

CORONAVIRUS

New art installation celebrates frontline Latinx workers of coronavirus pandemic in R.I.

Madeleine List The Providence Journal

Published 5:15 p.m. ET Sep. 25, 2020

PROVIDENCE — Saturday is Rhode Island Hospital Emergency Room Technician Alma Garcia's day off, and she plans to take her boyfriend and her son to see a new public art installation now hanging at the Providence Community Health Center at 355 Prairie Ave.

It's an eight-foot-tall banner designed by local artist René Gómez, and it's special to Garcia because, well, it's a portrait of her.

“Every time I see it, I feel a little bit emotional,” said Garcia, 33, of Providence, who was able to view Gómez's design before the colorful banner was installed on the side of the Providence Community Health Center building on Friday.

Garcia's banner is one of seven hung up around Providence on Friday that feature Latinx frontline workers who have worked throughout the novel coronavirus pandemic.

“Sometimes when people think about health care, they only think about doctors and nurses. They don't think about the people behind them — the techs, laundry, housekeeping,” said Garcia, who is originally from Guatemala. “They need everybody. If you don't do your job, everything's going to collapse.”

The banners were designed by local Latinx artists in a collaboration thought up by artist Shey Rivera, Spanish-language radio host Tony Mendez and local poet Sussy Santana. The city contributed a grant of \$4,000 from its Department of Art, Culture + Tourism and \$2,000 in funding from its Healthy Communities Office.

As of Wednesday, Latinos made up 45% of COVID-19 cases in Rhode Island, while they make up about 16% of the state's population. The largely Latinx neighborhood of Olneyville has consistently had some of the highest case numbers of any zip code in the state.

According to a Brown University study, some of the leading occupations for Hispanic workers in the state are high-contact jobs that are often considered essential and could put workers at greater risk of contracting the virus, including cleaners, customer service representatives and retail salespeople.

“They are essential workers,” Rivera said, standing outside America’s Food Basket on Broad Street, where the first of the banners was installed Friday morning. “They don’t have the luxury to work from home ... so this project intends to tell their stories and recognize that a lot of people are taking risk and helping us get through this, and they're often, perhaps, unsung voices in the midst of this transformation.”

While the Latinx community is over-represented on the frontlines of the pandemic, it is too often under-acknowledged, said Oliver Arias, a 28-year-old health-care worker who is featured in a banner on the side of the ECAS Theater with his 1-year-old daughter, Sophia.

“Just like most communities of color, (we’re) just kind of always put on the back burner,” he said.

Arias, who works at a group home for adults with cognitive disabilities, said that working through the pandemic has been stressful, especially after five of the home’s residents tested positive for COVID-19. Without hazard pay, he said, he doesn’t feel supported by his state or federal government.

But the appreciation from his community shown through the art project makes a difference.

“Even just these small gestures of acknowledgment, they do help,” he said.

For Tracy Jonsson-Laboy, 35, a Providence artist who designed the banner that now hangs on the side of the Southside Cultural Center, the art pieces serve to remind us of our collective humanity.

“If there was one thing that I think the project really asks us to do is to not take people for granted,” she said. “No matter what their background is, what their color is, what their economic status is, people are essential.”

mlist@providencejournal.com

(401) 277-7121

On Twitter: @madeleine_list

The art installations can be viewed at:

Providence Community Health Center 100 Curtis St.

Artist: Raúl Velásquez

One Neighborhood Builders 66 Chaffee St.

Artist: Atabey Sánchez-Haiman

Providence Community Health Center 239 Cranston St.

Artist: Shey Rivera Ríos

Southside Cultural Center 393 Broad St.

Artist: Tracy Jonsson-Laboy

ECAS Theater 57 Parkis Ave.

Artist: Matt Garza

Providence Community Health Center 355 Prairie Ave.

Artist: René Gómez

America's Food Basket 863 Broad St.

Artist: Antonia Lara Sánchez