

**Legal Name**

Childsplay, Inc.

**Project Title**

To support "El Puente," a residency program in partnership with local artist Zarco Guerrero that seeks to make theatre for young audiences a vital part of Latino families' cultural experience

**DDCF Grant Number**

2013021

**Project Progress and Successes**

During the past year, Childsplay began implementing "El Puente," a program in partnership with artist Zarco Guerrero to engage Latino families in theatre participation. During the reporting period Childsplay completed Phase 1 (Research and Development) and Phase 2 (Pilot Implementation and Assessment).

Phase 1 began on July 1, 2013, as the company began to research arts participation among Latino families in our community. We worked with Urias Communications, a public relations agency specializing in the Latino market, to conduct a series of focus groups for both bilingual and Spanish-language dominant households. These learnings helped the organization to develop an implementation plan for the pilot event. There were major learnings that came out of these focus groups, which helped Childsplay understand more about the audiences we are trying to reach, and how we can best connect with them. Urias Communications also helped Childsplay to create a sustainable marketing plan that could be implemented long-term, after the end of the grant period.

In January 2014, Childsplay began Phase 2, with programming surrounding the first El Puente festival. The company identified its production of *The Cat in the Hat*, an adaptation of Dr. Seuss's beloved picture book as the best platform for El Puente activities, given its widespread family appeal. Five residencies were conducted in schools and community centers throughout January and February. Zarco led these residencies, giving young people the opportunity to create their own masks. Students from these programs were invited to attend the festival with their families, bringing the masks they had created. Childsplay also worked with Urias Communications and Zarco's organization Cultural Coalition to market the event specifically to Latino families. The event was picked up by KAET (local PBS affiliate)'s *Horizonte* program, *La Voz*, the *Arizona Republic* and *Raising Arizona Kids*. Our local Univision affiliate also partnered with Childsplay to help us recruit focus group participants.

The first El Puente festival was held on March 9, 2014. It featured a free performance of *The Cat in the Hat* at the Tempe Center for the Arts (TCA), with 200 tickets given away on a first come first serve basis. Significantly, however, the event included much more than just the performance. The lobby of the Tempe Center for the Arts featured craft activities such as mask-making and hat-making (in honor of the Dr. Seuss performance), face painting, food for sale, as well as a wide variety of culturally relevant performances. Thirteen artists from across the community performed as part of the event, including Ken

Koshio, Teatro Meshico, Teatro Mitote, Primavera Folklorico, Tika Hoops, DJ Sean Derek, Cultural Coalition, IDEA Museum, Ballet Folklorico Ollin Yolitztlí, Axé Capoeira, MarDi Dance Duet, Desert Dance Dragons, Los Estandartes, and Natalia Ceballos. 200 people saw *The Cat in the Hat* out of the more than 400 people who attended the festival performances before, during and after the play. The day ended with a large procession of cast members, artists and audience members out of the Tempe Center for the Arts, across the pedestrian bridge just outside and culminating in a large dance and drum circle.

The festival itself was a major success for Childsplay, for Zarco, and for the El Puente program as it continues to grow. Anecdotal response from both participating artists and audience members was highly enthusiastic. A local writer who covered the event remarked that this was the most diverse crowd she had ever seen in the Tempe Center for the Arts. The art gallery inside the TCA reported more clicks (representing patrons) than ever in its history. When Anthony Runfola, Childsplay's General Manager, asked the audience for *The Cat in the Hat* to raise their hands if it was their first Childsplay performance, nearly the entire crowd raised their hands. A post-show survey reflected that 86% of responding attendees were Latino, meaning that Childsplay succeeded in bringing in new audiences of Latino families to the theatre. Additionally, Childsplay was able to build meaningful connections with other cultural organizations and artists that we would not have otherwise. These connections may lead to long-term partnerships and future collaborations that continue to inform Childsplay's work with Latino families in our community.

A final success for this project is the overwhelming positive reaction Childsplay received across the community as we began to implement the program. Being transparent about our commitment to diversity -- and actively addressing the ways in which we are not yet succeeding -- has garnered positive reactions from individuals and organizations across our community, particularly as it took the form of fun, vibrant, community-oriented programming.

### **Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project**

One of the biggest challenges we encountered in this project was having enough time for research. We realized early on that we would need more time dedicated to the research portion of our program, and accordingly, we weren't able to complete our research with Urias Communications before the first festival. However, we were able to take the research we had completed into the first event, and are now strongly equipped for the next two festivals with both the completed research and marketing plan and a pilot event behind us.

Another obstacle we confronted is the challenge of developing a program like this in a space that we rent, rather than own. The Tempe Center for the Arts is an amazing space, but it is used for many different things, not just Childsplay programs. Accordingly, we found ourselves somewhat limited by the facilities schedule and vendor contracts. As we move into next year's events, we are looking for new ways to mitigate these challenges by planning ahead long-term and engaging the TCA as a meaningful partner in this programming.

An ongoing challenge with a program like this one is that a free event will always have a certain amount of uncertainty involved. It is harder to secure commitments ahead of time without a ticket purchase, especially when trying to engage a new audience. However, despite this uncertainty, we had a large turnout for the event. We will continue to seek new ways of ensuring attendance without ticket purchase at the fall event, where we will have significantly more tickets to give away. One way we will do this is to shift our residency

programs out of schools and into community centers, becoming more family-oriented than student-oriented. We anticipate that this will result in more whole-family buy-in and a higher likelihood of participation.

**What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?**

Some of the major learnings for the organization came out of the focus groups conducted during the research phase. One of the presumptions we had going into this project is that many Latino families were not attending the theatre because it is too expensive -- however our focus groups revealed that while cost is a factor, it is not the real issue. Childsplay's tickets are at a comparable price point to many events that families attend. With this in mind, the organization is focusing more on broadening our reach and re-framing our programs in a way that will engage new audiences in the content we present. We are seeking to reflect the overall experience of attending the theatre in our marketing, suggesting that Childsplay can be a day of family activities for participants.

**Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.**

El Puente was featured in/on:

KAET Channel 8's Horizonte <http://www.azpbs.org/horizonte/detailvid.php?id=1063>

The Arizona Republic

StageDirections.com

<http://www.stage-directions.com/theatre-buzz/5116-doris-duke-charitable-foundation-awards-155000-grant-to-childsplay.html>

Front Door News

<http://frontdoorsnews.com/2014/02/el-puente-theater-festival-mask-procession/>

**If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N**

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Samantha Johnstone, [sjohnstone@childsplayaz.org](mailto:sjohnstone@childsplayaz.org)