

Mexican American Studies: The Historical Legitimacy of an Educational Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to increase understanding of the factors that most significantly influenced the decision made by the Tucson Unified School District to implement the Mexican American Studies program in the late 1990's and early 2000's. This article outlines the process that led to the adoption of the program. The article further delineates the political and social circumstances that made the process smooth, transparent, and effective. To accomplish this goal, the article draws from historical accounts, legal documents, personal renditions, and research publications that were used to arrive at an educational program that was long due to the Mexican American young people of Tucson.

Introduction

In the spring of 2012, the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) Governing Board decided to dismantle the Mexican American Studies program that was designed for and had been successful at meeting the needs of Mexican American students for over a decade. In spite of considerable community protest, the Governing Board carried out this action in response to pressure from the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction supported by the Arizona legislature that had enacted legislation targeting the Mexican American Studies program specifically. Dubbed HB2281, which passed in the spring of 2010, the measure prohibits classes that (1) advocate ethnic solidarity, (2) are designed primarily for students of a particular race, (3) promote resentment toward a certain ethnic group and (4) promote the overthrow of the U.S. government. This article, therefore, attempts to give a historical background for the reasons why Mexican Americans Studies Program was created in an effort to address the educational inequality Mexican American students experienced in the Tucson Unified School District.

In 1998, after many attempts at meeting the educational needs of its Mexican American students, the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) adopted an educational approach that incorporated students' identities and backgrounds as a foundation for their education. The overarching goal of the TUSD in endorsing such a program was to adopt a research-based approach that would bring into the fore cultures that have been largely denied or omitted from the school curriculum. The intent of this article is to take the reader through a historical journey of how the TUSD, in its attempt at identifying and addressing the needs of Mexican American students, arrived at its decision to develop a Mexican-American Studies Program. This journey is unique in that it sets the stage for a program that would prove successful, albeit controversial.

The resulting program was based on what Ladson-Billings (1995) and other researchers (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001) have described as culturally relevant pedagogy and has been recognized as an effective way of meeting the academic and social needs of culturally diverse student populations. Culturally relevant pedagogy is a vehicle for collective empowerment of students as they experience academic success in the context of maintaining and/or educating their cultural competence and developing a critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It also serves as a means of making learning more relevant to students who have traditionally been marginalized from the mainstream curriculum by validating and affirming their culture and their contributions to the classroom context. Culturally relevant teaching taps into students' background knowledge and their frame of reference to facilitate academic success and cultural competence. In addition, culturally relevant teaching asserts that students develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness in order to critically engage in social issues such as educational inequities. Thus, culturally relevant pedagogy empowers students on an individual as well as

a collective.

This article, however, will not report further on how the Mexican American Studies program was designed, implemented, or evaluated. A full discussion of the program proper is beyond the scope of this article; interested readers are encouraged to see Cammarota and Romero (2004), Cammarota and Romero (2006), and Romero (2008). This article, rather, will serve as the historical backdrop for the program's inception. It is the intent of the authors to inform readers about the responsiveness of a community to its students through a program that was intended to meet, above all, their academic needs.

Historical Background

The purpose of providing Tucson's historical background is to establish the claim and the foundation that Tucson is different than the rest of the state because of its track record of moderate political and social harmony. This predisposition on the part of Tucsonans for peaceful resolution to conflict facilitated the passing of the recommendations to address the needs of a very important segment of the population, the high school students of Mexican American decent.

Founded by Spanish-speaking settlers in 1775, Tucson, Arizona remained a frontier garrison of México up until 1854. In that year, Tucson became part of the United States when the United States and Mexico negotiated the Gadsden Purchase. In the years after the annexation, Mexicans maintained a majority in Tucson, making contributions to the political, economic, and cultural life of Southern Arizona and the state as a whole (Sheridan, 1986). Tucson was a beautiful desert oasis. Nestled along the Santa Cruz River and surrounded by four mountain ranges, Tucson developed a tolerant attitude about the diverse groups that were to soon migrate to the Southwest (Sheridan, 1986). Consequently, Tucson did not go through the growing pains of social and ethnic strife to the same extent that afflicted other parts of the area that once was Mexico. On the contrary, groups not indigenous to the southwest, Asian Americans, African Americans, and others, soon found a place where to establish themselves among a variety of ethnicities and nationalities.

Following the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, many Mexican families migrated north to eke out a living in the territory that had become part of the American Union. In Southern Arizona, Tucson became a magnet for many of these families. Through determination and hard work as well as impacted by various political, economic and social class factors, families like the Carrillos, the Ochoas, the Samaniegos, the Elias, and many others left their imprint in the history annals of a country that they came to respect and honor. They served in city, county, and state governments; they were businessmen and entrepreneurs; and they started the first modern public school in Arizona (De La Trinidad, 2008). These Mexican pioneers made such an impact in the economic, social, and cultural development of the area that modern day Tucson still benefits by the influence of their legacy (Sheridan, 1986).

In October of 1867, the Arizona Territorial Legislature passed legislation that enabled the creation of public school district (Cooper, 1967). Arizona Governor Safford was "an ardent supporter" of public education and with the support of two Tucson businessmen, Estevan Ochoa and Sam Hughes, he was able to convince the legislature of the advantages of public schooling. In Tucson, a partnership of community leaders and educators existed that made the creation of a school district possible. Soon after, the state legislature passed a school finance law which set a property tax to pay for the costs of public education (Cooper, 1967). One important side-bar to this historical narrative is the fact that enrollment was limited to males whose primary language was Spanish. One of the first teachers hired for the school was John Spring who taught by first giving instruction in Spanish, and then in English (Cooper, 1867). The public school district that the Mexican pioneers were instrumental in starting has survived the test of times. Now known as the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD), it is currently the second largest public school district in the state of Arizona. Its fascinating history from 1867 to 1967 is told in detail in a book written by James F. Cooper (1967). So proud is the TUSD of its history that Cooper's book is posted in its entirety in the TUSD website.

The Desegregation Question

As the district expanded and the issues became complex, new programs were implemented to meet those needs. The population explosion of the 1940's and 1950's caused by the baby boomers along with Mexican immigrants seeking employment in the mining industry (Cooper, 1967) strained the district's resources. The increased enrollment in TUSD brought about the need for additional classrooms. Pre-school examinations and inoculations to insure that children entered school in a healthy condition was an additional issue that was addressed at this time. Other areas engaged by the district at this time included programs for crippled children, school lunches, anti-tuberculosis care, dental examinations, and special services for low-income children (Cooper, 1967). However, one of the biggest challenges for TUSD was the Desegregation Question which spanned from late 1968 to 1983. Even though TUSD had voluntarily integrated its African-American students in the fall of 1951 before *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided (De La Trinidad, 2008) and had led the federal government in approving federal funding for bilingual education, there were still vexing issues that had neither been addressed nor resolved. The IC program in which Spanish-speaking first graders were placed, the practice forbidding the use of Spanish in classrooms and playground, over assignment of students to special education classes, ability grouping in the high schools, and district staffing practices were among the queue of unresolved issues about which both Mexican American and African American parents were concerned (Brousseau, 2011; De La Trinidad, 2008).

Attempts by the District to address the issues included an ethnic transfer policy allowing easier mobility of students within the district, redrawing of attendance lines, a moratorium on new school construction, no further closing of minority schools, establishing of bilingual programs, purchase of bilingual and multicultural books and materials, teacher inservice programs, promotion of involvement of community groups, and increased recruitment of minority and bilingual teachers. Nonetheless, these attempts did not eschew two lawsuits filed in late 1976, one on behalf of Mexican American and one on behalf of African American students, (Brousseau, 2011). The two lawsuits were consolidated by a judge into one group lawsuit which became known as *the Fisher-Mendoza v. TUSD (1978)* court case, a case which took a year and a half for the judge to resolve. Both plaintiffs were parents of children in the District concerned over a plethora of issues facing the sprawling district. They were openly critical of past educational and administrative practices, school violence caused by racial and cultural incidents, and over the educational needs of bilingual and minority children— all of which were recurring problems not addressed satisfactorily by previous attempts (Brousseau, 2011).

When the two sides finally settled on June 5, 1978, its implementations proceeded in three phases starting in the fall of 1978. In phase one, the District (1) closed three inner-city, minority schools, busing the students to other nearby district schools; (2) adopted uniform standards for suspension and expulsion of students; (3) pilot tested an intensive phonics instructional program for a cohort of Mexican American first graders; (4) designed a Standard English and a Second Dialect (SESD) for African American students; and (5) mandated cultural sensitivity training for teachers and counselors at all schools involved that emphasized addressing low expectations of minority students (TUSD District History, 2011).

In phase two, which started in the fall of 1979, three magnet schools were started, two of which were elementary schools and an additional middle school located in minority neighborhoods. The process involved involuntary busing of K-8 students to predominantly White schools and involuntary busing of White students to a magnet middle school placed in a predominantly minority neighborhood (TUSD District History, 2011).

In phase three, which started in the fall of 1981, the District created four magnet schools in inner-city barrios to voluntarily attract both White and minority students (TUSD District History, 2011). During this phase the District created a Black Studies program and offered Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD), offering courses in Black history and culture for nearly 3,000 African American students (Brousseau, 2011). An important footnote to add to this discussion is that while the District created an African American Studies Department creating a Mexican American Studies Department was not discussed. It took several years for this inequality to surface as will be evident subsequently.

The Exultation Period

TUSD's legal troubles did not end with the peaceful settlement of the *Fisher-Mendoza* desegregation case. In the early 1980's, a group of Mexican American and Native American parents from the predominantly Mexican-American west side of the District, filed a civil lawsuit on behalf of Mexican American and Native American students in federal district court. The parents voiced concerns over various matters, including the poor state of facilities serving minority neighborhoods, the lack of rigorous programs for minority students, and the unsystematic approach to addressing the needs of English language learners (ELLs). The district and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) came out with an agreement, known as the Alvarez-Jasso Consent Decree, that avoided a court confrontation (L. Basurto, personal communication, September 16, 2011). The case was filed in 1987 but a Consent Decree was signed in 1994 (Brousseau, 2011). Due to a benign and visionary district administration, the district was able to design procedures in identification, placement, and exit for ELLs from bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) programs. In addition, a staff development program for teachers and other employees who were responsible for the education of English language learners was designed and carried out. The facilities and the materials issues also were addressed at this time through an increase in the budget for the affected schools.

TUSD's greatest accomplishment during this period was the amount of time and effort parceled out to address the needs of ELLs in several areas: special education, gifted and talented education, speech and language programs, material development, and staff development. A unique result of this effort was a comprehensive plan for bilingual education and a compliance procedures manual that was used to monitor programs for ELLs in TUSD schools. The comprehensive plan was so effective that OCR used it as model for other school districts in the country to emulate (L. Basurto, personal communication, September 16, 2011). Addressing the needs of English language learners was first and foremost in the minds of district administrators, even though the Alvarez-Jasso complaint included the lack of a systematic approach to teaching multicultural education. The Tucson Unified School District administration decided to maintain the label of Bilingual Education and Hispanic Studies Department for economic expediency. To add a second department to house the Mexican American Studies instead of simply keeping the add-on of Hispanic Studies to Bilingual Education saved the district considerable expenses. However, no additional funding was allocated to the existing Department and consequently a formal Mexican American Studies department and program per se were not instituted.

The Unaddressed Matter

In January 1997, a group of Tucson Unified School District Hispanic parents filed a lawsuit claiming that the District discriminated against Hispanic students by failing to run a comprehensive Hispanic Studies Department (Tully Tapia, 1997, January 8). In a letter to the editor of the *Arizona Daily Star*, Rosalie Lopez (1997), a parent and one of the leaders of the group of parents outlined the parents' concerns. Their grievances were based on the fact that Mexican-American students did not have a program to address their needs nor a department to spearhead these efforts. They pointed out the success that the African-American and Native-American Studies departments were having with their respective populations and they wanted Mexican-American students, the largest ethnic population in the District, to partake in the effort. Additionally, a group of supporters, called the Coalition of Neighbors for Mexican American Studies, attended board meetings to promote the proposal to establish a new department under the Mexican American Studies rubric (L. Basurto, personal communication, September 16, 2011).

As mentioned before, Hispanic Studies up until that time fell within the purview of the Bilingual Education and Hispanic Studies Department even though the Hispanic studies component had not properly and systematically been addressed. The parents claimed that the department focused primarily on students' language needs and slighted Hispanic students who were not English language learners (Tully Tapia, 1997, June 29). They also argued that the District had overlooked the low academic achievement and high dropout rates among Hispanic students. Romero (2008) reports that 1,805 Mexican-American high school freshman entered the Tucson Unified School District in the fall of 2001; yet, only 1133 of them graduated four years later in the

spring of 2005, a 37.3% loss.

Furthermore, they pointed out the fact that the District had an African-American Department and, by that time, a Native American Studies Department and the Mexican-American parents' perception was that these departments had been instrumental in boosting academic achievement among students of those particular ethnic groups (Tully Tapia, 1997, June 29), and that a Mexican American Studies Department, instead of a Hispanic Department, was justified based on the fact that about 26,600, or 42 percent, of TUSD's 63,300 students were Hispanic. The lawsuit's intent was to have TUSD launch a full-fledged Mexican American Studies program by first instituting a Mexican American Studies Department with proper administrative to overview it.

Responding to the lawsuit and community pressure, as well as concerns over the mounting legal fees to fight the lawsuit, the TUSD school board established a committee to muster public input in the areas of bilingual education, multicultural education, and Hispanic Studies. This marked the first time that the TUSD school board officially sought to address the Hispanic Studies issue (L. Basurto, personal communication, September 16, 2011).

Legitimizing and endorsing the formation of the Committee and its charge, a federal judge urged TUSD and plaintiffs in the lawsuit to settle the matter out of court since everybody seemed to agree that something needed to be done to solve the dropout rate of Hispanic students in the District (Tully Tapia, 1997, July 2). In fact, James Christ, the TUSD school board president, in a guest editorial in the *Arizona Daily Star* (1997), wrote that the proposed Hispanic Studies curriculum in the Tucson Unified School District presented a great opportunity to bring immediate relevance and motivation to thousands of students at all grade levels. Rosalie López, mentioned previously, in her letter to the editor of the *Arizona Daily Star* (1997), predicted that the voters in the court of public opinion would change the complexion of the TUSD governing board at the polls. She predicted that when the complexion of the Board changed, Mexican-American Studies in TUSD would become a reality. She continued by stating that only then would the Tucson residents see improvement in Hispanic students' Stanford Achievement Test scores. Lopez (1997) claimed that TUSD high schools with significant numbers of Hispanic students scored 30 points below the national average in reading, 25 points in language, and 20 points in math. With Lopez's pronouncement regarding the need for the complexion of the Board to change, Lopez prognosticated the success that the Mexican American Studies program would attain in TUSD in just a few short years.

In 1997, the time was ripe for TUSD to take a serious look at developing a Hispanic Studies Program and the Committee that had already been established was going to be used as a vehicle to study and legitimize the program. It is worth mentioning that the Tucson Unified School District Governing Board had taken independent action in early 1997 by hiring the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), an outside consulting firm, to conduct an audit of the Bilingual Education and Hispanic Studies Department (L. Basurto, personal communication, September 16, 2011). The IDRA audit was intended to evaluate the performance of the Bilingual Education and Hispanic Studies Department and to study the feasibility of establishing a Mexican American Studies Department separate from and independent of the Bilingual Education Department. The Board's intent was to have the two independent reports, IDRA's and the Committee's, along with recommendations, brought to the District Governing Board in early 1998.

According to Gómez & Benton (1998), in the Committee's charge, drafted by the TUSD governing board, the Committee was asked to:

- review the Bilingual Education/Hispanic Studies Department in terms of existing programs as they relate to bilingual/multicultural education and second language acquisition
- review existing national research and programming related to multicultural education, bilingual education, Hispanic Studies, and second language acquisition
- hold several community meetings
- make recommendations to the governing board and the superintendent

The TUSD superintendent generated a list of thirty-four members of the community to serve on the Committee. The Committee's make up was thorough and diverse: Parents, community leaders, teachers,

administrators, union leaders, and university professors, and a student. The committee was given a year to conduct the process which called for bi-weekly meetings and included three public community hearings. Recommendations would be submitted to the District Governing Board at an official public meeting in the spring of 1998.

At the first Committee meeting, both the president of the TUSD school board and the school district superintendent addressed the Committee members. The former expressed the seriousness of the committee's task in terms of how its work was intricately related to the board's goals; the latter stressed how the committee's mission fit within his vision of where he wanted to take the district. Their talks had a decisive impact on Committee members' disposition and outlook. This was a privilege, a once in a long time opportunity to make a contribution to the education of hundreds if not thousands of students in TUSD (Gómez & Benton, 1998).

During the ensuing months, the committee members immersed themselves in their work. They approached their charge with dedication and diligence. After the Committee was divided into three smaller subcommittees, Committee members read and discussed the latest professional literature on their specific topics. They listened to endless presentations by representatives from the different district departments, finance, curriculum, drop-out prevention, compliance, bilingual education, etc. ad nauseam. Beside the Committee of the Whole weekly meetings, committee members scheduled individual subcommittee meetings that met independently. Committee members were also critically involved in organizing and attending the community meetings, which were the highlight of the process. Ultimately, they were voluntarily involved in drafting and debating the content of the report that went to the Superintendent and the District Governing Board. But more importantly, they were part and parcel of the debates that ensued when the time came for drafting specific recommendations to the Board.

Three subcommittees were established to (1) listen to expert testimony, (2) review current literature on the topics, and (3) report to the committee of the whole once a month. Hundreds of hours went into this process. Concomitantly, the Committee conducted the three hearings at strategically located high school sites throughout the district. Between 500 and 600 people altogether attended the meetings and many of them expressed their opinions, pro or con the issues in the Committee's charge. All proceedings were taped (Gomez & Benton, 2008), transcribed, and included in the report that went to the school board. The point here is that the process was open to the community and the community became engaged in the process. Over ninety-five percent of the speakers at the public hearings favored the creation of a Mexican American Studies program.

As a caveat to the process, it is worth mentioning that on September 16, 1997, the day prior to the Committee's first public hearing, the Tucson City Council on a 6-1 vote urged the Tucson Unified School District Governing Board to create a Mexican-American Studies Program (Burchell, 1997, September 16) based on their perception that the District curriculum largely ignored the history and contributions of Hispanics. With this measure, the Tucson City Council was representing and agreeing with the larger Tucson community's sentiment to seriously address the educational needs of Mexican American students in TUSD.

On March 10, 1998 the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), the independent agency hired to report on the same issues as the Committee, presented its yearlong audit of the Bilingual Education and Hispanic Studies Department. Beside IDRA's favorable review of the bilingual programs in TUSD, IDRA recommended that a Hispanic Studies curriculum be placed in all schools, and its focus should be separate from bilingual education.

The Committee submitted their own report to the TUSD superintendent at the beginning of March of 1998 and it was officially submitted to the TUSD school board at an official meeting in mid-March of that year. The decision that is germane to this article is that the committee recommended and the Board approved the establishing of a Mexican American Studies Department with the responsibility to design a Mexican American Studies curriculum in grades K-12. Almost immediately, a Mexican American Studies program coordinator was appointed to spearhead the program, fulltime positions were allocated to the department, and a budget also was determined.

As a show of support for decisions made at the local level, Arizona state superintendent Lisa Graham Keegan, a Republican, remained silent on the new Hispanic Studies Program designed by TUSD. Her strong belief in local autonomy was demonstrated years later when she filed court documents against state superintendent Tom Horne, a fellow Republican, when the Arizona Department of Education wanted to require charter schools

to align their curricula to state prescribed curriculum, despite its lack of regulatory authority. In a show of bullying from the pulpit, Tom Horne would later interfere with and intrude in the implementation of the Mexican American Studies program in TUSD despite the fact that the Tucson community had so decisively embraced the program.

Conclusion

Community engagement is the inclusion of community members in school decisions such as planning, activities, visioning, communication, and other school-related functions. After years of neglecting the Mexican American student population, in 1997 the TUSD initiated a process by asking the Tucson community not only for involvement but for permission (Vollmer, 2001), permission to adopt a fundamental change in the approach to teaching students of Mexican American descent. The clamor of the community in support of such a program was decisive as was determined by their showing at the three public hearings set up for the purpose of eliciting public input.

Beside the fact that the Tucson community was overwhelmingly in favor of this transformative educational program, there were other factors that contributed to the welcoming approval of the program by the community and the TUSD School Board. Historically, the polyglot Tucson community, as related above, had created a zeitgeist of tolerance and acceptance toward diverse cultural and ethnic groups. In 1991, TUSD, reflecting the community's sentiment in the area of ethnic relations, adopted a Diversity Appreciation Education Policy with the intent of eradicating the dehumanizing influences of sexism, racism, prejudice, and discrimination from its schools and facilities. In addition, the history, anthropology, Mexican American Studies, and education colleges and departments at the University of Arizona in Tucson had been graduating a cadre of teachers who were committed to this type of education.

These were the best of times in TUSD and its Mexican American student population. The Mexican-American Studies program in TUSD was based on a unique social science program that emphasized an innovative curriculum that serves the cultural, social, and intellectual needs of Mexican-American students. Called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP), the program provides students with all the social science requirements for their junior and senior years of high school (Romero, 2008). During the two-year duration in the program, students engage in and develop a curriculum that is culturally, socially, and historically relevant, with issues of race and racism at its center (Romero, 2008). The teachers involved in this project were trained in the specific methodology and content required by the curriculum.

Evidence of success includes results from the 2004–2005 reading section of the AIMS test, where the Mexican-American Studies participants outperformed all other 11th grade ethnic cohorts at the four sites where the program was implemented. In three of the four participating sites, the gap in performance was equal to or greater than 23%. On the writing section, program participants outperformed all other 11th grade ethnic cohorts at the four sites and the gap in performance was equal to or greater than 23%. At two of the four sites the gap in percentage passed was equal to or greater than 25%. The 2004–2005 math section of the AIMS test is the only section that program participants did not outperform all other 11th grade ethnic cohorts at the four participating sites. At one of the sites, Anglo students outperformed project participants by one percentage point. This trend continued consistently through school year 2008.

In 2008, 389 program participants were surveyed with the following favorable results (Romero, 2008):

- 95% agree and strongly agree that working on this project or taking this class has improved their writing skills.
- 96% agree and strongly agree that they talk to their parents and/or other adults about what they have learned in the project or in the class.
- 97% agree and strongly agree that the project or the class has better prepared them for college.
- 97% agree and strongly agree that working on this project or taking this class has improved their reading skills.
- 96% agree and strongly agree that they are willing to do homework in order to keep the project

- moving along on time to ensure participation in class.
- 97% agree and strongly agree that working on this project or taking this class has helped them believe that they have something worthwhile to contribute to this class.

The community at large had provided the Tucson Unified School District with a blueprint for the future (Gómez & Benton, 1998). When the TUSD School Board approved the Committee's report in April of 1998, it immediately became policy. Shortly thereafter, the District hired a Mexican American Studies Director whose responsibility was to design and implement the program. The Tucson community and the University of Arizona experts in the field were involved in the program design. The overarching goal of the program was to boost student achievement among Hispanic students by providing them with curriculum materials embedded in Hispanic history and culture (Gómez & Benton, 1998). While the initial study cohort in 2001 consisted of only 17 students (Romero, 2008) it is important to note that nearly all the students in the project had been labeled "at risk", and many had already dropped out or were on the verge of dropping out of high school. Two years later in 2003, the program was implemented in a total of 4 high schools (Romero, 2008). In just a few years, the program, especially at the high school level, spread and gained popularity among students, especially among the marginalized groups of students that for years had experienced educational neglect.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the state of Arizona felt elation from the program's success. Tom Horne, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, in his capacity as the chief education officer for the state of Arizona, started probing into the program in 2007. In spite of the program's popularity and success among Mexican American and other students, and the markedly positive support it had among the entire Tucson community, Tom Horne, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Arizona State legislature passed laws that targeted the program and made it difficult for the District to sustain it. Euphoria soon gave in to despair on the part of the teachers and students in the program. The onslaught of attacks on the program led to the worst of times for students of Mexican American descent in the Tucson Unified School District. Only time will tell what becomes of an idea that had strong roots in the tolerant and caring Tucson community.

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