

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: Camille Llanes-Fontanilla, Executive Director, Somos Mayfair



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Small and Valuable

The people in most need of nonprofit programs are often the individuals who are the hardest to reach. As the Executive Director of Somos Mayfair, a grassroots, place-based nonprofit in East San Jose, I have seen countless examples of how there is a disconnect between people in need of support and our local nonprofit sector. And I have experienced it myself. I was born and raised in East San Jose, spending my formative years in the Mayfair neighborhood where my own family has been devastated by poor health, limited educational opportunities, and immigration detention—all common issues in Mayfair.

My organization serves homeless families who cannot join nonprofit programs because they don't have an address. We serve recent immigrant arrivals who fled violence and corruption and don't trust institutions. We serve families who cannot access resources because of language barriers, documentation status, income guidelines, cultural norms, and limited transportation. It is for these reasons that many small community-based organizations exist—to address the needs of very specific populations, immigrants, monolingual speakers, ethnic groups, and disenfranchised neighborhoods.

Somos Mayfair, along with our sister organizations—African American Community Services Agency (AACSA), International Children's Assistance Network (iCAN), and Services, Immigrant Rights, and Education Network (SIREN)—to name a few—provide culturally relevant, accessible programs for specific populations. Many were developed “for us and by us,” giving us the credibility to build trust, as we have the same lived experiences, cultural understanding, and language as

the people we serve. At Somos Mayfair we are able to meet clients where they are, address their immediate needs, and develop their leadership so that they can become agents of change in our community.

However, the realities of deepening and growing our work are often in tension with the needs of donors. While our organizations value many of the same things as donors—impact, innovation, and connection—it is difficult for us to secure resources and develop the required infrastructure to support these things. As community-based organizations embedded in our communities, we are limited in our ability to make connections beyond our own networks and are not on the radar of foundations, corporations, high-net-worth donors, and potential board members. Without this broader support, it is difficult for us to secure flexible capital that allows us to invest in marketing, fund development, human resources, evaluation, facilities, and volunteer management. The grants we secure are mostly restricted to programs, not allowing us to build out the infrastructure needed to fully measure, grow, and scale our work.

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