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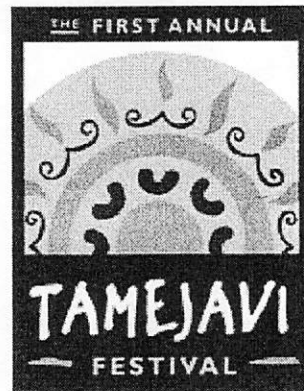
Meeting in the Marketplace: Festival Blends Art and Civic Change

This spring, just outside Fresno's famous Tower Theater, a troupe will perform a traditional Cambodian folk opera before hundreds of Central Valley residents. Back in Cambodia, community organizers stage the very same opera to draw citizens into towns to vote in elections. Despite the eight thousand miles between them, the performances share a purpose: to use cultural expression and the arts to bring people into the public square, give them a voice and involve them in civic life.


That's the idea behind the first annual "**Tamejavi Festival**," an event put on for Central Valley communities by immigrant groups from throughout the region. Tamejavi (pronounced tah meh jah vee) combines the Hmong, Spanish and Mixteco words—**Tai Laj Tshav Puam**, **Mercado** and **Nunjavi**—for a cultural harvest market.


"The marketplace—the town plaza—plays a vital role in the different cultures of the Central Valley," says Estela Galvan of the **Pan Valley Institute**, the festival's sponsoring organization. "In their home countries, the marketplace holds the fabric of community together. We want to create such a space in the Central Valley."

Over the course of the weekend of April 26 through 28, in Fresno's Tower District, immigrants from the region will celebrate their cultural traditions by presenting theater, music, dance, exhibits, food and crafts from their home countries and cultures. The Cambodian folk opera is one event. Others include a nationally-known Hmong comedian who uses storytelling and rap to bridge cultures and generations; El Teatro Inmigrante (recently founded by the co-founder of **Teatro Campesino**, "The Farmworkers Theater", Agustin Lira) performing a play about the journey of two immigrant women from Mexico to America; and the opening night feature of "The Twin Tower Songs Project," multi-lingual songs, poems and stories about immigrant experiences of September 11.



Local artists created
Tamejavi's look

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The event's organizers first got the idea for the "Tamejavi Festival" after a meeting of the **Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship**, an Irvine-funded network of immigrant civic groups in the region. They noticed that the participants, exhausted after a long day of meetings to plan their civic action efforts, suddenly became energized when they showed each other their various cultural traditions—songs, tapestries, folk tales—during an evening event.

By sharing their histories and traditions, the groups deepened connections with each other, says Erica Kohl, a consultant to the CVP and one of the organizers of the Tamejavi Festival.

"We realized that there is hardly any time for these groups to speak in their own languages or to reflect on how they express themselves in their home countries," Kohl says. "They came alive because they no longer had to use the lingo from their new world on effecting community change—phrases like 'leadership development' and 'relationship building.' They were free to share their experiences and ideas in their own voices and through their own forms of cultural expression. And we realized that when they use their own voices, they can be much more powerful in building relationships and doing joint civic work across different immigrant cultures."

It's not the typical cultural festival, nor the typical project funded by the Foundation. For one thing, it's organized by the immigrant communities themselves. For another, it's a joint project of Irvine's **Arts** and **Civic Culture** programs and in turn a unique effort to blend the fields of art and community organizing. "And nobody we've funded has ever created a new word to define themselves," says Melanie Beene, Irvine's program director for the Arts. "They've consciously crafted new language to be a container for all that they are. Because 'Tamejavi' combines three words that mean the same thing in different languages, it emphasizes both similarity and difference."



Tamejavi will feature Oaxacan dance and music traditions

Immigrants are finding new ways to work together and have a voice in civic affairs—and they're doing it by going back to their cultural roots and artistic traditions.

According to Kohl, the Tamejavi Festival is part of "a very intentional organizing strategy—

to build a network among communities that are really fighting for the same things but don't always connect because of their cultural differences." A lot of immigrant groups don't work together, she says, because they're isolated by geography, language, the lack of opportunity to meet and work together—and occasionally mistrust.

"Art can be a tremendous vehicle for cross-cultural understanding," says Beene. "Because it traffics in symbolic language, you don't have to speak the language of that culture to derive pleasure or understanding from their art."

The Central Valley Partnership has long sought to lift up immigrant voices in the region. "While it might be hard for those living in Los Angeles or the Bay Area to imagine, there are very few public spaces in the Central Valley where immigrant communities can speak out and use their own culture's forms of expression to do so," Kohl says. "This festival will give them a public stage to celebrate the contributions of immigrant communities to the region, and to raise issues that are important to those communities."

"People have a hunger to connect through art," says Craig McGarvey, Irvine's program director for Civic Culture. "What kind of art depends on what people. The new Californians have a hunger to connect with one another through their cultural traditions. And that's what they're doing through the Tamejavi Festival."

Links:

The **Central Valley Partnership** for Citizenship is a network of nonprofit agencies spread throughout California's Central Valley. The site provides links to immigration issues and resources.

New California Media is an association of more than 400 print, broadcast and online ethnic media organizations. NCM translates, digests and distributes selected reports and commentaries from ethnic and international media online.

Community Arts Network project promotes information exchange, research and critical dialogue within the field of community-based arts. The site includes the Community Arts Training Directory, APInews monthly newsletter, essays, a reading list and links.

Connecting Californians: Finding the Art of Community Change (HTML version)

A report that documents the findings of a 10-month research project that asked artists, humanities professionals, community organizers,

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