

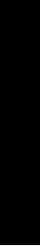


# Belonging by design

A Barrio Alegria Toolkit

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## **Barrio Alegria**

Barrio Alegría is a community engagement organization advancing neighborhood vitality through creative placekeeping, economic opportunity, and leadership development. We believe in dignity, shared ownership, cultural expression, and building joyful, resilient futures together



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### **Abstract**

This toolkit reframes community engagement as relational, energetic work rather than a series of tactics to increase turnout. Drawing from over a decade of practice at Barrio Alegría in Reading, Pennsylvania, it offers a grounded methodology rooted in invitation, belonging, recognition, contribution, and shared containers for participation.

Rather than presenting engagement as formulaic or transactional, this publication outlines the conditions that allow participation to deepen and ownership to emerge. It combines practical tools, reflective frameworks, and lived examples to help planners, community groups, and institutions move from event-based outreach to sustained relationship-building.

At its core, this toolkit argues that engagement succeeds not when people attend, but when they see themselves inside the work.



## A Note Before You Begin

This is not a neutral how-to manual. It is not a universal model. It is not a formula you can replicate and expect the same results. This toolkit pushes back against extractive engagement and invites you into the relational dynamics of community work.

What follows are tools gathered after more than a decade of stewardship and community engagement. They were shaped over years of showing up—often without clarity, sometimes without funding, but always with our hearts open to establishing and growing relationships. They grew from kitchens, sidewalks, parks, arguments, laughter, grief, and long stretches of uncertainty. They were not designed to scale cleanly. But they were designed to hold.

They were also shaped by place. This work unfolded in Reading, alongside neighbors who have lived here for generations, within a taskforce system that made space for community voice from the beginning. It was strengthened by a foundation willing to dream with us rather than manage us. It was sharpened by leaders who understood how privilege enters a room and chose to name it. And it was refined by friends who trusted us enough to challenge us—and allowed us to challenge them in return.

Without that ecosystem, this work would look different.

This is not a document to rush through. Read it the way you would walk a neighborhood: slowly, curiously, with your senses on. Some sections may feel immediately useful. Others may feel uncomfortable, irrelevant, or unfinished. That is part of the work.

In Barriolandia, we often say: We might not be alive to see the fruits of our work, but that doesn't mean we stop planting. This toolkit comes from that posture. The work of community engagement is long. It requires planting trees whose shade you may never sit under.

Above all, remember this: community engagement is not something you do to people. It means stepping into relationships you didn't design, power dynamics you don't control, histories you didn't live through, and expectations you didn't set, accepting that you will come out changed.

And sometimes, the deepest roots are planted knowing you may never sit in the shade.



# **PART I**

## What you should know about Community Engagement

Community engagement is the sustained practice of building trust and sharing power so neighbors can shape what happens in their own place. It unfolds in relationships, over time, and asks for presence, humility, and a willingness to be changed. In this sense, it is less about outreach or branding and more about how we choose to enter existing lives, histories, and power dynamics with care.

Because of that, community engagement is not an abstract value. In practical terms, it requires a shift in decision-making power toward the people who live with the consequences. It asks institutions and practitioners to open themselves as vehicles for possibility, supporting ideas that emerge from the community rather than imposing solutions from outside.

But community engagement is often misunderstood. It is not simply translating a flyer, though that can be a starting point. It is not sitting behind a table handing out information, though that can be meaningful. These actions matter only when they are part of a larger relationship, one rooted in trust, continuity, and shared responsibility. When those conditions are present, community engagement reaches its fullest expression: a neighbor comes to you with an idea and asks for partnership, resources, or knowledge to bring it to life.

### The Place

In 2011, Reading, Pennsylvania, had been declared the poorest city in the United States. Reports and statistics painted the city in grim tones, but numbers never tell the full story. South of Penn is not just a place with low voter turnout or a median income 20% below the city average. It is a community of deep roots, where neighbors remember every tree cut down and every child who learned to ride a bike in the park, where grandmothers pass down the art of convening people and resilience is stitched into daily life.

South of Penn—south of Penn Street—is a neighborhood with permeable boundaries: the river to the west and south, the railroad tracks to the east, and downtown to the north. Within those lines lives a dense network of stories and relationships that move in and out as they please. In the Reading Iron Playground area, an African-American enclave with generations of pride and endurance, you can feel the heartbeat of the city, where long-time residents are often the first to say, “You need to meet so-and-so.”

Our involvement in South of Penn began when Barrio Alegría was invited to participate in the Wyomissing Foundation’s South of Penn Taskforce, rooting us in the neighborhood alongside partners committed to strengthening it from within. When we first arrived, we were artists, not urban planners. We knew how to create moments that made people stop, smile, and feel part of something bigger than themselves, but we didn’t yet know how to translate that into the slow, uneven work of community and economic development.

## **The Moment We Understood What Was at Stake**

Choosing the opening story for this toolkit was not easy. We wanted one that could hold the spirit of our work. Again and again, we found ourselves returning to a story we share often, because it carries a simple truth at the heart of Barrio: everyone can contribute, no matter what. It also draws a clear line between how art is sometimes understood and how it is lived here. For some, art exists to decorate and beautify. In our community, it is often a matter of life or death.

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut Pennsylvania down, we stopped all projects. The spaces we had transformed, abandoned lots, parks, bodega steps, were quickly reclaimed by litter, neglect, and drug dealers. Vulnerable people and places became targets again.

When restrictions were lifted, we slowly resumed programming. One afternoon, after a neighborhood cleanup, a South of Penn neighbor called us in tears. "I was just threatened in the street. A man from down the street said they're going to "jump me" because they think I've been calling the police and bringing activities here. Can we please have more activities so they know it's not just me doing them?"

She didn't call the police. She didn't call City Hall. She called us, a group she had been doing Bhangra dances with. But we were who she trusted.

At that moment, we understood that our work in creative placemaking was not merely important. It was vital.

## **The Lesson: Light, Shadow, and Contribution**

South of Penn's future is shaped by both people inside and outside the boardroom. To some, the levers of decision-making rest with city departments, elected officials, major nonprofits, and funders. They decide which projects move forward, where dollars are spent, and which voices are formally invited to the table.

But our work has taught us that power also lives elsewhere. With neighbor captains who can rally a block on short notice. With engaged leaders who can fill a room with a phone call. With bodega owners who hear every rumor before it reaches the news. With elders whose word carries the weight of history. Both kinds of power matter here, and neither works well without the other.

Understanding a community isn't a box you check in a kickoff meeting or a six-month grant cycle. It is a discipline of presence: showing up when nothing is happening, listening until the silences speak, letting your plans be shaped by what you hear instead of what you expected.

In the story above, we knew we had to do more than show up for another art event. We identified who the aggressor was and then we went to his house. He was sitting on his front porch.

“Hi! We wanted you to know that we’re holding a watercolor event in the alleyway.”

The man’s face lit up. “Oh! Do you guys need help? That place is usually a mess. Let me grab my broom and help you clean it before the children arrive.” He stayed for the whole event. And at the end, he said, “I’m going to talk to everyone here. Nobody is ever going to bother you guys again.”

Understanding that we often place on pedestals those we consider “good” and push into the shadows those we consider “bad” is essential. In truth, a community, like every individual, is woven of both light and shadow. When we shift our perspective, we begin to see that in a barrio, everyone can contribute in small but meaningful ways.

The tools in the next chapters will help you plan, recruit, and sustain your efforts. But if you skip this step, if you don’t take the time to be present and to hear people for who they are, then everything else will be just decoration.



## **NEIGHBOR SPOTLIGHT**

### **Jeanette Buchanon**

In the South of Penn, when we want neighbors to know something is happening, we don't print more flyers. We look for Miss Jeanette.

Most mornings, she pulls out a chair, fixes a cup of coffee, and sits at the edge of her front steps, surveying the life of Seventh Street. People stop. News travels. Decisions begin to take shape. Long before we met her in the summer of 2018, neighbors had already given her a title: the mayor of Seventh Street.

Jeanette was born in 1959 and has lived in Reading her entire life. Around South 7th Street, she holds a kind of authority you can't appoint or fund. She convenes people because they trust her. One of her earliest memories is of her grandmother, who, along with a group of women, organized activities for neighborhood children. "I was raised at the Reading Iron Playground," she tells us. "We had people who put us on the right path. I'm just trying to give back to where I've lived all my life."

At a recent planning meeting, Jeanette spoke matter-of-factly about confronting a man selling drugs outside her house. "I am not afraid," she said. "I was born here, and I'm going to die here." She remembers when the neighborhood felt more stable, when people didn't move in and out so often. "When the drugs came, everything went downhill," she says. "So we gotta make the best of it."

These days, neighbors are rallying around her again. Some who moved to the suburbs still come back, checking in, asking what's happening. Jeanette laughs when she talks about it. "Everybody else leaves," she says. "I'm still here. They tell me I can't go anywhere because they won't have anywhere to come back to."

You don't have to look hard to find Jeanette. She's usually right there, outside her house, with a boisterous laugh and an open seat nearby. She's watching, listening, connecting dots. And quietly, she's looking for someone to pass the work on to, someone who will carry the stories and traditions of Seventh Street forward.

This is what informal power looks like here. Not a title. Not a position. A chair on the sidewalk, and the trust of a block. Barrio not only credits Miss Jeanette for the work she has led, but in a real way, we would not be here if it wasn't for her. She helped us define community engagement not by what practitioners do, but by who communities trust when things are at stake.



## How Engagement Deepens

### Moving People Along the Engagement Spectrum

Engagement deepens in stages, from being informed to taking ownership. Our practice is informed by The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, developed in 2019 by Rosa González of Facilitating Power in partnership with Movement Strategy Center.

Before moving people along any spectrum, we name what engagement means to us. At Barrio Alegría, engagement is not simply facilitating activity. It is a posture. A willingness to become vehicles for liberation. This understanding shapes how we show up, how we listen, and how we share power.

It looks like showing up as neighbors, not consultants. Coffee instead of communications.

It looks like letting pain, joy, mistrust, and dreams shape the work, rather than pre-packaged programs.

It looks like moving from informing to empowering, until community members are leading the dance, from cleanup rituals to creative revolutions.

We define engagement not as action for neighbors, but transformation with them. Our presence becomes a tool the community can choose to use, or not. From this understanding, engagement unfolds along a spectrum:

Inform → Sharing flyers for movie nights.

Consult → Asking through surveys what issues matter most, such as safety or trash, and hosting a yearly gathering where neighbors share what they want to see. We call this event Lluvia de Ideas, “Rain of ideas” or brainstorming session.

Involve → Co-creating events like porch concerts or park activities.

Collaborate → Jointly planning block parties or programs, and inviting neighbors to co-lead ideas that emerged from Lluvia de Ideas.

Empower → Supporting a neighbor to lead their own cleanup, initiative, or advocacy effort.

While the stages are drawn from the original spectrum, the examples reflect how engagement shows up in Barrio Alegría’s work in South of Penn. Engagement does not happen by accident. Over time, we have learned that moving with neighbors through different forms of participation requires intention. The strategies that follow name the conditions we return to again and again. Together, they support movement across the engagement spectrum while honoring that each person enters, stays, and contributes in their own way.

## Strategy I. Start with Goals that Grow from the Ground Up

**Principle:** Goals are not written in an office; they are grown in lived experience.

**How we do it:**

Our work begins from a place of acceptance. We accept that our neighbors belong, even before they show up, and when we meet them, we welcome them with the understanding that everyone has something to contribute.

Before we take any action, we listen, not with a clipboard in hand or a recorder turned on. That's not how your neighbor would say hello. We show up with a cup of coffee, drop off a birthday card, or host a thank-you meal for the person who let us run an extension cord for a porch concert we held on a neighbor's porch.

From there, we identify the goal together, making sure it reflects both the need and the community's vision. Then we use our resources and connections to help raise that goal into spaces where neighbors don't naturally find themselves.

**Barrio Story:**

When we first began working in the South of Penn, we assumed security was the top concern. But before we acted, the South of Penn Taskforce deployed surveys to ask neighbors directly. In those early days we walked the streets with clipboards, holding "30-second conversations" to learn the single most important issue they wanted a community organization to address. The answer was overwhelming: litter.

At the next Taskforce meeting, some leaders hesitated. Trash wasn't appealing. I turned to my colleague and said, "Well, we're going to have to make trash picking sexy." And we did.

We launched a "Don't Mess with the SOP" campaign, photographing neighbors holding a chancla (flip-flop) as a playful warning to would-be litterbugs.

We partnered with Public Works to monitor trouble spots where trash piled up around bins instead of inside. Then, we brought in opera singers to hide near those bins. When a neighbor threw trash inside the bin, they burst into "Hal-le-lujah! Hal-le-lujah!" When trash landed outside the bin, they sang O Fortuna with theatrical intensity. It worked. People laughed — and picked their trash back up to do it right.

We built on the momentum: organizing cleanup competitions with other neighborhoods and even challenging the city of Pottstown to a DC vs. Marvel-themed cleanup battle. There's still a viral video circulating of Thanos sweeping 5th Street in Reading.

**What This Means for You:**

Listen before you leap. The issue you think matters most may not be the one your neighbors lose sleep over—ask them.

Turn challenges into invitations. If a goal feels “boring” or unappealing, creativity and a shot of the unexpected can make it irresistible.

Engage through joy and play. People will show up for laughter, music, and spectacle—and leave having done real work.

Remember that this work goes beyond “serving” a community. When goals are born from listening, they belong to the people themselves. And once neighbors remember their power, they will carry the work further—and longer—than any organization can alone.

Remember: a goal born from listening grows deeper roots — and a deeply rooted goal can survive droughts, storms, and leadership changes.



## Strategy II. Recruit Through Trust, Joy, and Visibility

### **Principle:**

People join when trust is present and the first step feels joyful, not intimidating. People stay when they can see themselves growing into ownership.

### **How we do it**

We lean on community anchors. Elders like Jeanette, bodega owners, block captains, park regulars. These are the people who know who had a baby last week, who is new on the block, and who quietly needs a seat at the table. Their presence signals safety long before we ever speak.

We begin with dancing under the open sky, the smell of pastelillos in the air, a child tugging on their mother's hand to join the drum circle. Art, music, food, and laughter soften the ground before we plant the seeds of civic dialogue.

People who wander in for a plate of rice and beans or to see a cousin perform are personally invited back. The first time, they watch. The second time, they help carry a chair. By the fifth, they are leading a table, hosting a workshop, or singing at a porch concert.

We pay close attention. The next neighborhood leader is often already in the room. Many times, they do not yet see their own superpowers. Our work begins by helping them feel seen, welcomed, and trusted.

### **Barrio Story: This is what it looks like when trust, joy, and visibility create a pathway from participation to ownership.**

With his friends, family, and city shrinking in the rearview mirror, Anthony Orozco drove nine hours east, intent on becoming the man he was meant to be. At the time, the move felt practical. The Reading Eagle needed a Spanish-speaking reporter to cover its Latino affairs beat, and Anthony had a journalism degree to put to use.

Landing a full-time, salaried reporting job at a daily newspaper was an exciting prospect, even if it meant relocating to a state, a county, and a city he had never been to. He arrived knowing exactly two people: the editor who hired him and a Craigslist roommate desperate to sublet an apartment.

Responding to late-night fires, interviewing undocumented immigrants, attending galas, and churning out stories suited Anthony well. He was 23, bright-eyed, and eager to integrate himself into a new community.

Anthony got to know Daniel Egusquiza through weekly salsa nights at a local hotel. Though

they often disagreed, they enjoyed the intellectual challenge the other brought. They shared an allergy to platitudes, an affinity for people unhindered by a lack of privilege, and a mutual intolerance for the boring.

Like Daniel, Anthony was also an artist. He was a poet who had honed his craft at open mics and bars around the University of Cincinnati. More than performing, Anthony wanted to talk shop with other poets.

One day, Daniel asked Anthony if he wanted to host poetry workshops. Anthony hesitated. He had never taught a class before. Daniel told him it was not a big deal. Just have fun with it.

Anthony agreed. To his surprise, the room filled quickly. The poets who showed up were looking for the same things he was: a place to work on their writing, to learn craft from one another, and most importantly, a place to belong. Beyond the workshops themselves, Anthony watched people overcome fear, form friendships, and open one another's minds to new ways of thinking.

This became his new obsession. Using art to activate real transformation in people's lives. Soon, it became clear that one or two workshops would not be enough.

The workshops grew into a year-long series of well-attended, community-building gatherings. Then came a project bringing a Puerto Rican poet to Reading. Then a county-wide poetry anthology. Then Anthony was named Berks County Poet Laureate. He participated in learning exchanges across the country with Barrio.

In 2022, Daniel asked Anthony to take on his most ambitious role yet: Director of Operations at Barrio. Anthony already had a successful, award-winning career in print, radio, and digital journalism. But the chance to help spark transformation, in the city, in the status quo, and in people's hearts, was irresistible.

Anthony accepted. Barrio changed. So did he.

### **What This Means for You**

Start where people are. Not everyone will see themselves as a leader at first.

Make space for growth. Offer low-pressure roles and allow responsibility to expand over time.

Expect the long game. Trust and ownership are built in seasons, not days.

Pass the baton. True empowerment means the work outlives your direct involvement.

## Strategy III. Capturing Potential

**Principle:** Ownership expands when everyone can contribute, even those you might not expect.

### **How we do it**

We pay attention to what people are already doing. The teen who is always filming on their phone becomes the event documentarian. The neighbor who stays behind after cleanup becomes the one who locks up. Potential rarely arrives labeled as leadership.

We do not wait for people to come to us, even when an event is large or highly visible. We stay aware of threshold fear and cross the distance ourselves. We introduce ourselves, name what we see, and say plainly: This is for you too.

After a cleanup, we shout out María for the way she turned an empty lot into a flower garden. Recognition is not a reward. It is a signal that contribution is seen and valued.

### **Barrio Story: This is what it looks like when contribution becomes a doorway to ownership.**

While visiting a skate park just north of Reading, long-time Barrio accomplice Anthony Orozco noticed a group of young adult, artistic-looking Latinos. They struck up a conversation and he learned that one young man was a recent arrival from Mexico, a musician who specialized in a niche rap genre. The artist shared that he wanted to break into the local rap community but did not yet know many people.

Anthony remembered the conversation while planning a Salita Concert, a small, intimate gathering meant to honor volunteers and friends. He invited the rapper and encouraged him to bring a plus one. The artist arrived with Angie Jimenez, a friend who had been with him at the skate park the day they met.

The rapper began connecting with a local rap collective. Just as importantly, Angie spent time talking with Anthony about photography and their interest in shooting Barrio events. Soon after, Angie attended an outdoor concert where the Mexican rapper performed his first paid gig. Not long after that, Angie showed up with a camera to document a park cleanup.

Angie loved the positivity, the connection with neighbors, and the energy of the organization. They took on more photo jobs with Barrio and later joined the photography workshop series, where they sold several pieces and were celebrated for their artistry.

Eventually, Angie decided to take things a step further and applied for a fellowship within the organization. During the interview, they were asked about work history, skills, and interests. But Barrio leaders focused just as much on Angie's spirit, the unique chemistry they would bring to building the next iteration of Barrio.

Angie later shared that they had never experienced an interview so soulful or grounded. They became one of four fellows offered a one-year contract to continue transforming Reading alongside neighbors.

This trajectory is not uncommon at Barrio. Artists, involved neighbors, and lovers of joy often orbit the work. When invited and supported, they begin doing the work of Barrio on their own.

### **What This Means for You**

Recruitment is not about filling seats. It is about opening doors people want to walk through. Trust is built in everyday moments: greetings on the sidewalk, remembered birthdays, and plates of food shared before meetings begin.

Once someone crosses the threshold, they may not yet see themselves as a leader. A personal invitation, a small role, and consistent encouragement can awaken a sense of belonging and purpose.

Your role is to notice, invite, and nurture. If you do this well, you will not just recruit participants—you will help grow future leaders who will carry the work further than you ever could.



## Strategy IV, Honor different forms of wealth

**Principle: People already carry wealth; engagement creates the conditions for it to be shared.**

### **How we do it**

We create spaces where people are invited to bring what they already know, love, and carry. Skills, stories, recipes, traditions, and care are treated as assets, not extras.

Rather than asking people to observe or consume, we offer roles that make them essential. Cooking, teaching, hosting, welcoming, caring for others—these acts create dignity through participation.

We name contribution out loud. A dish cooked, a story shared, a moment held for others is acknowledged as real wealth. Recognition turns quiet offering into shared belonging.

### **Barrio Story: This is what it looks like when contribution becomes visible wealth.**

When Donna arrived in Reading from Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, she carried little more than her family's hands in her own. Back in San Juan, she had worked as a community liaison, but the storm stripped away water, food, and power, forcing her to start from scratch in a city still battling its own wounds of poverty and disinvestment.

At Barrio Alegría, Donna found those same values alive again. She joined our Storytelling Through Dance program, where she began to rebuild her sense of wealth from the ground up.

Soon after, she cooked a massive pot of her grandmother's asopao for 30 participants. For an hour, the soup became a stage for connection, laughter, and shared stories. During rehearsal, Donna declared that she felt like the wealthiest woman in Reading because she had fed so many people.

That night at Barrio, everyone agreed.

### **What This Means for You**

That quiet neighbor, newcomer, or even the so-called "troublemaker" may be your strongest ally if you offer them a role and make them feel essential.

Every invitation plants a seed of ownership. Every public thank-you says: you belong here, and this place is better because of you.

## Strategy V. Plan Logistics Around the Culture of the Place

**Principle: Meetings and events should fit into the life of the community, not the other way around.**

### **How we do it**

We design gatherings that align with how people already live, move, and connect.

Choose familiar spaces. We host events in places people already use: parks, playgrounds, stoops, and bodegas.

Honor real schedules. We time activities for when people are naturally available: evenings, weekends, after church.

Integrate cultural touchstones. Language, music, food, and traditions are not add-ons. They are the foundation that makes people feel at home.

### **Barrio Story: This is what it looks like when place, memory, and rhythm guide engagement.**

Nestled between Gibson and Neversink alleyways, Reading Iron Playground has been a hub of joy and connection in the South of Penn for decades. In the 1960s, when it was still surrounded by homes where parents could watch their children from the porch, the park thrived with bus trips, parades, and carnivals organized by local women who made sure every child felt loved.

As families moved away and houses were torn down, events dwindled. The park fell into disuse, and crime moved in. In 2018, South of Penn neighbors stepped up, partnering with the city and local organizations to restore safe, vibrant programming. But instead of simply adding new activities, we began by asking neighbors about the traditions they missed most.

One of those traditions was the annual Easter egg hunt. It began when neighbor Shona Williams, determined to create joy for local children, bought baskets and candy with her own money. With help from her aunt Pam Williams and Jeanette Buchanon, every child left with a toy and treats.

When Shona passed the baton, Jeanette and the South of Penn carried the tradition forward. They secured resources and expanded the gathering to include cleanups, movie nights, and block parties, always rooted in what neighbors remembered and loved.

The results have been transformative. Volunteers like Jamie Harris and her son Jacob have watched the park come alive again with lights, laughter, and community spirit. In 2024, the Easter egg hunt drew its biggest crowd yet, complete with a bounce house, a DJ, and hundreds of bags of candy.

Today, neighbors gather at Reading Iron Playground. Children play. Events return. Familiar faces look out for one another. The space is cleaner, safer, and full of life.

As Jeanette says, "If we don't use it, we'll lose it. That's why we need to keep doing things."

### **What This Means for You**

When planning an event or meeting, ask how it can feel like an extension of everyday life in the neighborhood rather than something imposed from the outside. Look for where people already gather, when they are naturally together, and the rhythms they already move to. Sometimes that means more Teddy Pendergrass than Anthony Santos.

If families go to the park in the evenings, bring your program there. If Saturdays are when the block buzzes, that is your moment. The more you align with the community's internal clock, the more the event feels like theirs, not yours.

And remember: when you add a bounce house to an Easter egg hunt or a DJ to a movie night, honor the community's legacy. Was there a favorite vendor? Someone who always dressed as the Easter Bunny? A legendary DJ everyone remembers?

You are not just organizing an event. You are creating memories, strengthening trust, and showing that the community's joy is worth investing in. That is how you keep the lights and laughter on long after the event ends.



## Equity: Power, Access, and Common Failures

### Inclusivity and accessibility

When we talk about inclusivity and accessibility, it's easy to check the box with the obvious: translating flyers, offering interpretation, making sure people can physically attend a meeting. These things matter, but they do not, on their own, create true participation.

I've heard Spanish-speaking residents say in public meetings, "I don't want to speak because then you have to translate my words and I feel like I'm slowing everyone down." That hesitation is a sign that the space itself, not just the language, needs work.

That realization came to me in other ways, too. Years ago, I believed my university degree was entirely my doing. I studied hard, passed a difficult entry exam, and devoured books. No one forced me to do those things. Then my partner at the time pointed out something I had never considered: my family had the means to give me space and safety to focus on school. But that condition is not universal. I had inherited it.

It forced me to look again at what I thought was purely effort.

I remembered that lesson during a staff meeting when we read an article written by a former Reading resident who returned with plans to "revitalize his hometown" through an arts center. He encountered setbacks along the way, and when a shooting happened near the property, he packed up and moved to New Jersey.

Bri, a young Latina on our team, spoke quietly but firmly. "I saw somebody get shot on my way to school. It shook me. It made me want to leave. But then I realized this is my town, and I couldn't give up on my city."

Her answer made us pause. Some people can opt out of difficulty. Others must stay and transform the place they are in order to survive.

I carried that awareness into a classroom where I had been invited to speak to twenty freshmen at a private liberal arts college. At first, they were polite and cautious. We spent two hours building trust, warming the room. Near the end, I asked everyone to form a circle and answer a simple question: "How are you feeling?"

When it was a young Black Muslim woman's turn, she took a deep breath.

"I've never told anyone this, but I fear for my life before I leave my dorm for class. Some mornings I call my mom just to hear her voice. She tells me everything will be okay. But I feel like everyone here hates me. Like you all wish I were dead."

The air tightened. The hum of the overhead lights grew louder. A student next to her instinctively pulled her into a hug.

Then another student spoke. She came from a family of police officers. She looked at the first girl carefully. "I do feel for you. I really do. But... It sounds like this is your issue. Your fear. I don't understand why it has to be an issue shared by all of us."

Her words settled heavily between them.

And me? I felt like a baby at that moment. I wanted to defend. To bridge. To fix. Instead, I could only witness. I did not yet have the language to hold what had surfaced.

What became clear in that silence was this: fear does not disappear simply because a meeting has begun. Stability, safety, and belonging are not evenly distributed. Some people enter a room ready to contribute. Others enter calculating risk. Some are deciding whether speaking will cost them something.

Over the years, we have learned that translation and physical access are only surface adjustments. If we rush to smooth discomfort, we risk teaching people that honesty is dangerous and silence is safer. If we ignore the unequal conditions people carry with them, participation will quietly favor those who have always felt entitled to take up space.

Inclusion is not about adding access points. It is about designing for the realities people are carrying when they enter the room. Once we understand that people do not enter a room on equal footing, the question shifts.

It is no longer: "How do we get people to participate?" It becomes: "How are we showing up in relationship to our own power?" Because the same forces that shape who feels safe enough to speak also shape who gets to decide, who controls resources, and whose voice carries weight.

If we are serious about equitable engagement, awareness is not enough. Awareness must inform how we design, how we facilitate, and how we name our limits. The stories above are not cautionary tales. They are mirrors. They ask us to examine what we bring into the room, especially the forms of power that travel with us whether we acknowledge them or not.

What follows are lessons we have learned about power in practice: how to recognize it, how to name it, and how to wield it with integrity.



## **Understanding Power in Equitable Community Engagement**

Power shapes every engagement space, whether we acknowledge it or not. It influences what we can offer and how we are perceived. Understanding our own power helps us recognize both the opportunities and the risks it creates in engagement spaces.

### **Power in Our Identities and Lived Experiences**

Our identities and lived experiences can either align with or differ from the communities we engage. When they align, trust-building may come more naturally—we may share cultural reference points, language, or experiences that create a sense of mutual understanding. When they differ, building trust can require more intentional effort, as we may lack shared perspectives or even resemble systems of oppression in the eyes of marginalized communities.

In these situations, it's worth considering collaborative approaches—such as working alongside practitioners who share identities or lived experiences with the community, or committing to higher levels of engagement that give community members more decision-making power. These strategies help counterbalance uneven power dynamics and create space for authentic connection.

### **Power in Our Roles as Practitioners**

Regardless of our job title, we carry institutional power. It travels with our role, our access to resources, and our proximity to decision-making. Even when we are not the final authority, we often serve as gatekeepers to processes that affect communities.

Imagine your agency decides to build a park, and you are asked to “engage” residents about it. During conversations, you learn the community does not want a park, but you have no authority to change the plan. At that moment, you are not facilitating community engagement. You are disseminating information. Calling it engagement when nothing is negotiable erodes trust.

One of the most important practices in equitable work is naming power and limits clearly. What decisions are already made? What is still open? Who ultimately decides? Clarity is not a weakness. It is integrity.

Equitable engagement does not mean pretending power disappears. It means using it transparently, creating real pathways for community influence, and stepping back when decisions do not belong to us. When power is named honestly, trust grows. When it is disguised, trust erodes.

## Key Questions to Ask Yourself

Before starting any engagement process, reflect on:

Who controls the resources? – Who decides how funding, staff, and time are allocated?

What is your actual decision-making authority? – Be clear about what you can and cannot decide, and how you'll make those decisions.

What decision-making power will the community have? – Define their role from the start.

How can you work at higher levels of engagement? – Look for opportunities to move from informing to collaborating or community ownership.

How might power imbalances affect the work? – Consider the ways unequal power could influence trust, participation, and outcomes.

## Why This Work Requires More Than Good Intentions

When power imbalances go unacknowledged, engagement becomes performative. Communities feel consulted but not heard. When power is shared intentionally, communities move from passive recipients to co-creators. Trust deepens. Outcomes strengthen. This shift asks something of us.

It asks for sustained effort. Community work is rarely linear. Progress comes from showing up consistently, celebrating small wins, and staying present when momentum slows.

It asks us to remember that relationships are the work. Trust grows through presence, listening, and cultural humility. People move across multiple worlds, and we enter those worlds carefully.

It asks for action-oriented allyship. Change does not happen alone. We must build coalitions, redistribute influence, and step up imperfectly, staying accountable when we misstep. Equitable engagement is not a technique. It is part of your organizational culture.



# Three Common Patterns of Failure in Community Engagement

When community engagement falls short, it's rarely because people don't care. More often, it's because familiar patterns quietly take over—patterns that feel productive on the surface but ultimately distance communities from real influence and belonging. Over time, we've seen three failures appear again and again, across organizations, sectors, and cities. They show up in different forms, but they share a common outcome: communities are invited to the table without being trusted to help set it.

## 1. Centering Institutions Instead of Community

Core failure: Engagement spaces prioritize how organizations operate, learn, or collaborate over how community members live, decide, and belong. In these spaces, progress is measured by institutional alignment rather than community impact. Meetings focus on internal processes, partnerships, and professional relationships, while residents are discussed more often than they are present. The community becomes something to be added later, instead of the starting point.

## 2. Performative Engagement

Core failure: Voices are invited into the room without any real willingness to be changed by what is said. This form of engagement asks people to speak, but not to influence. Input is collected, acknowledged, and then quietly set aside in favor of predetermined plans. Leaders reassure rather than inquire, respond rather than reflect. The appearance of listening replaces the practice of it, and participation becomes theater.

## 3. Excluding Lived Experience as Expertise

Core failure: Proximity to harm, place, and consequence is treated as bias instead of knowledge. In these moments, lived experience is framed as emotional, disruptive, or “negative,” while distance is mistaken for objectivity. Those most affected by decisions are asked to validate ideas shaped elsewhere, and when their insights challenge the narrative, they are often sidelined rather than engaged.

The failures described above are not isolated mistakes. They are expressions of the same misalignment, and they often show up most clearly in public decision-making. We have seen them play out in real time. They are not the result of bad intentions. They are the result of power operating unchecked. Recognizing this is the first step toward designing differently. The following stories illustrate how easily these dynamics take hold—and what happens when engagement loses its grounding in community reality.

## When the Community Is an Afterthought

**Principle: Decisions made for a community, without the community, erode trust—even when intentions are good.**

### What We Are Seeing

Across cities and institutions, we often see community engagement treated as a procedural step rather than a foundational practice. Plans are developed internally, budgets are allocated, and timelines are set before residents are ever invited into the conversation. When community input arrives late, it is framed as validation rather than participation.

This approach creates a misalignment between institutional priorities and lived reality. By the time neighbors are asked to weigh in, the most important decisions have already been made.

### Barrio Story: When Process Replaces Relationship

In 2025, the City of Reading had a pot of money it needed to use on capital improvement projects. In a city with 90,000 residents, many of them Latino of Caribbean descent, there was one clear option for what to do with that money – tear up an existing, popular baseball field dedicated to Puerto Rican sports legend Roberto Clemente to make room for ... an ice skating rink?

This baseball field, connected to a local youth recreation center, is used almost daily when weather allows. Without any forewarning or notice, the field was suddenly rendered unusable in the middle of summer. Practices were canceled and ground was already broken on Robert Clemente Field by the time that the local news began reporting the uproar. Neighbors showed up to city council, wrote on social media, and commiserated with a common refrain, “Who asked for this?”

The answer was obvious: no one. This decision was made in the echoey chambers of City Hall with zero input from the community that actually uses the space. The outcry was so visceral that the city responded by announcing it was temporarily halting the \$319,000 project.

And having the chance to learn from this misstep, what did the city do? It announced that they had selected an alternative site in a grassy field in City Park and that they would hold a public meeting at the location to hear from residents. But yet again, the city appeared to put the proverbial cart before the horse.



## When Institutions Become the Center

**Principle: When institutions focus more on their own process and comfort than on what residents are actually experiencing, engagement stops being about the community and starts being about the institution.**

### What We Are Seeing

In many engagement spaces, progress is measured by how well organizations understand one another rather than by how deeply communities are shaping decisions. Collaboration improves, relationships between institutions strengthen, and professional language becomes more refined.

Meanwhile, the community itself is discussed abstractly or deferred until later. Residents become a future consideration rather than the starting point. Engagement turns inward, and the people most affected by decisions are positioned as an audience to be included once systems are ready.

### Barrio Story: When Alignment Replaces Accountability

In 2023, major organizations in Reading were invited to a training series on community engagement led by a group from out of state, complete with big promises and a book full of polished success stories. The work felt tidy and curated. Community building rarely is. A year later, during a follow-up session, participants were asked a simple question: What have we learned after a year of engagement?

The answers came quickly. Organizations understood each other better. Collaboration had improved. Staff relationships had grown. Ten responses in, someone finally said, “We learned that community members are not so eager to share their opinions.”

Barrio Alegria Executive, Daniel Egusquiza, pointed it out. “That’s the first comment that mentions the community, and it shows up this far down the list.”

The facilitator smiled. “Learning how we work is important,” she said. “We can always add the community at the end.”

The words landed heavy. Later, during the full-group reflection, he raised his hand. He explained that their small group had spent nearly all its time talking about organizations, not people. He said that framing the community as something to be “added at the end” felt deeply misaligned with the work many of them practiced daily. And then he named what had been sitting unspoken in the room: most people there worked in Reading, but did not live in Reading.

Silence followed. A facilitator finally replied, "Turning outward starts with ourselves. Then we can focus on the community."

The next day, Daniel was pulled aside. His energy, he was told, felt disruptive. When asked why he was there, he answered plainly: "Because if I leave, there will be almost nobody left in the room who actually lives in the city." The response was polite and final. "Not all spaces are for everyone. Perhaps this isn't the place for you."

He gathered his things and walked out. The community, it seemed, could always be added later.

### **What We Suggest Instead**

Begin by centering the people who live with the consequences, not just the professionals who manage the process.

If community members are absent from the room, pause the work and ask why. Who feels welcome here? Who feels spoken about rather than spoken with?

Treat lived experience as expertise, not disruption. Discomfort is often a signal that an important truth is being surfaced, not that the process is failing.

Finally, remember that engagement spaces are not neutral. Who designs them, who facilitates them, and who is allowed to challenge them all shape whose voices matter. If the community can only be "added at the end," then engagement has already missed its purpose.



## The Illusion of Listening

**Principle: Listening without a willingness to be changed is not engagement. It is performance.**

### What We Are Seeing

In many engagement spaces, community voice is invited but not allowed to influence direction. Meetings are framed as opportunities for input, yet decisions have already been made.

Questions are asked, but only answers that align with existing plans are affirmed.

This creates a subtle but damaging dynamic: people are encouraged to speak, but not to shape outcomes. Over time, communities learn that participation is symbolic, not consequential. Trust erodes not because people were ignored outright, but because they were heard without being taken seriously.

### Barrio Story: When Listening Becomes Theater

One of Reading's prominent organizations once called a community meeting. Their work was widely respected, and their staff deeply committed. Still, we arrived wary, hoping this would be a space for real conversation.

It didn't take long for one of the organization's leaders to dominate the room. With microphone in hand, he asked what issues the community thought leaders should focus on.

"Safety," someone offered.

"We're already working on that," he replied.

"Education," another said.

"I agree—and the good news is, we're already working on that."

Residents continued naming concerns: joblessness, homelessness, abandoned properties. Each response was the same. We're already working on that.

The question hanging in the room went unspoken: if everything is already decided, why are we here?

No disagreement was invited. No uncertainty was allowed. The meeting wasn't designed to surface new ideas, but to confirm existing ones.

When leaders claim to have all the answers, engagement becomes performance. Listening turns into theater. Instead of building trust, these moments deepen mistrust. Instead of opening space for creativity, they quietly close it.

Sometimes, the community needs someone to interrupt the play with an inconvenient truth.

## What We Suggest Instead

Design engagement spaces where uncertainty is allowed and influence is real.

If you ask a question, be prepared for answers that challenge your assumptions, timelines, or priorities. Listening requires risk. Without it, participation becomes symbolic.

Name what is and is not negotiable upfront. When constraints exist, honesty builds more trust than false openness.

Finally, remember that engagement is not about validating plans. It is about co-creating them. When people see their ideas shaping direction, listening stops being theater and starts becoming a relationship.



# **PART II**

## Tools & Engagement Methods

Community engagement is not formulaic. It is energetic work.

Tools, frameworks, and shared language matter, but they are not the work itself. They are vessels. What fills them are relational forces we don't always name: trust, power, memory, emotion, and history. These forces are already present when people arrive.

Community engagement lives where the sea meets the island, where what can be planned touches what can only be felt. Because of that, our focus is less on tactics for turnout and more on practices that shape how people feel, relate, and remain.

You can set the agenda, reserve the room, and send the reminders. Still, the question people carry with them is quieter and more decisive: Do I belong here? The answer to that question shapes everything that follows.

Because of this, engagement rarely begins at the meeting. It begins earlier and often elsewhere. With a call from a friend. With a shared song drifting into the street. With a bottle of water on a hot afternoon. With a moment of recognition that says, you are welcome here, before any words are exchanged.

Part Two turns toward practice. The methods you will find in this part of the toolkit are ways we have learned to tend the space between people, where energy gathers or disperses.

As you move into these practices, hold this posture:

Every tactic carries an emotional and relational charge.

The question is not only did people come? It is: what did they encounter when they arrived?



## **Getting People to Your Event**

For us, an invitation is not information. It is key to relationship building. If you've ever been to one of our community engagement trainings, you've probably heard us say: Flyers do not get people to your event.

What we mean is simple. People are surrounded by information. Competing for attention alone is a losing game. That doesn't make flyers useless. It means they serve a different purpose. We think of flyers as information anchors, not engines. Someone sees one, tucks it away in their mind, and maybe, on the right day, returns to it.

## **What Actually Moves People**

In our practice, what brings people through the door are relationships. Invitations carry weight when they come from someone you know, or at least someone you trust. A name, a face, a shared moment changes everything.

We'll be honest. This can start to sound like a formula, so we say it gently. Out of 100 invitations, maybe 50 people say yes. By the time reminders go out and the day arrives, cancellations and no-shows do what they do best. In the end, you might be left with 15 smiling faces.

Engagement is a relay race, not a sprint. Relationships carry the handoff.

## **Belonging Is the Question Under the Question**

There's another truth we've learned along the way. People want to see themselves in what you're inviting them to.

Have you ever asked someone to come to an event and the first thing they said was, "Who else is going?" That question isn't about gossip. It's about belonging. What people are really asking is: Is there a place for me here?

## **A Barrio Story: Invitation as Practice**

In 2015, we were invited to perform at Reading Area Community College. We agreed on one condition: students had to co-create the choreography and the story.

When we met them, we realized quickly that the invitation couldn't come to watch a performance. It had to be something else entirely.

Do you know how to dance? No? Perfect. We were hoping you'd show up. Ever acted before? Never? Amazing. We need you.

Four months later, the work became a one-hour performance. But that was never the point.

What lasted were the friendships, partnerships, and collaborations that grew from being invited as they were.

The event is just the byproduct.

The practices that follow are not about maximizing turnout. They are about creating invitations that feel personal, grounded, and worth responding to.



## **Invitation as Relationship**

The insights that follow come from Barrio staff with boots on the ground. They are practices that have worked for us, shaped by years of trial, missteps, and learning in real neighborhoods. We offer them as invitations, not prescriptions. We encourage you to adapt, remix, and explore what resonates within your own organization and community.

### **Invite with intention.**

Inviting people individually creates real connection and makes an invitation feel meaningful. More invitations do not always mean better turnout. Not every event is for everyone. Thoughtful invitations are rooted in knowing who will genuinely enjoy and benefit from the experience.

### **Know your people and meet them where they are.**

Take time to understand your community so invitations feel authentic rather than transactional. Do not only ask people to come to you. Go where they already gather. Show up for your partners. When events are localized, door-to-door canvassing around the event site matters. Personal presence builds trust faster than any flyer.

### **Use mass promotion to spark memory, not pressure.**

Mass promotion isn't about calls to action; it's about calls to joy. People may miss the event, but joy gives them a reason to remember you and say yes next time. If you create a flyer, make it visually compelling. Design shapes memory. Make sure information is clear and complete. Never assume people know local landmarks. Always include the full address.

### **Work through relationships and natural connectors.**

Every community has people who naturally connect with others. Parents talk to parents. Neighbors talk to neighbors. Work with these connectors to extend invitations beyond your immediate reach. How you invite matters. A private message often creates more connection than a public social media tag.

One place these principles become especially visible is canvassing in the neighborhood.

## Canvassing in the Neighborhood

Engagement increases most when neighbors are personally invited rather than only receiving a flyer. Canvassing asks for comfort with discomfort; fear will show up, and the work is to stay present and lead with warmth anyway. An invitation should never feel like pressure or obligation. It should feel like an opening, one that leaves room for a clear no or a door gently closing.

Remember that connection matters more than persuasion.

That means listening first, adjusting your tone, and meeting people where they are so the invitation feels human rather than rehearsed. Even when the energy coming back is hesitant, distracted, or resistant, your presence still matters. Tone, body language, and respect linger longer than the invitation itself.



## **Creating Belonging at Your Event**

Whether it's a watercolor night, a dance performance, or a porch concert, a successful community event is defined by how people feel while they are there, and whether they can imagine returning.

There are a few essentials we aim to hold at every Barrio event.

### **People should feel seen.**

At Barrio events, we make it a point to greet everyone personally. We welcome each person as if they were a gift, because they are. This mindset allows us to see people not for who they were yesterday or who they might become tomorrow, but for who they are in this moment.

When we're working with a group we've never met before, we often use a simple exercise called "I See You."

Participants form two lines facing each other. One person says their name. The person across from them responds, "Welcome to this space." The roles switch, and one line rotates so new pairs meet each other.

It's simple, but the effect is powerful. When people feel seen, something shifts. Energy softens. Walls lower. Smiles widen. People move from attending an event to inhabiting it.

### **People Should Be Recognized**

Being seen once is not enough. People also need to feel remembered. Recognition is about continuity. What happens the second time someone encounters your organization should build on the first. When warmth at the invitation is met with indifference at the door, people feel the disconnect immediately. At Barrio, we think of organizational culture as the rhythm of a dance.

Newcomers arrive with their own rhythm, but over time they find their place in the shared tempo. To keep it healthy, it must be intentional and regularly checked.

We make a point to learn something small about each person who walks through our doors. Where they feel at home. What part of the city they love. A memory they carry. These details become threads of continuity that help people feel recognized when they return.

Because we aim for transformation, not transactions, we focus on what is meaningful, not just what is measurable. Growth may be slower, but it roots deeper. (More on this in the measurements section.)

### **Everyone can contribute.**

We believe everyone carries a gift, and the community grows strongest when those gifts are shared. Contribution doesn't require money or formal expertise. It can be time, care, creativity, or simply showing up.

We've seen neighbors who thought they had nothing to offer teach a child to dance, cook a meal for volunteers, translate for a newcomer, or fix a hinge on the community stage. These small acts create a shared reservoir of care no single person could build alone.

This is why reciprocity matters. When one person offers, others are inspired to do the same. Over time, contribution becomes both a safety net and a launching pad.

At Barrio, everyone has a role in building the neighborhood of happiness. Because when everyone contributes, everyone belongs.

### **Document your event**

Documentation is not an afterthought. It is a bridge.

A sign-in sheet is more than a list of names. It is permission to continue the relationship. Each name is a seed that can grow into a collaborator, a leader, or a long-term neighbor in the work.

What matters most is not capturing attendance, but what happens next: a thank-you message, shared photos, or an invitation to what's coming. A follow-up message is how the door stays warm after people leave - and how you get invited to coffee at Miss Jeannette's house after the community meeting.

A community is not built in one night. It grows through consistent, caring touchpoints.

### **Tend the Energy of the Room**

During an event, your mind will race. Practice being present anyway.

If you are not enjoying yourself, people will feel it. Your energy sets the tone. Be clear about what's happening, invite questions, and make safety—physical and emotional—visible and felt.

Pay attention to those on the edges. Belonging doesn't always announce itself. Sometimes it needs to be gently held open.

Before people leave, make sure they know what else exists beyond this moment. Engagement deepens when the invitation continues.

## **The Alchemy of Engagement**

Barrio Principle: Participation deepens when people are held by a shared container. As we've moved through invitation, belonging, recognition, and contribution, a pattern begins to surface. The practices look different on the outside, but underneath them, the same condition keeps returning. After ten years of practice, we've noticed something showing up consistently.

Participation deepens when people know what they are inside of together. At Barrio, we think of this as a container. Not a program. Not an agenda. A container is what allows people to stay long enough for trust, risk, and contribution to emerge. Most often, that container includes three simple elements:

A project: Something tangible to gather around. Something that gives people a reason to show up beyond conversation.

A timeline: A clear sense of beginning, middle, and end. Open-endedness can feel generous, but structure is what allows people to commit.

A shared result: An outcome that lets people say, We made this together.

When one of these elements is missing, participation becomes fragile. People drift. Energy dissipates. When all three are present, something different happens. Attention settles.

Ownership grows. People begin to feel the work holding them, not the other way around. Within this kind of container, participation doesn't have to be forced. It can be invited. That's where embodied practices come in.

## **Embodied Participation**

Some rooms struggle not because people don't care, but because participation is uneven. A few voices fill the space. Others recede. Confidence and fluency become gatekeepers.

We have learned to use movement, spatial arrangement, and rhythm to make participation visible and shared. These practices allow people to enter the work without needing the right words, the right tone, or prior relationship. They are especially useful when hierarchy needs softening, perspective needs surfacing, or a group needs to feel itself as a collective body rather than a set of individuals.

Each practice that follows unlocks something different. Choosing one isn't about the outcome you want to extract. It's about reading the room you're in and responding with care.

## Somatic Conversations: Moving as Participation

In many rooms, a few voices dominate while others stay silent. Somatic conversations create a way for everyone to participate by using the body, not just words.

The exercise begins with a simple prompt, such as: “Today is a good day.” Participants move to one side of the room if they agree, and to the other if they disagree. This physical choice makes perspective visible and collective before anyone speaks. Facilitators then invite reflections from each side. Because participants have already expressed themselves through movement, speaking feels less risky and listening deepens.

In one session, nearly everyone moved to the “yes” side. One woman stood alone on the opposite end and explained, “It is not a good day because there are people dying right now in Gaza.” Her words shifted the room. Others crossed over to stand with her, turning a simple prompt into a moment of shared recognition.

Somatic conversations remind us that participation doesn’t have to begin with words. Movement surfaces hidden perspectives, and when people listen to the reasons behind each position, empathy can change the shape of the room.

### **When to use it**

Use somatic conversations when discussion feels stuck, dominated by a few voices, or overly abstract. This practice works well in mixed groups where people have different levels of comfort speaking publicly.

### **What it unlocks**

Movement lowers the barrier to participation. It allows people to express perspective without needing the “right” words. Hidden or minority viewpoints become visible, and the room can physically shift as empathy grows.

### **What to watch for**

Keep the tone invitational, not confrontational. The prompt should be simple enough to invite instinct rather than debate. Pay attention to those standing alone or in the middle and create space for their voices without turning them into symbols.

## Salsa Dancing: A metaphor for using community rhythm.

Sometimes community is best understood through movement rather than words. Salsa becomes both a metaphor and a practice for shared power.

Participants line up facing each other and choose whether they want to lead or follow. At Barrio, roles are not assigned by gender. Everyone chooses. Both roles matter, and harmony only emerges when power is shared. The lead's role is to care, not command. The follower listens with their body, responding rather than anticipating. When both attend to one another, movement becomes collaborative instead of controlling.

Before dancing, partners greet each other and rotate. This simple act mirrors community work: we acknowledge one another, one by one, until everyone belongs. As the dance begins, tension appears. We don't avoid it. We use it. Healthy tension makes turns possible and movement alive. People laugh, stumble, and shine together.

Salsa in a community space is not about technical perfection. It reminds us that connection requires rhythm, listening, respect, and joy.

Salsa dancing teaches us:  
Power is shared, not held.  
Tension is inevitable; how we use it matters.  
Joy is not extra. It is essential.

### **When to use it**

Salsa is most useful in rooms that need trust, playfulness, or a reset in energy. It works well early in a process to build connection, or mid-process when fatigue or rigidity has set in.

### **What it unlocks**

This practice makes power visible. Leading and following become shared responsibilities rather than fixed roles. Participants experience how care, listening, and healthy tension create harmony. Joy becomes a legitimate form of learning.

### **What to watch for**

Consent and choice are essential. Invite people into roles rather than assigning them. Emphasize care over performance. The goal is not technical accuracy, but shared rhythm and mutual responsiveness.

## Circle Time: Everyone as an Expert

The way a room is arranged shapes how people relate. Circle time removes the head of the table and places neighbors eye to eye, signaling that no single voice holds more importance than another.

We begin with simple introductions, often just a name and a short response to a grounding prompt. This reminds everyone that we arrive carrying stories and places with us. Announcements and updates follow, shared without a podium so information moves through the group rather than from above it.

When it's time to make decisions or address challenges, we invite counsel from the circle. Wisdom doesn't belong to one expert. It lives in lived experience, neighborhood memory, and fresh perspective.

Because everyone can see one another, support, disagreement, and care become visible. A nod, a pause, or shared silence builds trust as much as words do.

### **When to use it**

Circle time works best when decisions need collective wisdom or when trust and visibility matter. It is especially powerful in neighborhood meetings, planning sessions, or moments that require shared ownership.

### **What it unlocks**

The circle removes hierarchy. Everyone can see and be seen. Knowledge shifts from expert-driven to collective. Listening deepens because presence is mutual rather than performative.

### **What to watch for**

Resist the urge to control outcomes too tightly. The circle asks for patience. Silence is also participation. Pay attention to who speaks easily and who needs gentle invitation, without forcing contribution.

Not all energy serves the room. Some participants may feel an urgent need to be heard, dwell in complaint while others are dreaming, or attempt to take over facilitation. Clear agreements protect the container: step up, step back. No cross-talk. Time limits when needed. Redirect with respect. Make intentional space for the quietest voices. A circle is only as strong as its least-heard voice.

## Neighbor spotlight

Many stories show how invitation, contribution, and continuity can grow into shared stewardship over time. Danny G.'s story offers a clear example of that journey.

Danny lives on the 100 Block of South Fourth Street in Reading. Over the past decade, he has become a steady presence in the care and transformation of Idea Park, a micro park at the busy intersection of 4th and Chestnut streets.

What began as concern for a neglected space grew into consistent action. Danny helped organize neighbors around the park, showing up week after week for cleanups, mulching, landscaping, and small but meaningful improvements like lighting, trash cans, and doggy bags. His presence signaled something simple and powerful: this place matters, and so do the people who use it.

In 2024, Danny received the My Super Neighbor award from the City of Reading and Keep Reading Beautiful, a citywide recognition celebrating residents who model exceptional property care and neighborhood pride. But long before the recognition, neighbors already knew his impact. As Danny worked, others joined. Pride replaced neglect. Ownership replaced distance.

Idea Park is now a gathering place that reflects the care invested in it. More importantly, Danny's leadership has strengthened relationships among neighbors and reminded the South of Penn community—long shaped by disinvestment—that change does not always begin with large programs or outside resources. Sometimes it begins with one person who keeps showing up.

Danny's story reflects what this toolkit returns to again and again: community grows when people feel invited to care, trusted to lead, and supported to stay.





# **PART III**

## Accountability & Measurement of Impact

At Barrio Alegría, accountability means being able to explain both **what happened** and **what changed**. We measure impact in two ways: through numbers and through stories. Numbers help us understand what is happening now—who showed up, how often, and in what ways.

To paint a clear picture of our programmatic year, we track the number of neighbors who attend community happenings, the artists we engage, and the community members who support the work by setting up, facilitating, and holding space, including volunteer hours contributed. We document these measures through sign-in sheets, surveys, photographs, and staff reflection meetings to remain consistent and transparent. Stories then help us understand how that activity is experienced, why it matters, and where it may be leading.

### Why Stories Matter

Transformation is often quiet and complex. It shows up in subtle shifts—how someone speaks about themselves, the confidence to participate in a community meeting, or the decision to take a next step, such as applying for a business loan. These changes in confidence, belonging, and self-perception rarely appear in quantitative data. To listen for this kind of change, we use the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique, inviting participants to reflect not only on what they did, but on what changed for them. Stories allow us to witness outcomes that are internal, relational, and deeply human, helping us understand what empowerment, connection, and hope look like from the perspective of those experiencing them.

Stories also create accountability. Through Story Groups, community members reflect together on which changes matter most and why. This collective interpretation shapes our strategy, language, and priorities, keeping our work grounded in community-defined meaning rather than external expectations. Without stories, we would know what happened—but not where it is leading.

### A Note on Story Selection and Care

In our first year using this process, we collected 24 stories. As community members and stakeholders gathered to identify domains of change and select stories that best illustrated them, a hesitation surfaced. One evaluator shared, “I feel bad about selecting just one of the stories. Can’t we publish them all? They are all beautiful.” That moment clarified something essential: our process is not about deciding which story is more important, moving, or worthy.

Every story shared with us carries dignity and meaning. Selection, in this context, is analytical rather than hierarchical—it helps us see change clearly by identifying stories that best illustrate a domain of change so we can understand what has shifted, where, and how. This discipline allows us to speak about impact with rigor and honesty, while honoring the many stories that continue to shape how Barrio listens and learns.

## **How we use The Most Significant Change Model**

We use the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique. Here's how the process unfolds:

### **1. Gathering Stories**

We invite participants, staff, volunteers, and community members to share their experience with Barrio by answering one key question:

“What is the most significant change you’ve experienced as a result of engaging with Barrio Alegría?”

Stories are gathered through one-on-one interviews or written submissions, depending on what feels most accessible to the storyteller. Interviews are conducted by trained team members who lead with warmth, clarity, and inclusion, creating space for people to speak in their own way and at their own pace. We intentionally remove barriers related to language, time, and access by offering interpreters, flexible scheduling, and culturally relevant approaches when needed.

### **2. Reviewing Stories in Community-Led Story Groups**

Once stories are gathered, they are brought into Story Groups—small, diverse panels made up of community members alongside Barrio staff, volunteers, board members, and partners. Bringing these voices into the same room ensures that stories are read through multiple lenses and that meaning is shaped collectively rather than in isolation.

Each group reviews a set of stories (typically 6–10) and is asked to reflect on:

- What kind of change does this story describe?
- Why is this change significant to the storyteller?
- What does this say about our community's values, struggles, and hopes?

This step is not about picking a “winner.” It’s about surfacing meaning, tension, resonance, and shared wisdom.

### **3. Naming Domains of Change**

Through discussions in the Story Groups, key themes begin to emerge—what we call Domains of Change. These domains help us organize stories over time, identify patterns across different programs, and better understand the kinds of transformation that matter most to our community.

In the first year we used this model, we interviewed 18 people who had attended, worked with, or volunteered at Barrio Alegría, all responding to the same guiding question about the most significant change they had experienced through their engagement. From these stories, three initial Domains of Change emerged: personal transformation, business incubation and startup, and cultural leadership development.

These early themes helped us see both where our strengths were taking shape and where there was room to continue growing. Over time, continued storytelling and reflection have surfaced additional domains, including entrepreneurial growth, cultural heritage, and community belonging.

#### **4. Informing Our Strategy**

The insights we gather from stories are not only meaningful, but actionable. We use them to shape and refine our Theory of Change, strengthening the connection between our activities and the outcomes we seek. They also inform our grant writing, reporting, and evaluation, helping us communicate not just what we did, but what it meant. As a team, we regularly reflect on these insights to make programmatic adjustments and stay aligned with impact as defined by our community.

#### **5. Closing the Loop**

Transparency matters to us, which is why we share back what we learn with the people who trusted us with their stories, with Story Group participants, and with funders, partners, and the public. For Barrio Alegría, accountability is not about proving our worth but about staying in relationship—using measurement to notice where we are, and stories to listen for where we need to go next. This approach invites us to be accountable not only to institutions, but to the people who show up, offer their time and energy, and walk alongside us, reminding us that impact is something we grow into over time, together.

## A final note

Community engagement is not a project with an end date. It is a way of standing in relationship. The tools in these pages are not solutions. They are practices—ways of entering rooms, streets, parks, and conversations with intention and humility.

If there is one thing we have learned over more than a decade, it is this: trust moves at the speed of presence. It cannot be rushed. It cannot be extracted. It grows when people feel seen, when power is named honestly, and when contribution is invited rather than assumed.

The work will not always feel successful. Some meetings will fall flat. Some invitations will go unanswered. Some efforts will take years to show visible change. That does not mean the work is failing. It means it is real.

In Barriolandia, we often say: we might not be alive to see the fruits of our work, but that does not mean we stop planting. Community engagement asks us to plant anyway. To show up anyway. To listen anyway.

If this toolkit has done its job, it has not given you a formula. It has invited you into a new way of showing up. One that treats neighbors not as beneficiaries, but as co-authors. One that understands that power, when shared, becomes a possibility.

Wherever you practice this work, may you do it slowly enough to notice what is already there. May you design with honesty. May you measure with care. And may you leave every space more rooted than you found it.

The rest is relationship.



## **Glossary of terms.**

Community Calendar

Container

Threshold fear

Comfortable zone

Uncomfortable zone

Panic Zone

Parade

Leader

Barriolandia

Building Bridges

Holding space

Serve

## Footnotes:

### ASOPAO RECIPE

#### Ingredients

4 chicken thighs + 4 drumsticks, seasoned with salt and pepper  
6 tablespoons olive oil  
1 cup sofrito (homemade or store-bought)  
2 envelopes Sazón Goya sin achiote (without annatto)  
½ cup long-grain rice  
2 tomatoes, diced  
8–10 cups chicken broth  
4 ounces tomato sauce  
2 bay leaves  
1 cup sliced pimento-stuffed green olives  
¼ cup fresh cilantro, chopped  
Salt and pepper to taste

#### Directions

Play Preciosa by Mark Anthony and an assortment of salsa music in the background.

In a large soup pot, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Brown chicken until golden on all sides.

Add sofrito, Sazón, tomato sauce, diced tomatoes, bay leaves, and chicken broth. Simmer for 30 minutes.

Stir in rice, cooking until tender.

Add olives and season with salt and pepper.

Garnish with fresh cilantro. Serve hot with sliced avocado.

## **The Reading Iron Playground**

A cherished community landmark, traces its roots back to the early 20th century. Established in 1910, the playground was originally part of the Reading Iron Works complex, a bustling hub of industrial activity in Reading, Pennsylvania. As the ironworks thrived, the company recognized the need for recreational spaces for workers' families and the broader community. Thus, the Reading Iron Playground was born, providing a much-needed oasis of leisure amid the industrial landscape.

In its early days, the playground featured basic amenities such as swings, slides, and open spaces for picnics and gatherings. Over the decades, it evolved, incorporating more advanced play structures and sporting facilities. By the mid-20th century, the playground had become a focal point for community events, hosting local sports leagues, summer camps, and neighborhood festivals.

The playground witnessed significant changes in the late 20th century as the ironworks industry declined. As the city faced economic challenges, the park went through a period of disinvestment and began to lose the trust of neighbors. Today, through collaborative efforts between local residents, government bodies, and the South of Penn initiative the Reading Iron Playground remains a beloved community landmark, symbolizing the resilience and unity of Reading's residents. It continues to offer a vibrant space for children and families to play and connect, maintaining its legacy as a vital part of the community because the community itself kept trying to find ways to restore it to its historical glory.

We had launched an initiative that involved trash. Not the most interesting of all subjects, but our first hypothesis of what neighbors wanted to work on had been community security. (We deployed a survey and the overwhelming majority voted to focus on trash) During one of the planning meetings one of the neighbors said, "We should do something about the Reading Iron." (That is how they refer to the park). Our next planning meeting was at the park and the rest is history.

There were activities happening in the park that no child should or have to walk around taking place at the park. So we began holding art programs at the park. First, they were pop up programs, as funding allowed, and then they happened regularly. In 2018 we launched our Movie Nights series, and held our first block party the following year. And little by little our activities displaced the unwanted activities, until in 2023 the city announced that it had received funding to conduct major renovations to the park.

The capital projects manager for the city organized a community meeting to ask neighbors their ideas for the renovation and many neighbors showed up with ideas, grievances, and memories of the park. "There was a tree that was cut down years ago. I had my first kiss under that tree. It was special to me." said a senior citizen.