very helpful to have a good schedule of activities ahead of time,” said Camacho. She said it was necessary to show the students what they were building towards.

Camacho also recruited exceptional instructors and did her best to ensure they were dedicated and prepared. She stated that the greatest challenge came in carrying out a program like this through the city government system of which the El Paso Museum of History is a part. Her advice is to be well aware of all the necessary steps involved in budget approval and purchasing supplies so as to not hinder programming.

The museum is working on implementing a “digital wall” (debuting in December 2014) using touch screen technology to augment the “Neighborhoods and Shared Memories” exhibit. The wall will feature historical and contemporary photographs and other multimedia about all of El Paso. Limited available information on outlying neighborhoods will require fresh research and photographs.



For more information on the El Paso Museum of History and “Neighborhoods and Shared Memories,” visit:  
[www.elpasotexas.gov/history/](http://www.elpasotexas.gov/history/)  
[www.elpasotexas.gov/history/villitas.asp](http://www.elpasotexas.gov/history/villitas.asp)

