

READING PUBLIC LIBRARY

MEDIA ALERT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

READING PUBLIC LIBRARY & BARRIO ALLEGRIA PARTNER TO “CONQUER THE NIGHT”

Reading, PA - December 9, 2022 – The Reading Public Library steps on South 5th Street are endowed with poetry snippets that were painted during a community event in 2018. Although the majority of the verses were power washed years ago, the words “rise above” remain proudly on one of the central risers. These words came alive with lights during the recent Conquer the Night annual dance performance.

The process began one afternoon in October when five local dancers met at Barrio Alegria’s headquarters with dancer Mikol Anthony who led them through a choreography session. Mikol, a Reading High graduate who lives in New Jersey, traveled back to the city where he grew up to share his artistic knowledge. While they rehearsed, a crew of volunteers headed to the library steps to build a stage with lights, a cloth background, and a sound system. The group opened the evening show by dancing to “Cool Off” by Missy Eliot followed by five solo pieces that were choreographed by the local talent. Mikol Anthony closed the show with a fire dance.

Barrio Alegria, a local organization that uses art to transform communities, is no stranger to the library steps. For the past five years, those steps have hosted Barrio’s Storytelling through Dance project performances - featuring locally written plays that deal with social justice issues through the retelling of fairy tales. While these choreographed performances seem, on the surface, like short-lived explosions of color, the sustained and responsive community engagement behind the scenes is where the real impact of these creative place keeping efforts are being felt.

During the pandemic, Barrio had to reimagine safe community spaces so the team decided to hold activities outdoors, after sunset, beginning with a photography show outside the library where photos were projected on the Franklin Street side of the building. “We used creativity to deliver our promises to the community,” said Barrio’s Operations Director, Arleny Pimentel. Holding events at night is a direct pushback to narratives such as, “At 5 PM, when everybody leaves, there is nobody in Reading.” according to Barrio’s Executive Director, Daniel Egusquiza who has been challenging that narrative. “We live in Reading, and we are here after 5 PM. Does that make us nobodies?” he asks. Daniel plays a dual role as Barrio’s Director and the library’s Community Engagement Manager allowing him to fully appreciate the power of community partnerships.

During this latest event, Jose Garcia, a volunteer emcee, explained the concept of “Conquer the Night” to the public. “Night in the city is seen as a dangerous and forbidden place. But we are here because we live here. And, together, we are conquering the fear,”

For Barrio, holding the space on a consistent basis is key to their creative place keeping initiative. While single events can muster energy, consistency maintains energy and can be used to create change. Since the change has to include both day and night, they are shifting some of their events to take place outdoors after dark. These events are transforming our city’s main library into a place of welcome and excitement not only during open hours but at all possible times of the day or night.

What’s next? Barrio continues to develop its programs in conjunction with local artists and residents, and plans to continue partnering with the Reading Public Library. The next 5 years of community theater productions will follow the story of five superheroes while exploring themes like violence, voting, food insecurity, mass incarceration, and power dynamics. Barrio plans to capture that essence on the steps of the library, both during the day, and ever-increasingly, at night.

For more information contact Daniel Egusquiza at outreach.reading.lib.pa.us. Attached are two photos and a short video from the latest Conquer the Night event.

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