



More than a reading, the story was a dynamic art exhibition.

Circling Back to Start

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This tale will be told out of order because that is the way it happened—completely backwards and in an unconventional way that I somehow see as normal. Still, I think the details will be of special interest to my fellow librarians, particularly those wishing to build unique coalitions with community members.

At the time of this writing, I am counting down the days until my first book, *All Around Us*, will be released by Cinco Puntos Press. Yet it was over a year ago that we held what many considered to be our book's launch. It was an unforgettable celebration, complete with live music, dancing, poetry, and several community organizations sponsoring the event. So how exactly—and why—did we put the cart before the horse?

Well, the first rule I eschewed was to submit my manuscript to a big publishing house that would pair

me with an illustrator they trusted but whom I might never meet. These rules are in place for a reason, but I happened to know and trust an amazing artist with whom I had collaborated on many community-based projects. To have my book illustrated in the phenomenal way I knew she could, Adriana Garcia and I applied for a grant from the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC). They were the first organization to take a chance on us.

As with many grants, this one stipulated we present the final product—in our case, a fully illustrated children's book—to the community in a meaningful way. We considered hosting a regular reading, of course, but ever since my days in library school, I had been longing to display a story walk. To me, the concept is simple, appealing, and effective, especially in a city like our

hometown of San Antonio, Texas, where family literacy and physical fitness are areas that could use a caring nudge.

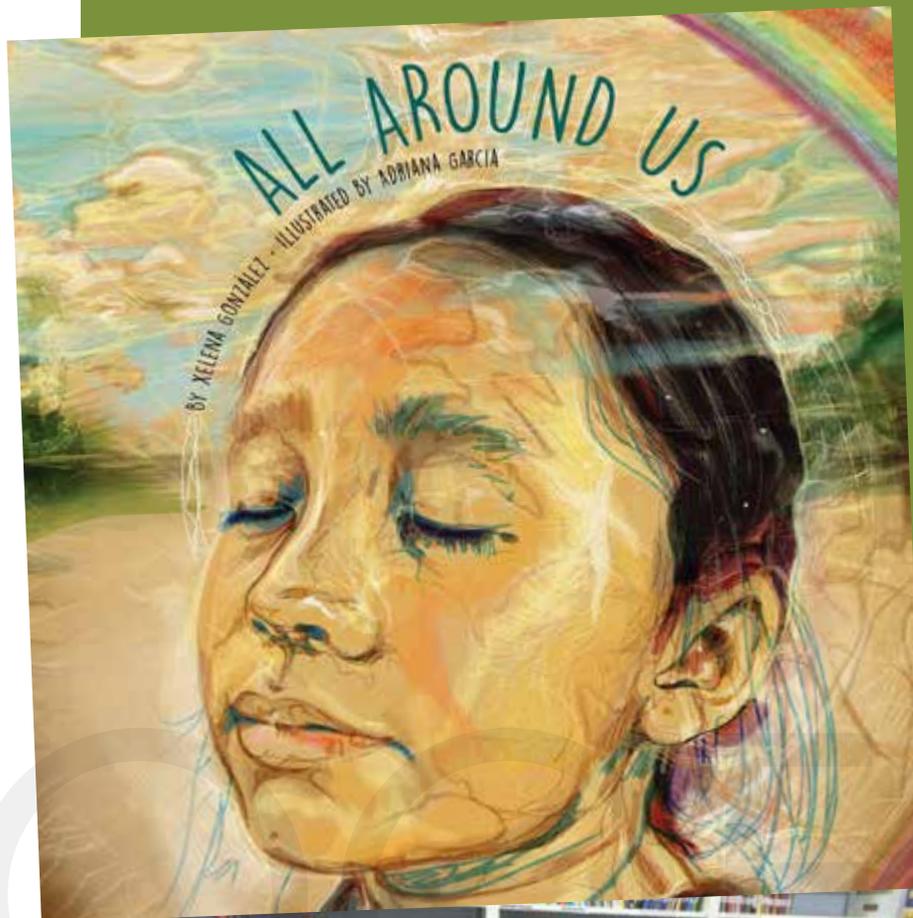
Over the next nine months, Adriana toiled over the illustrations, experimenting in a new digital medium that both stretched and challenged her impeccable painting skills. Meanwhile, I cheered her on from the sidelines, which happened to be located across the globe in Guangzhou, China, where I serve as head librarian at an international school. When the time came for summer break, my colleagues fled to various exotic vacation spots, while I returned to my hometown to join Adriana in realizing our story walk idea.

Pulling off the project required extra stores of energy I did not realize I had. (Really, who among us is not ready to sleep all summer

holiday by the time it rolls around?) Luckily, we had many extra hands supporting our effort. Among our team of party planners was a community health organization, a local gardening society, organizers from a youth poetry slam team, three restaurant entrepreneurs, several well-known local musicians, and, in a starring role, the San Antonio Public Library (SAPL) and its early-literacy team, the Little Read Wagon. Our event was held at Mission Library, one of SAPL's newer branches that features sprawling fields and several community gardens. It was the perfect location with the perfect partners.

The story walk drew a considerable number of people out of bed on a Saturday morning. Thanks to our community partnerships, we were able to offer a full breakfast buffet of healthy options. (I never did get to see the fruit tray assembled in a rainbow; it disappeared by the time I was done touring the story walk with visitors.) We began with a brief reading of the book, which was only a mock-up version at that time. Then we walked as a large group through the story walk outdoors. At each page—printed and mounted in the style of large political campaign signs—we asked audience members to help read the story, printed in English on one side, in Spanish on the reverse.

More than a reading, the story was a dynamic art exhibition. When we reached the part of the story where the child narrator gardens with her grandfather, our friends from Healthy Neighborhoods briefly demonstrated a seeding activity and discussed healthy eating habits. Then came the page where our characters practice mulching, and the Mission District gardening society was on hand to show the basics. Further along in the book,



Xelena González during story time with her youngest bunch of students in Guangzhou, China. Photo courtesy of Xelena González. Source: <https://therivardreport.com/san-antonios-first-original-storywalk-to-premiere-at-mission-branch-library/>

we had various performing artists present at each page, responding to the story in song, poetry, spoken word, and dance.

Just remembering the experience makes my heart warm with gratitude and eases the mild sadness I feel for having to miss the official book launch to come in a few weeks. That piece of gold was struck soon after we completed the story walk and realized there was ample interest from the community in taking home a copy of our story. We researched the publication possibilities—including printing the book ourselves here in China—and pitched an independent press favored among indigenous and Latinx creators.

Cinco Puntos Press said “yes” in an e-mail I received on my first day back at school. Elated and with tears in my eyes, I shared the good news with curious colleagues and parents of returning students. Immediately, many took an interest in the story walk project, photos of which some had already seen on WeChat (China’s answer to Facebook). Since our school is located in an arts district, the recurring idea was to replicate the project on our campus.

Offers began pouring in to translate the story into other languages. Our school hosts a multitude of nationalities, and our little library contains materials in eight “mother tongue”

languages. But of course Chinese had to come first. My deputy librarian graciously agreed to translate the book and did so remarkably vividly. Our crowning project of the school year was taking each class on a story walk around our campus, where students took turns reading pages in English and Chinese. I welled up all over again hearing my story in foreign tongues, as students not only read aloud but translated smaller parts for one another in Korean, Italian, French, and Arabic.

And so the story ends at the beginning—with a new book that I trust will be as well received by the larger community as it was by our smaller circles. In telling this tale, I often hear variations of “So, you did things completely backwards?” Yes, in a certain sense. But when it comes to garnering community support, be it for a library program or a work of art, it is the smaller connections that must be nurtured. From there, the larger circle forms, steadily, organically, and beautifully.

Xelena González is the author of *All Around Us* (Cinco Puntos Press 2017), a picture book that deftly depicts her Mestiza culture and roots on the west side of San Antonio, Texas. Before moving to China to serve as an international school librarian, Xelena conducted community outreach for the San Antonio Public Library, specializing in early literacy programs. Along the way she has led various workshops in dance, creative writing, and interdisciplinary arts. These varied experiences add to the bag of tricks she hopes to take into her new adventures as a visiting author.

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EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

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