

*Sandra Creando*

# HEALING THROUGH ART THERAPY



Minnesota  
Humanities  
Center



adler

GRADUATE  
SCHOOL

# What is Sanar Creando?

Sanar Creando is a Latino-focused afterschool program for elementary and middle school. It was created to help students understand their emotions through art activities. The program had three goals:

1. Help decrease the effect of traumatic events in Minneapolis from the past few years in K-8<sup>th</sup> grade students,
2. Help students feel more welcome and that they belong in their community,
3. Invite students to participate as artists and storytellers in their community by creating a mural.

This program was a four-way partnership between Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research (HACER), Aurora Charter School, Gustavo Lira García, and Adler Graduate School in Mental Health.

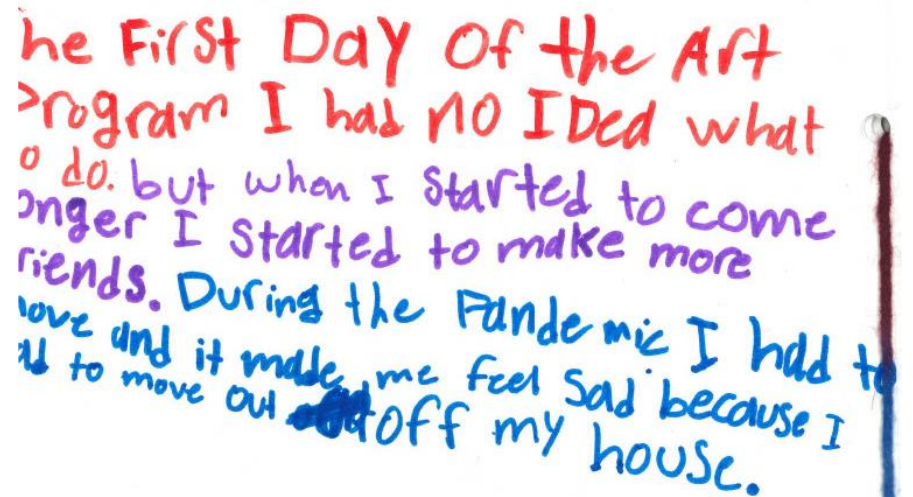
HACER	Aurora Charter School	Gustavo Lira García	Adler Graduate School
			
Design, management, evaluation	Host and logistics	Muralist	Art therapy support

This work is funded in part by the Minnesota Humanities Center with money from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund that was created with the vote of the people of Minnesota on November 4, 2008.

## About Aurora Charter School

Sanar Creando was hosted at Aurora Charter School. Aurora is a K-8<sup>th</sup> grade school in Minneapolis, MN. It is on Lake Street, close to area most affected by the 2020 riots that followed the killing of George Floyd. Aurora serves a population of 100% Latino of low and middle-income families, mostly first-generation and some second-generation immigrants. The closeness and the intensity of the event and the COVID-19 lockdown deeply affected Aurora families.

## Why murals?



The First Day Of the Art Program I had NO IDEED what to do. but when I started to come longer I started to make more friends. During the Fandemic I hdd to love and it made me feel sad because I had to move out off my house.

Murals in Latino culture have been used as a cultural-based form of self-expression. They give communities a chance to have their voices heard. These public spaces have become places for people to learn about their cultural history, gain a deeper sense of self- and group identity, and offer an

opportunity to build community with others for social justice.

Not all murals have to have a significant social role to be meaningful to a community. Just by itself, a mural can bring a community together to take pride in the environment.

## How can art help mental health?

The process of making art and art therapy have been shown to improve mental health. On its own, art therapy will not address all challenges in mental health. However, there is evidence that there is a relationship between the arts and positive changes in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and trauma.<sup>1</sup>

## Our Process

The Sanar Creando afterschool program consisted of three main components: activities, mural creation, and guided conversations.

### Activities

Every session, the program team had activities ready for the students. These activities helped get the students talking while also giving them time to practice their art skills before

working on the mural. Some examples of activities included:

- A presentation on emotions in art
- An activity on movement and mindfulness
- Playing the game Lotería
- An art activity focused on creating a self-portrait

## Mural creation

Throughout the sessions, students learned about several Latin American artists and art forms in images and videos. This helped start the conversation about what topics would go in the mural: identity, community, and emotions.

*The students were asked to answer:  
“What’s important for you to show in the mural?”*

The students each made their own individual creative work during the sessions. Then, the students were invited to vote to select a small number of specific images that would be included in the mural. The muralist then created a draft based on the chosen images. The muralist and students would then experiment with and propose color schemes on paper.

The images were projected onto a metal panel to transfer them to the larger proportions of 10' x 5' or 8' x 4' panels. Under the guidance of the muralist, the students transferred the draft collaboratively onto the panel.

Then the painting would begin! The students created art pieces that expressed and explored concepts and feelings under the guidance of the muralist and the artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Brain Research Shows the arts promote mental health: University of Calgary, Canada. <http://tinyurl.com/yc5uzsm2>



facilitator. Through this, the students gained confidence and improved their artistic skills.

## Guided conversations

The guided conversations focused on **cultural identity**, **impact of the events of the last few years**, and **hope for the future**. Students expressed their feelings and how those events affected their lives. They also talked about identity as a tool to increase self-esteem and improve their mental health.

### Cultural identity

- How would you describe your cultural identity or ethnicity?
- How would you describe the impact this identity has on you?

### Impact of past years

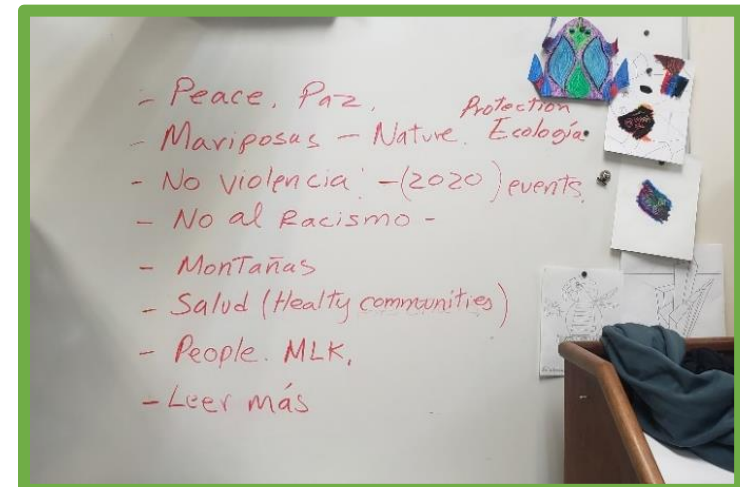
- Over the past three years, have you felt more than usual amounts of stress, sadness, and fear?
- Have you had the time or the opportunity to think about where these feelings come from or how they are impacting you? Have you talked about them with someone?

### Hope and future

- In what ways have you managed to find joy in the past three years?
- In moments when times were tough, what gave you feelings of relief?



Examples of mural drafts



Student responses from guided conversations



# The murals



## Justice for All

**Artists:** Students in grades 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>.

**Mural description:** The students wanted to represent the events they lived during the pandemic and the demonstrations and riots following the murder of George Floyd. They also wanted to showcase inclusion by showing a woman, her rainbow bandana, and the raised fist of "Black Lives Matter."

The butterfly represents freedom, and the character looking to the future. The message of hope represents their wish for Justice for All.

Students want this mural to prompt conversations of social justice among those who see it.





## Health, community, and peace

**Artists:** Students in grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Description:** The mural represents three important ideas for students – three struggles:

1. *Fight for health:* The intensity of feelings of fear, frustration, and uncertainty during COVID-19 and quarantine.
2. *Fight for our community:* The flags around the tree of life representing togetherness, student identities and pride in their cultures.

3. *Struggle for justice and peace:* Hands around the world and a student protesting, using their voice, especially when they feel someone is not being treated fairly.

Students want this part of the mural to make us talk about the events happening in the world and how we feel about them.





## Hope for the Future

**Artist:** Students in kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

**Mural description:** The students show here how proud they are of what they were able to do by working together. It shows that we all have something of an artist inside – represented by the pencil and the rainbow and the art that comes out of it. The tree represents their pillar of strength

and protection, especially that of their families. The unicorn is the imagination and creativity of the students. The hummingbird represents freedom.

Students want everyone who experiences this last section of the mural to feel joy, happiness, and hope for the future.





## What we learned

We learned the most from conversations with the students in class, team observations and debriefs, and the artist statements. We also spoke to school staff and had a small number of conversations with parents.

The murals are the most tangible product of the project, yet the most valuable part of the experience is its delivery to the community that participated in its creation.

### Key learnings



**Awareness comes before expression. Awareness and expression open paths for healing.** Participation in this project gave students an opportunity to explore the concept of identity. For most students, this was the first time they talked about how they felt about the events of the last few years.

Mental health specialists have established that awareness and a strong sense of identity are related to self-esteem and other mental health measurements. A strong sense of identity and self-esteem might prepare students to overcome past trauma and face events such as violence and discrimination, with fewer negative effects.



**It is important to have a sense of control of your own life and have hope, instead of feeling powerless or hopeless.** We can't say how these students will be affected in the long term by this experience. We do hope that it has

deepened their understanding of who they are and provided building blocks to their self-esteem. Finally, we hope it has given them a window to see themselves as able to initiate change, have control over their lives, and have hope for the future.

## Tips for the future

We hope that other schools will be able to create similar projects to this one. Underrepresented communities can use this art therapy model to strengthen their voices, process their feelings in non-verbal ways and engage others in conversations.

Here are some tips we recommend for programs in the future:

### Working with the students

1. Make sure to invest enough time to allow for trust and connections to develop.
2. The canvas technique used for the third phase (mural drafted on canvas, then cut, painted, and transferred back to the panel) is more flexible and time efficient.
3. Create a lesson plan of artistic technical skills to run parallel to the session.
4. Have sensitivity to the students' creative process – to let students explore their creativity and have freedom of expression.

5. It is essential to have a team that meets the cultural and linguistic needs of the students.

### Partnerships

1. Clarify leadership of the team with clear roles, interactions, and expectations.
2. Art therapists must be part of the design team from the beginning.
3. School participation and partnership are essential.

### Evaluation

1. Have defined, yet flexible, evaluation metrics and processes.
2. Ongoing monitoring and adjustments are important; build debriefing as part of the process.
3. Observing critically, with intention.
4. Have clear documentation and reflective book as closure. Systematically collect and file art pieces the students create.

## Full report

A full detailed report of how we implemented this program can be found at <https://hacer-mn.org/publications-reports/>.

## Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the support of the work and support of the following individuals:

### Aurora Charter School

Aurora Charter Public School is a fully bilingual immersion

institution situated in Minneapolis. Its mission is to provide exceptional education and support to Latino families, many of whom are first-generation immigrants to the United States. Aurora's team was composed of Matt Cisewski (Executive Director), William Kobe (K-8<sup>th</sup> Art Teacher), and Sam Kosel (Social Worker).

### Gustavo Lira García, Muralist

Gustavo Lira, a highly skilled Latino painter, sculptor, and muralist. He led the students in the development of the mural.

### Adler Graduate School

Adler Graduate School's role in the project was to provide context and therapeutic art component to the project and facilitate the conversations to avoid further traumatizing the students. Erin Rafferty-Bugher led the art therapy team, bringing her extensive experience in trauma-focused work with children and. Three Art Therapy graduate interns joined the team: Marlissa Karpeh, Pamela Grimaldi, and Kelly Benson

### HACER Evaluation Team

HACER's role was to lead the design, coordination, evaluation and execution of the project. HACER's team is composed of Rodolfo Gutiérrez (Executive Director) and Carolina De La Rosa Mateo (Director of Operations), who designed the project and established the evaluation goals; Hana Bibliowicz (Artistic Facilitator), Nicolás Díaz de León and Patricia Mudoy (Evaluators) who implemented the program; and Ericka Lara Ovaes (Research and Evaluation Coordinator) who provided project management and evaluation support.