

Group Helps Improve Community Through Agriculture and Art

By **RACHELLE KRYGIER**

Jesus Romero, 26, and Jacob Robles, 24, are leading a community self-reliance group in Barrio Centro, a neighborhood struggling with poverty in central Tucson. The group, Flowers and Bullets, invites members to use their skills in new, productive ways, through projects in agriculture and art.

The two men, friends since childhood, started Flowers and Bullets in 2012, a response to the Tucson Unified School District's decision to shut down its Mexican American Studies department under financial and political pressure from the state.

Mr. Romero, known as Tito, and Mr. Robles, former students at the Tucson High Magnet School, worked for the department as assistants and mentors right after graduation. They joined the community effort to preserve the curriculum by protesting outside school board meetings.

Opponents charged that Mexican American Studies, including Chicano art and literature classes, were politically radical and racially divisive, although they were open to all students.

Supporters of Mexican American Studies, known as MAS, touted the cultural connections, critical thinking and community activism that the curriculum and teachers inspired.

We always told them to "go back to where you come from and make it better," said Jose Gonzalez, a former MAS teacher who had Mr. Robles and Mr. Romero in his government class.

Mr. Robles and Mr. Romero lost their jobs when the department was dismantled.

"In the end we weren't left with much for ourselves," Mr. Robles said. "We have no college degrees, we work working-class jobs. There are no prestigious titles or any recognition for that work we did."

He and Mr. Romero decided to put into action the lessons from MAS in their own neighborhood, Barrio Centro, through the cre-



Jacob Robles, 24, one of the leaders of Flowers and Bullets, had not been back to see the mural he painted in 2012 for ACE Charter High School until May 21.

ation of Flowers and Bullets.

"Our neighborhood is a big Mexicano Chicano neighborhood," Mr. Robles said. "We try to glorify our indigenous background and kind of acknowledge our history."

Barrio Centro is a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood bordered by a rail yard and a cross-town parkway. It is part of Ward 5, which has the city's highest percentage of people receiving food stamps or cash public assistance and residents older than 25 without a high school diploma.

Everyone is welcome to participate in Flowers and Bullets — teenagers who have left high school, drug dealers, addicts,

single parents, taggers and convicted felons. It has approximately two dozen members, ages 19 to late 50s.

"When we work with some of the guys in the neighborhood, we're like, 'Yo, we know that you're using the scale for something other than food sales,'" Mr. Romero said, referring to drug dealers. But that is O.K., he said, because Flowers and Bullets is about working with members' reality, not forcing a change from outside. Mr. Robles and Mr. Romero said that knowledge is an asset, even if it comes from an illegal activity.

Members are taught to become more self-sufficient through agriculture. Mr. Romero raises

goats. He said two of them, Chino and Cajeta, would soon be slaughtered. Eating meat from the animals they raise is part of the indigenous process of connecting with the earth, he said.

Ten members have backyard gardens. They produce food for themselves and to sell at the downtown farmer's market. In addition, they make and sell soaps, canned products — such as pickled jalapeños — and seasonal jams and jellies.

"We started a co-op," Mr. Romero said. "Two of our members have chickens, so we have eggs for ourselves. We trade food for ourselves, and one of our youngest members has, like, an indoor-grown garden and we buy

plants from him."

Members take orders online and by word of mouth. They plan to hold their own Flowers and Bullets market this summer at the Wooden Nickel Tavern, a neighborhood bar. Joseph Varela, the bar's owner, agreed to let the group use his licensed kitchen to cook, can, label and sell their food.

"This guy, he tries to keep the other guys out of trouble, and that's why I like them and want to help them," Mr. Varela said.

Mr. Gonzalez said he is proud of how his former students have "responded to a need in their neighborhood by going back to what our people have always done: agriculture and having a relationship with the earth."

Flowers and Bullets also helps its graffiti artists showcase their work and gain recognition and compensation, without the risk of arrest that comes with tagging in public spaces.

Member artists design and sell t-shirts for \$15 at events and local coffee shops. Proceeds are plowed back into the enterprise.

Flowers and Bullets members were hired to help students create a mural inside the ACE Charter High School in 2012. Emily Ruddick, an ACE teacher, said, "We have to get beyond the stigma that graffiti is a gang thing or just a marking of territory. It is a form of expression for kids who are in a loop of poverty."

Some Flowers and Bullets artists have become entrepreneurs. Nito Bravo, 24, was one of the organization's first members. He belonged to a gang in high school but eventually gravitated to the graffiti crowd.

Mr. Bravo now sells his artwork in Phoenix. "I hope we can keep pushing Flowers and Bullets forward for the community, kids and other generations to know that there is something positive out here and that we can do this in our small community and make it a big thing," he said.

Another member, Dora Martinez, 27, said Flowers and Bullets' agriculture and art projects are only a means to help the community address the systemic causes of poverty that are part of life in Barrio Centro.

German Quiroga, an officer at the Barrio Centro Neighborhood Association, said he supports what the group is doing even though he is not wild about its name. "I believe their mission is economic justice, which we support despite the name that has a bitter irony," he said. "That's how they depict their reality."

The name Flowers and Bullets is confrontational by design.

"The bullets are like that struggle — that resistance," Mr. Robles said. "Everything we and our homies have gone through to make the flower beautiful."

Theatrical Town Faces Real Murders

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Boze Bell. That ordinance stayed in effect until 1910, when the state Constitution proclaimed, "The right of the individual citizen to bear arms in defense of himself or the state shall not be impaired."

Arizona has some of the least restrictive gun laws in the country, and nearly all Tombstone citizens are armed, according to Brian Davis, the owner of BTD Scientific, a local gun shop.

When people want to purchase a gun at Mr. Davis's shop, they must fill out an application, prove their state residency and age with a valid ID and agree that they are purchasing the weapon for only their personal use, he said. Then Mr. Davis calls the National Instant Criminal Background Check System to evaluate the individual's history. If he receives confirmation over the phone, the shopper can walk out of the store with a weapon within several minutes.

Gun owners in Arizona do not need permits; they can keep their guns loaded and concealed. Guns are allowed in bars, but the possessor cannot be served alcohol.

In Tombstone, "basically everyone has a gun, and they know it," Mr. Davis said.

From 2002 to 2011, there were no murders and four reported rapes in Tombstone, according to Arizona Department of Public Safety records.

But something seems to have changed: In the past three years, Tombstone has had two murders and a police-involved shooting death.

In 2012, a deputy responded to

a 911 call about a home intruder. According to court records, the intruder, Cameron King, 15 at the time, had gained access to a gun that had been in a safe in the house. A young woman, who was hiding in the house, had seen Mr. King with the gun and called 911.

Deputy James Norris arrived at the house 40 minutes later. His search for Mr. King led him to a closet in the master bedroom. He pulled open the closet door and came face-to-face with Mr. King, who was holding the gun, according to the court records. Deputy Norris fired six times and then told Mr. King to "get down."

In the last three years, Tombstone saw two murders.

Mr. King said, "I'm down" and collapsed. He later died from his injuries. The shooting was investigated, and months later, the deputy was exonerated without trial.

The next year, a love triangle led to the town's first murder in years. Melissa Moser, a married woman from Washington state, drove to Tombstone and had an affair with a local man, Antonio Molina, a prosecutor said at trial. When this became public knowledge, Jonathan Gibson, 28, the woman's husband, went to Tombstone to try to reconcile with his wife.

Mr. Molina and Ms. Moser invited Mr. Gibson to dinner and

killed him after a heated dispute, the Sierra Vista Herald reported. Mr. Molina and Ms. Moser were convicted of murder and are serving life in prison without parole.

Last year, Barry Chappell, 60, stalked his ex-girlfriend's new beau, Leroy Colomy, 74, down 10th Street in Tombstone. Without warning, Mr. Chappell ran up behind Mr. Colomy and shot him five times in the back, the Arizona Daily Star reported. Tombstone marshals arrested him, and he was later sentenced to life in prison without parole.

In a town that strives to preserve its Wild West reputation, it can be difficult to distinguish actors from those who live here. The same can be said for the guns that are fired throughout the day. Hearing 50 blank rounds shot in five minutes during re-enactments is typical in Tombstone, but if a person takes a loaded gun out of its holster, "someone will take it wrong," Mr. Davis said.

All of that gunplay has some citizens wondering how Tombstone can balance public safety with a tourism industry that revolves around gunslinging.

Billy Hunley, 48, a fourth-generation owner of the Birdcage Theater in town, said the gunslinging culture trickles into residents' personal lives. "I try to get out of here as much as I can," he said.

The town's gunslinging history may take a toll on locals, but Mr. Davis said he thought video games were also to blame. "I think part of the problem today is desensitization," he said. "They don't deal with the ramifications of shooting someone."

Push to Ban Circus Animals Comes to Tucson

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the approved U.S.D.A. tool for working with elephants," said Sabrina Cullen, the national public relations manager for Ringling Bros., "just like people put a leash on their dogs or a rein on a horse. Because the elephant obviously is very tall and large, you can't put a leash on it," she said.

When the Ringling show is traveling, Ms. Cullen said, the elephants and horses go by train and are placed in custom cars with cooling systems and they receive constant supervision.

A circus historian, Dominique Jando, challenges the idea that all circuses mistreat animals. "The fact that some trainers have abused the animals is absolutely certain," he said, "the same way that pet owners have abused their pets."

Mr. Jando referred to Circus Knie, the largest circus in Switzerland, as a model circus because it travels with veterinarians and makes sure the animals have spacious stalls and extensive open enclosures to roam.

Thomas Chipperfield, a world-renowned trainer who has been working with lions and tigers for 13 years, uses a system of repetition and reward: The trainer encourages a certain behavior from the animal, and when the animal shows even the slightest improvement, it receives verbal praise and a treat.

Mr. Chipperfield, who comes from a long line of animal trainers that goes back 330 years in Europe, welcomed media and advocacy groups to witness the process. "Normally we are quiet people in comparison with the animal right groups that are very vocal," he said. "But because traditionally we don't respond to these claims, people are starting to listen to the groups. We are guilty by association."

Speak's proposed ban comes at a time of growing interest in the circus arts in Tucson. Several businesses have promoted circus arts through showcases and educational events that include acrobatics, contortion, flying trapeze, fire and more.

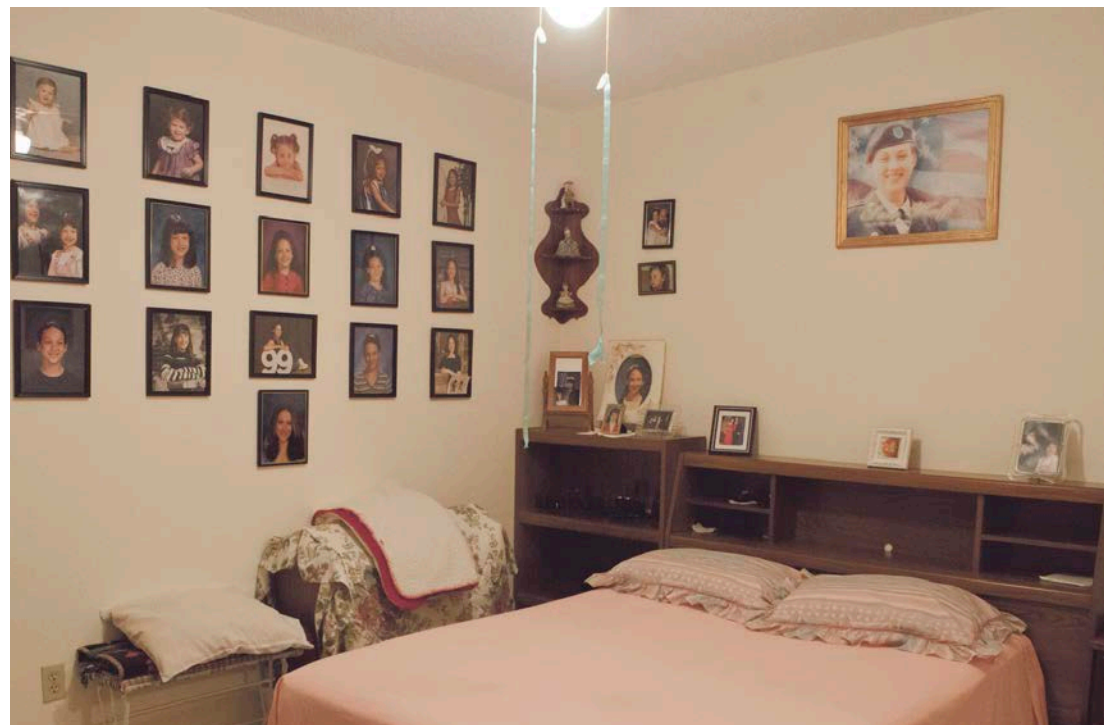
Flam Chen, the oldest profes-

sional circus arts troupe in the city, produces the All Souls Procession, an annual ritualistic performance inspired by Mexico's Dia de los Muertos. There are no animals in the show, but people often bring their pets.

Companies like Flam Chen, created in 1994, practice what they call New Circus. "It is more theatrical, is about telling a story and using circus as a device," Nadia Hagen, the troupe's founder, said. "Humans get to make a choice. Humans get to be like, 'I want to put myself at risk.' But the animal doesn't get to choose. I think I don't need to be entertained that way." Ms. Hagen also said she sees the potential of creating art with nature's creatures.

Pedro Romano, 32, a fire performer at Cirque Roots, the newest troupe in Tucson, said he loves acts with domestic animals, especially dogs. As for wild animals, he has no doubts.

"I think large mammals like the elephants, that need a whole continent to roam in, definitely shouldn't be kept in the big top," he said.



Sam Huff's room in her grandparents' home remained as it was before she was killed in Iraq.

In Memory of a Fallen Young Soldier

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year.

Her friends and military superiors remembered Private Huff as a brave, sharp soldier who loved dancing and had a dazzling smile. Her team leader, Sgt. Sam James, said Private Huff had a huge thirst for knowledge.

"She was also a beautiful young lady, the kind that would turn heads in the mall," Sergeant James said, according to a Defense Department news release at the time.

Her service to the country was memorialized in numerous articles, including pieces in The Washington Post and The Guardian, and at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial in Washington.

But to her family in Tucson, her death was merely the beginning of their loss. Four years later, Private Huff's mother, Margaret Williams, died in 2009 after a five-year fight against cancer. She served in the Marine Corps, and when she died, her ashes were placed right over her daughter's grave at Arlington, June Williams said.

Private Huff was the Williams' only grandchild. They said she took after her parents for their commitment to service. Her mother was an air traffic controller and a dispatcher for the Tucson Police Department, and worked in the communications division at the Oro Valley Police Department. Her father, Bob Huff, is a musician and retired as a detective with the Tucson Police Department.

"No one understands what it's like except other people who've lost someone," Mr. Huff said in a phone interview. "To lose someone in war who's only 18 years old."

Mr. Huff spent his Memorial

Day weekend at a grief convention in Boulder, Colo., where he told his story to relatives of fallen service members. He talked about the time when his daughter, at age 16, first told him she wanted to join the Army. He reminded her about the war going on, but she insisted that she needed to go. She said she hoped to pursue a degree in forensic psychology and someday work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Then there were the more personal memories.

Mr. Huff said that his daughter had a knack for pranks and clever jokes. He recalled a time when he was giving her a bath when she was a toddler and trying to get her to say certain phrases. He would say words like "Cincinnati" or "Mississippi," and she would repeat them perfectly. But when he said "jurisdiction," his daughter shot back, "Church's Chicken."

During the convention, Mr. Huff's group was encouraged to write letters to their deceased loved ones telling them about their lives now.

"When it came my time, I didn't write to her, because I talk to her all the time," he said. "She keeps an eye on things."

Before leaving for Colorado, Mr. Huff had dinner at his home in Tucson with Tara Martin, a daughter from a previous marriage. They spoke of Sam and recalled a stuffed animal that she carried with her from the time she was a baby. Mr. Huff got up from the table and came back with the ragged old rabbit. They both started to cry.

"She was the best of all of us," Ms. Martin later said in a phone interview.

Private Huff's high school class gathered for a 10-year reunion last October. There was an obvious hole in the group, said Jennifer Palmieri, who played

flute with her in the band. At least five former students of Mountain View High School were killed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, The San Francisco Chronicle reported. At least three were from Ms. Palmieri's class, she said.

On the evening before she was killed, Private Huff called her mother, her grandfather said. She said she was happy and would not want to be anywhere else.

On the day she died, the private lay mortally wounded. She asked her sergeant to tell her mother she loved her and to wish her father good luck with his instrumental album, Mr. Williams said.

After his daughter's death, Mr. Huff put his music on hold for several months. He eventually finished his album, which he named "Sun and Moon." The first letter of each word intentionally spells out "Sam."

Before Private Huff left Tucson, her father received a recording of her playing part of one of his songs on her flute. On the album's title track, Private Huff's flute can be heard looped throughout the song. Mr. Huff said he has since mailed more than 4,000 copies of the album to families who have lost loved ones in combat.

Sometimes he wonders if he should have tried to stop his daughter from enlisting in the Army. But he knows it was something that she felt she had to do.

Now remarried, Mr. Huff said that he thinks about his daughter every day. He feels that she and Private Huff's mother are watching over him and helped him find his new wife.

He will never have closure, he said, but he is doing everything he can to cope.

"There's no way Sam would want me to sit around crying my eyes out all the time," Mr. Huff said. "She lived life in a big way, and she would expect me to go on and do the same."