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## New Mexico movement hopes to put banned books back on shelves

by Demetria Martinez

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Los Jardines ("The Gardens") Institute is a New Mexico sanctuary: a community garden where I volunteer in Albuquerque's South Valley dedicated to growing food for the area's poor residents. But go into our adobe studio and you'll see another kind of sanctuary as well: one for the mind and spirit. Shelves hold some of the more than 80 books that the Tucson public high school banned last year when it ended its renowned Mexican American studies program. (The books are mostly by Latino authors, but not all; Shakespeare's *The Tempest* made list, too.) Why? School officials said the program's curriculum promoted racism and division -- possibly opening minds to the idea of overthrowing the United States government.

The reaction was swift. A year ago in March, a Houston-based collective, Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say, organized the Librotraficante ("book traffickers") Caravan. It stopped in six cities, ultimately smuggling the "contraband" books back into Tucson. Traffickers called for the founding of underground libraries around the country, seeding a "literary renaissance" in the Latino community.

Indeed, for many around the country, reading has become an act of resistance. Los Jardines Institute, for one, started a banned book club. Every month, at least 15 of us, mostly Chicanos and African Americans, gather at the studio for our monthly meeting. Last month, we discussed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Next we will analyze *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, edited by Elizabeth Martinez. We'll also be reading the classic *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* by Rudy Acuna and *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* by Bill Bigelow. We're working our way through the first seven books that were boxed up and removed from Tucson classrooms after the Mexican American Studies Program was eliminated.

"It's almost spiritual nourishment when we're coming together," says Manuel Neza Leal, one of the club's organizers. "These books' authors are coming alive and the people in the room are part of a rebirth. ... People leave the room with that feeling of completeness."

Meanwhile, in Santa Fe, state legislator Antonio "Moe" Maestas (D) introduced House Memorial 95, also known as the "Banned Book Memorial." The document is a powerful argument for the value of the seven banned books. Declaring that "New Mexico is not Arizona," it calls for the House of Representatives to support any books that encourage New Mexicans to understand their cultural history "while empowering a generation of youth who are proud of their heritage and ready to contribute to the rapidly evolving American landscape." The memorial made it to the House floor, but not in time for a vote; some form of the memorial will be reintroduced in the next session.

"If you get to know your role on this earth -- who you are in relationship to everyone else -- it's very empowering," Maestas wrote in an email to *NCR*. "When a human being learns their culture, their history, their native language, it adds confidence in themselves and all of us benefit from that."

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