



LATINO LEADERSHIP ALLIANCE

Latino Leadership in Motion

# Voces de Silicon Valley

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## Voces de Silicon Valley

In this collection, created by the 13th cohort of the Latino Leadership Alliance's Leadership Academy, we have assembled three case studies of Latino Leadership in San José and Silicon Valley. In each, we examine how Latino/a/x/e leaders came together to advocate for greater resources for their communities, and promote equity and justice in San José and Silicon Valley. For each, we have also been honored to speak to and hear from visionary leaders who did the work about what it actually takes to enact change.

The first case study examines how the Mexican Heritage Plaza, a unique resource and site of comunidad in East San José, came to be. The second investigates the East Side Alliance and its collaborative work to share knowledge, resources, and implement aligned effective practices to prepare students for a successful future. The final looks at Madre a Madre, and the work of Maria Marcelo in the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood as an example of the impact that servant leadership can have in empowering a community over time.

It is our hope that these case studies will provide both practical lessons and inspiration for future leaders in the Latino/a/x/e community of Silicon Valley and future cohorts of the Latino Leadership Alliance.

We wish to express our immense gratitude toward both the Latino Leadership Alliance board and our cohort facilitators, Eddie García, Lennies Gutierrez, and Andres Quintero for supporting our collective vision. In particular, we want to acknowledge the contribution of the Latino Leadership Alliance board co-chair, Mayra Flores, who offered her skills as an editor during the final stages of this project. Finally, we want to express our tremendous appreciation for all of the leaders who generously shared their insight and experiences with us to capture voices of Latino/a/x/e leadership in Silicon Valley for the benefit of future generations.

## **ABSTRACT: VOCES DE SILICON VALLEY – MADRE A MADRE**

This white paper celebrates the enduring legacy of Madre a Madre, a leadership group led by the late Maria Marcelo, dedicated to advocating for immigrant, Latino/a/x/e, and low-income communities for more than 22 years.

Originating within Washington Elementary, Madre a Madre's separation from the institution due to misaligned values with administrators led to the formation of the non-profit organization, Healing Grove. This paper displays the exceptional resilience embodied by Madre a Madre, a shining example of servant leadership. Despite adversities, their unwavering commitment and innovative approach sustained their mission and created lasting change in the Latino/a/x/e community.

This narrative illustrates how servant leadership can inspire transformative impact. Madre a Madre's journey is a testament to the power of resilient leadership and its potential to foster lasting change.

## **Inception**

The Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood is located south of Downtown San José, a historically Mexican-American and immigrant community. According to the 2020 Census, most families in the neighborhood are low-income, with more than 60% of Latinos/as/x/es earning less than \$50,000 annually, and the majority of residents having less than a high school education.

As a community of Latino/a/x/e immigrants, there has always been a need to build community and connections with neighbors to foster familial and cultural relations. The mothers of Washington Elementary students certainly felt drawn to elevating the leadership of the community by focusing on being involved in their children's school life. In 2004, with the support of Principal Maria Evans, mothers of Washington Elementary started gathering in a group they named Madre a Madre (Mother to Mother). The mothers gathered weekly to learn about educational resources, and mental and physical health, amongst other topics.

Soon, Madre a Madre became a pillar of Washington Elementary and the broader community, led by Maria Marcelo, a local mother, and leader, the Madre a Madre initiative grabbed the attention of non-profit activists, politicians, and higher education institutions, including Santa Clara University, University of California, Berkeley, and San José State University (SJSU). All of these stakeholders had a mission; increasing the literacy skills of English Language Learners, and creating a vibrant, safe, connected, informed, and inclusive Washington neighborhood.

## **Facing Challenges**

A powerful force to reckon with, Madre a Madre ensured the mothers of Washington Elementary developed the skills necessary to advocate for themselves and their children. As the mothers became more involved, they had a big presence on campus, Madre a Madre held weekly meetings and many members chose to volunteer in the school reading to children every morning. As the mothers developed advocacy skills, other institutions became interested in collaborating with them to make improvements in the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood.

Santa Clara University was one of those institutions, and with the help of Maria Marcelo started two programs centering the leadership of Madre a Madre members. The Thriving

Neighborhoods Initiative and the Prosperity Initiative were two programs hosted by the university. These programs provided resources to bring in leadership and community development opportunities for the Washington neighborhood and were led by the university's undergraduate students and staff (Tufts, 2015).

The Santa Clara University programs aimed to foster genuine relationships and develop connections that would ensure equal power between university representatives and community members. Unfortunately, this was not the case as the Washington community still depended on funding and resources provided by the university. The challenges faced are explained in the university's publication *The Sacramental Nature of Community*:

*"... as the SCU-Washington-Madre a Madre partnership grew in its first three years to include over 20 programs co-designed by SCU faculty, staff, college students and Washington parents, interpersonal conflict sometimes undermined the ongoing enthusiastic participation of both the university and community partners. Competition between Washington school staff and SCU students, faculty, and staff for the time and attention of parents sometimes moved relationships into power-struggles."* (Merritt et. al., 2018)

Even with these challenges, Madre a Madre prospered and the group kept growing, reaching numbers of up to 80 mothers at meetings (Healing Grove website). Unfortunately, the existing tension grew, and when there was a turnover in staff at Washington Elementary, the conflicts reached a breaking point. After Maria Evans, the principal who helped found the program transitioned out of her role, Madre a Madre had complicated relationships with the new leadership, eventually leading to the group separating from the school. This transition included conversations and conflict over the name Madre a Madre, and for a short period of time, the group was forced to adopt the name Mamas Unidas (Moms United) to differentiate themselves from the original affiliation to the school.

Fortunately for the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood, even without the support of the school, Madre a Madre had the resources and internal leadership to continue with their advocacy and servant leadership. Most importantly, they had Maria Marcelo – a pillar of hope and dedication who led the group to success following the separation from the school. Identifying now as Madres Unidas, mothers continued to advocate for the resources the

community needed. Their partnership with institutions continued, including a relationship with UC Berkeley. As one of the mementos from their work together, a painting was created to commemorate the community. The painting, now sitting in Maria Herndandez's office, portrays a tree with robust roots expanding into a vibrant community, full of color and people playing and celebrating around the tree. Across the tree branches, a sign reads "Mamas Unidas."

## **Growing**

When Madre a Madre began in 2004, there were only a few women showing up to the weekly meetings and as time passed, the numbers continued to grow. Much of the base was brought in by Maria Marcelo through her organizing skills. Many of the members found the tools and relationships they needed to find their voice and develop the resilience to advocate for the resources they needed. Most importantly, members had the opportunity to be with their children, as one early member of Madre a Madre described.

*"The fact that we were there in the program, at least for me, my daughters felt proud, because they said my mother is there in the program, and they felt great, they went to their classes and turned around, greeted me, and then said, "My mom is there", I mean the program helped them and it helped me." (Lopez, 2023 Translated, personal communication)*

Members of the group developed a culture of care with one another, and a true identification with the group. In one of their anniversaries, the group developed an acrostic poem, which one of the moms still holds in her phone after many years of its creation.

The poem reads:

*Madre a Madre  
Mujeres Fuertes  
Alegres  
Destacando el  
Respeto y  
Excelencia a la vida  
Amadas por todos  
Madres  
Alentadoras*

*Dedicadas a  
Reforzar la  
Educación y el amor*

The translation of this poem reads:

*Mother to Mother  
Strong women  
Joyful  
Highlighting respect and  
excellence in life  
Loved by everyone  
Mothers  
Encouraging  
Dedicated to  
Strengthening  
Education and love*

After their transition out of Washington Elementary, the amount of support Madres Unidas received was impactful. Brett Bymaster, an individual who had supported the group for many years, was one of the biggest advocates who was essential for establishing a system in which Madre a Madre could thrive and could continue to provide resources for the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood. Brett partnered with Maria Marcelo to create Healing Grove, a non-profit organization providing resources for health care, soul care, and culture care, as listed on their website. Once Healing Grove was established and the group had a permanent home, Madre a Madre regained its original name, along with the original programs held by the group.

### **Maria Marcelo**

Through all the challenges, the resilience of the women was monumental, and there is no denying that the work of Madre a Madre stemmed from Maria Marcelo. Maria Marcelo developed meaningful relationships with all the women who joined the group and she worked side by side with them fostering their leadership. As we interviewed the community, we learned

about Maria Marcelo's approach to building leadership in the Washington-Guadalupe Neighborhood through Madre a Madre.

*"She was really good at adjusting but unfortunately there's a lot of women and people in the neighborhood who aren't as good at adjusting, who have language barriers like si no hablo inglés no me puedo comunicar, entonces no me puedo involucrar, no valgo lo suficiente, (If I don't speak English, I can't communicate, then I cannot be involved, I am not worthy enough) so for her it was that, that pushed her to create the group and have other people feel strong enough in the fact that they are worthy to be here, the fact that they're strong enough to be here and even though they didn't know the language there were ways in which they can advocate for their children and advocate for themselves."*  
(Hernandez, 2023, personal communication)

Leaders of Madre a Madre connected with one another through their experience as mothers and beyond that, they found a community of individuals passionate about providing a better life for their families. Maria Marcelo believed in the activism that was needed to create that better life, and her legacy is a group of powerful women with the tools and determination to create a better community for their families and neighbors.

*"We became like a family, we respected each other, we helped each other, we listened to each other when one had a problem, we always had the support, so Madre a Madre has helped a lot."* (Lopez, 2023, translated, personal communication)

Unfortunately, in December 2022, as the group was conducting posadas for the holidays, Maria Marcelo was struck by a car on her way home and died. The next day, members of Madre a Madre flooded her family with support, and the community united to pay their respects and continue the community work Maria was so passionate about. Hundreds of individuals gathered to celebrate Maria's life, including prominent politicians and community representatives (Gay & Seldon, 2022).

### **Impact in the Community**

Madre a Madre has had an immeasurable impact in the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood. What started as an initiative to help children in school, completely transformed the community.



Some of Madre a Madre victories include the preservation of open space, as they organized and advocated to keep Tambien Park.

*“That area where the park currently is, that was supposed to be a Rocketship Elementary, so that was one of the first things that united Brett and my mom, one of their first projects where they worked together to kind of stop another Rocketship Elementary, we would go to board meetings every week, there’s even a YouTube channel that they created where they interviewed the moms, you where, why we don’t need another Rocketship in our neighborhood.” ( Hernandez, 2023, personal communication)*

In this now vibrant community space, families meet for food and prayer on Thursday evenings during the summertime. The advocacy for the park remains, as the community advocates for the maintenance of the space through greening and clean-up services. Madre a Madre members agree that Tambien Park is one of the only available open spaces where children and families can exercise and connect with nature in the neighborhood, thus making its maintenance essential for a healthy community.

There have been other advocacy efforts from the group, which have been transformational for the neighborhood. In 2014, the neighborhood experienced a high level of crime and prostitution. Thanks to Madre a Madre advocacy, local law enforcement was able to advocate for funding to address the issues of prostitution (Torres, 2014).

Once Madre a Madre found a permanent home with Healing Grove, the group was able to host a series of programs for the community, including arts and crafts for children and Mujeres Interesantes, a series of workshops where school children learn about women in the community and their pathways to leadership.

An essential part of Madre a Madre is unity through faith. Maria Marcelo was a woman of faith, and the partnership with Brett, who was a pastor, allowed the group to bring faith to the Madre a Madre leaders. As the group grew, they celebrated important Christian and Catholic holidays, including Easter and Christmas. They also established Luke 14, a program for which Madre a Madre members brought food to unhoused folks in San Jose.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Madre a Madre, through Healing Grove, held a program named Nehemias, where community members were trained in food handling, providing trainees with important entrepreneurial opportunities (Cruz, 2021). All of the programs put forth by Madre a Madre are an opportunity for the community to foster connections within themselves and their built environment, allowing them to co-create a vibrant neighborhood centering joy, health, and leadership from powerful Latinas.

### **Madre a Madre Today**

The creation of Healing Grove has undoubtedly been one of the biggest successes of Madre a Madre. The organization provides health care services as well as community care – all within one establishment. Healing Grove provides a space for multi-generational interactions, programs start with children and youth, and they extend to parents and elders. This culture of family and culture is well exemplified as the role of Maria Marcelo is now occupied by her daughter, Maria Hernandez, a brilliant leader guided by the wisdom of her mother and community.

Weekly Madre a Madre meetings still take place and in the summer 2023, Maria led an initiative to have Madre a Madre meetings at Tamien Park. During these meetings, the community comes together to share food, games, and music and read bible scriptures.

Healing Grove's mission centering health, soul and community care is seen through all the services provided by the organization. Members are proud to be part of Madre a Madre, and the group is the perfect example of how community-driven leadership can have a monumental impact in Latino/a/x/e neighborhoods.

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## Translated Quotes

“Nos convertimos como en una familia, nos respetamos, nos ayudamos, nos escuchamos cuando una tiene un problema, aqui siempre es el apoyo, entonces madre a madre ha ayudado bastante.”

“ El que estuvieramos ahi en el programa, por lo menos para mi, mis hijas se sentían orgullosas, porque decían mi mama esta ahi en el programa, y ellas se sentían grandes, pasaban a sus clases y volteaban, me saludaban y entonces decían, mi mama esta ahi, osea que a ellas les ayudaba y a mi me ayudaba.”