

## THE MURALS AT CUNEY HOMES

(In Third Ward)

Houston Texas, 1980–1981

Sometime in the spring of 1980, I had a visit from an African-American woman named Mrs. Newman. She had called to discuss an ongoing cultural program at the Cuney Homes Housing Projects in Houston's Third Ward. This housing project was almost a hundred percent African-American, so I was curious how I could be of any help.

We met at my home in Houston's Denver Harbor neighborhood. She proceeded to describe the already-established program aimed primarily at young residents of Cuney Homes. This included a dance program under the direction of a beautiful young woman named Mindi, a refugee from South Africa. Also, a theatrical program was directed by an accomplished playwright and drama director, Thomas Maloncon. These were the two major activities taking place at Cuney Homes, but there were also others, for example, exercise sessions for women and occasionally singing gatherings.

Ms. Newman asked whether I would paint murals with young people from Cuney Homes. The request caught me by surprise, as my thinking was that she needed assistance in formulating an art program, probably based on my mural experience. It had not occurred to me that they might want me, a Chicano, to actually direct such a project myself. The kindness shook me, as I had not received any income for a long time. Of course, I was honored at the offer and accepted immediately.

This project was truly an unusual event in Houston because the Mexican and African-American communities rarely, if ever, did anything mutually supportive.

My desperation at that point, however, was more than simply being broke. This was my wife's second year in her struggle against cancer. Because of its belated discovery, the cancer was now so far advanced that her chances for recovery were less than fifty percent. We prayed fervently for her recovery, growing more distressed as the treatments had little effect. In fact, her condition gradually worsened. With the offer at Cuney Homes, my wife's spirits were lifted and she seemed more determined to fight her illness, and I felt somehow more reassured at seeing her emerge from her depression.

My pay for the eight month project would be \$1,000 per month!! We were in heaven, so happy and gratified to our black friends for hiring me to work with their youth.

I met with the Cuney Homes' Manager and its Resident Council. The head of the Council was Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, who was blind. By that time, I had already done my preliminary drawings for an 8 foot by 12 foot mural. When I presented my drawings, their response was heartwarming. They loved the idea and accepted my mural concepts as I had designed them. One issue which intrigued them; how was it, someone asked, that "you not being black, can develop this idea that so well expresses the Black experience?" I really don't remember what my response was, but they were pleased with my design.

This is what my design looked like: at its center area, a young man is brought before a mirror, which an elderly woman holds up to him. From behind his left shoulder, a young boy reaches over and is pulling an ugly grinning stereotypical mask off his face. At this, the young man sees his own reflection in the mirror, and this image then is one of human beauty and dignity. Between the young man and the mirror is the figure of Rosa Parks who points to his reflection as if to say, "This is you, not the mask which racism had imposed on you!"

At that moment, various historical figures proudly look on as the young man discovers his inherent human dignity. These figures are Lawrence Dunbar, Paul Robeson, Mary McLeod Bethune, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali and others. Among these historical figures, I later added two persons from Cuney Homes: one is Thomas Maloncon, the playwright working with housing project youth, and a young Cuney Homes woman, whose name I cannot now recall. On either corner of the foreground, visible under the feet of young children, are two discarded figures; on the right, is a grinning Aunt Jemima doll, while on the left lies a robed KKK skeletal figure. Both these images, I explained, represent some of what Black people have faced, and still struggle against. I entitled this work "Free at Last!"

I did not submit a design for an outdoor mural at that time, but I developed a design while we worked on the one I have just described.

There were approximately seventeen youths in the group, between the ages of fourteen and eighteen years. I came to call them "my kids." We met initially to discuss our mural project, and I showed them the mural design drawings. Again, I was apprehensive that the youth would be hostile to my depiction of African-Americans without having experienced their struggle. But no, they loved the design and were eager to begin. They kept asking, "When do we start?" I explained how we needed to first build the mural panel. They were amazed at its size, but soon were busy building it.

The Cuney Homes' Manager was concerned that the youth would be using power tools. She was, however, pleasantly surprised at how well they did handling the tools, and she was equally impressed at how well done the mural panel was. She saw that the kids were excited to do the carpentry, texturing and priming the panel, and when it was done, that they were proud of their work. We finally got started drawing the imagery on the mural panel. I let them get the feel

of the charcoal sticks on the textured surface. Some kids drew very well, and I kept some of their drawings with my own corrections.

As we drew each figure, I explained their meaning or history. They were especially attentive to my description of the main and central figure, the young man brought before the mirror. When I described the removal of the ugly stereotypical mask from the young man's face, my kids were fast to relate how they had experienced something similar.

In me, I believe they saw solidarity with their struggle. They were surprised at being told of their beauty and dignity, of the incredible pain and suffering Black people had endured in the U.S. I told them in some detail about their heroes being depicted on the mural; about Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, Harriet Tubman, and all the others, especially Martin Luther King. I could sense it in the first few days of our discussions, how my kids were growing in consciousness. Knowing their history, became so important that they were always waiting for me to begin our day painting and talking. For my part, I enjoyed my work very much, and it remains one of the most fulfilling experiences in my life.

Of course, it was not always serious; we also kidded and laughed a lot. One time, a tall boy named James, with a big afro said to me, "You Mexicans haven't had it so bad, like Black people." I replied that this was true, but added, "You'd be surprised the things we've been through..." He said, "Like what?"

This started what became a series of stories and incidents of my family in our barrio. I related to my disbelieving bunch about one of my family's "outings" to pick cotton in the Texas panhandle. The farm owner, for whom we were working, announced that he would give a prize to the family who picked the most cotton each week. As if to add mystery to what the prize would be, he would not reveal it until the end of the week. Each family wanted to pick as much

cotton as possible for the actual earnings and not for some silly “premio” (prize). My father, however, who was a little naïve, gave our family a pep talk, saying that some of the other families’ member<sup>s</sup> were not there. He also pointed out how we, our family, counted six piscadores (six cotton pickers)! Our chances were very good, he said. Then he added that he had heard the reward would be \$25, which would be a real help. None of the talk of a prize impressed us younger ones, however, who could see the extra effort only meant more work. Until, that is, one of the youngsters told the rest of us kids that he had overheard “el troquero” (our trucker who hauled us to and from the cotton fields) say that the prize was a new bicycle! I was twelve at the time, and had never had, neither had any of the other kids in our camp, owned a bicycle.

All of a sudden, we younger ones were filled with motivation, and we cautioned ourselves not to divulge to the adults that we knew what the prize was. Parents were surprised, but pleased to see their young ones pick cotton with such determination without complaining. In my family, the best picker was my kid brother, who was only ten. I tried very hard to keep up with him, because he often embarrassed me by bringing in heavier sacks to be weighed. That week, however, I succeeded in picking more cotton than my little brother, but only out of sheer desperation for I really wanted that bicycle. Other kids, too, did especially well, as we all dreamed about winning the bike. After the day’s work, we would gather and talk about how we would ride the bike so fast and give each other rides. We speculated on what color it would be; I liked red, some liked blue or black. Someone said he would save and buy one of those horns, the kind you squeeze that go on the handlebars. One boy, a young teenager, said that he would give his girlfriend rides “on the handlebars!” This scandalized us younger ones, but still, we each had our happy dreams and our imaginations went wild with anticipation. We told each other that whoever won the bike would share and even lend it to the others.

That whole week, we did not mind the 100 degree heat, nor the dust, flies or any of the discomforts we were accustomed to as farm workers. We waited for Saturday, the end of our work week and everyone made last minutes efforts to pick more cotton than ever before.

Saturday finally came and we worked till 2 or 3 in the afternoon. We arrived back at the farmhouse (where we stayed during the harvest period). All of the kids hung around the farm area. "El troquero" and "el patron" were off to the side talking and tallying families' earnings, that is, the amount of cotton each family had picked.

El troquero and el patron finally called the people together to collect their earnings and also to announce which family had won the prize that week. Some people, I noticed, weren't at all curious about the prize, but only wanted to receive their week's earnings. Us kids, however, were feeling great anxiety as matters were moving so slowly. We even discreetly searched the area near el patron's house; we looked in the owner's pick-up, but couldn't see the bike. We whispered to each other that the bike was surely inside el patron's house. This reassured us and we finally relaxed, careful not to reveal that we knew where el patron was hiding the bike.

At about four that afternoon, the first name called to receive his family's wages was my father, Don Ramon. El troquero announced that Don Ramon's family had won the prize for we had picked the most cotton! My little brother and I jumped to our feet, bewildered at our good luck and, looking everywhere for the bike...except we couldn't see it anywhere.

El troquero, the kindly "patron" beaming at his side, then announced that Don Ramon's family had won a 50 pound sack of potatoes! My father's dream of the \$25 prize evaporated in that instant, as el patron went to the back of his pick-up and hauled the potato sack and, beaming at his own generosity, gave it to my father, who looked somewhat perplexed. El patron then shook my father's hand and congratulated him. My father's lower lip sometimes trembled when

he scolded my little brother and me, and when el patron was shaking his hand, I noticed my father's lip was trembling. I could feel my father wanting to get out, away from that place at that very moment. On the other hand, us kids were numb, feeling tired all of a sudden...

I told the kids at Cuney Homes this story and it was greeted with both laughter as well as exclamations of "Man, that ain't no good, shit!" and "I would-a-whipped the @!/?#!" Anyway, after other such stories, the kids at Cuney Homes had a bit more sympathy with us Mexicans.

We initiated a second mural at Cuney Homes, this one on the outside of one of the housing units. My kids and I came up with a simple design. They were worried about the doorway and porch on the lower area and a small window on the second floor of the building. After some discussion, some saying we should just paint around it, one of the boys, I think it was a youth named John Broussard, suggested that the windows be "part of the mural." With this in mind, we arrived at having two hands, with broken chains dangling from the wrists, holding the window as if to beckon the viewer to "come look, for free people live here!" We got the inspiration for that design from a play other Cuney Homes' youths were performing. It was entitled "From Africa to Third Ward."

Our painting this outdoor mural attracted a lot of attention from people who were not residents of Cuney Homes. People would stop to "aks" what we were painting and my kids were ready, even eager, to describe the meaning of our mural. Their descriptions were usually accurate, but somewhat embellished with ever new information. After these "explanations," I would re-examine the imagery we had painted thus far to see if I had missed something which I'd just heard in my kids' descriptions. They were proud to talk about "our work." When a pretty female would wander by, they would rush out to greet her and say, "You want me to tell you about our mural?" To which the girls usually agreed and afterwards, the boys felt they had

scored “points” with the beautiful girls. Our outdoor mural did not take long to complete so energized were my kids! We then returned to our indoor mural which was more secluded and less exciting. But we were all happy.

Periodically, I would use the Cuney Homes’ large van and take the kids crabbing in La Porte, once in Galveston. We would return with our buckets filled with crabs which some of the moms would cook.

On the way to La Porte, a small town near the Gulf Coast, we passed through Pasadena, a chemical and oil refining city where their well paying jobs made for a comfortable middle class community. There we stopped at a Dairy Queen for an ice cream or soda treat on that day, which, at 10:00 a.m. was sweltering with humidity and heat. To our surprise, *all* the people sitting there got up and left at seeing us enter. Seeing my kids’ faces, I knew they felt terrible and hurt, and even after we’d left, my kids were somber and confused. I decided to never take my kids to Pasadena again.

On another occasion taking another route to La Porte through Pasadena, we saw a large one level building with a huge sign across its width, which read, in black letters, “KNIGHTS OF THE KU KLUX KLAN.”

We stopped in its parking lot and had a very serious discussion about the racism and hate in white people. I, too, felt anger, and I did my best to point out their African-American beauty and human dignity. We had a conversation about their history and ongoing civil rights struggle. And when we were back in the van on our way to La Porte, I heard someone say, “I’m Black and I’m proud!” Others, too, said the same thing and, soon after, they were talking about other things and laughing like normal kids again.



One day at our indoor mural site, I received a phone call with very bad news. It concerned my wife's cancer and some negative results of medical tests she had taken. Scared and angry, I slammed down the phone and stood there unsure of what to do. Outside the little office (where I had taken the call), the kids heard me slam down the phone and, peeking in, saw the distress on my face. Soon after, we were again painting, although my worries at the moment prevented me from being very talkative. I had lost track momentarily of what we were doing, not inclined to see what my kids were painting. Sitting down to drink a pop, the youth joined me in taking a break. I was trying hard not to start crying, for the news had, indeed, <sup>been</sup> bad. And my kids, not knowing what to make of it, asked me what was the matter. In my emotional state, afraid to burst out crying should I open my mouth to talk, I gestured with my hand to wait, to allow me to collect myself. Before I could say anything, one of the boys said, "Mr. Leo, would you like us to waste somebody for you?"

Seeing me distressed and angry, they had assumed the phone call related to some insult of some evil someone had done to me. I had not realized that they were feeling my pain too, and wanted to help me anyway they could. I lectured them about what we had spoken about, non-violence, about Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. And then I explained that the phone call had been from my wife's doctor who told me her cancer was now extensive throughout her pelvic area. And that there was no hope for her recovery. The next couple of days, my kids were depressed for my wife that I had to cheer them up and tell them funny stories.

Sometimes my kids would take me to meet their moms and siblings in their little apartments. Cookies and Kool-Aid were the usual treat and I enjoyed meeting and getting to know their families. I was overwhelmed by their kindness and thoughtfulness. With the outdoor temperatures in the high 90's or 100's, the inside of the apartments, with no air conditioning,

were sweltering and stifling, almost unbearable with only a fan, usually a small fan, oscillating back and forth, cooling but a few feet in its immediate area. Yet, these families endured these conditions year after year, and emerged more human than spoiled rich people, and even middle class people with all the comforts money could buy.

One day I overheard one of the kids say, “Mexicans is short people...” “Which reminds me,” I told them, “...of a story in my family. Gather around,” I told them, “for I am going to tell you a story about a very short man...” The kids loved my stories and I felt stimulated at such an eager audience.

“Once upon a time,” I said, “my father had grown up tired of just working in the fields year after year and never having enough to support his family.” He told us one day, “I am going to the city to look for work.” My mom quickly said, “There’s no work in Corpus (Corpus Christi, Texas)!” To which my father said, “But I am not going to Corpus. I’m going to Foston (Houston)!” “Huh?” said my mother. “We don’t even have enough money for the bus! How are you going to get there, by walking?” “No,” my father said. “I am going to hop a train, tu sabes, como los trampas (you know, like the tramps do).” In shock, my mother and older sister tried to dissuade my father, but his mind was made up. He had learned, from Don Jose that hopping freight trains was real easy, “nothing to it! All you had to do,” said Don Jose, “was to find out when the trains left the train yard and climb on a freight car and stay in it till it reach Foston!...” With this information, my father planned his big move, except it had to be from another town because there were no trains that passed through our little town.

Finally, the day came and my mother made him a big lunch and put some apples from her father’s orchard in his sack. Tio Alberto, my father’s youngest brother, came in his car and loaded us all to accompany our father to the train yards in a larger town, about 20 miles from

Beeville. Our other uncle, Tio Rumaldo, also younger than my father, borrowed a car and brought his two little girls and a couple of other people also to say goodbye to my father. We finally arrived and gathered near, but not too close to the train yard. My father had been warned about train yard guards who often beat tramps with wooden clubs, often severely. The idea was to watch the departing freight trains from about a block away and when it started moving for my father to run and climb one of the freight cars.

So there was my father, with his lunch bundle and a beat-up suitcase, a sad picture of a traveling man...and a multitude of family, relatives and friends come to say goodbye. My mom was even sobbing, with my father reassuring her, saying he would write to us as soon as he got to "Fioston."

Soon the train started making noises with metal clanging, the wagons jerking and then becoming still, and then more noises, until very gradually it started moving. My father hugged and kissed all his family, shook hands with his two brothers, said goodbye to a couple of friends there also, and then started a slow, crouching run towards the moving train. We saw him glance around the yard for guards and seeing no one, started running faster towards the train. We saw him draw nearer and he seemed to choose an uncovered freight car, possibly because it would be easier to climb, since it did not have a gate or door to open.

He threw his bundle and then the suitcase on the wagon as the train began to move faster and faster. My father ran closer to the moving train and we saw him straining to reach the side handle bar on the freight car. We could not see too clearly now, but we could see he was still running trying to reach up and climb the freight car. We saw that he made these little jumps, almost falling, then start running again, now flinging his arms, doing his little jumps and then trying again. Then we saw his mighty effort to jump and reach the handle bar and go crashing to

the ground. By now, the train had gathered too much speed and my father just sat there glancing back at the fast moving train.

Our uncles ran to him thinking he had hurt himself. They found him sitting on the ground with his head buried in his hand<sup>s</sup> and he was crying. The three just sat there, my father was so embarrassed and ashamed. After what seemed a very long time, they started walking back to us with my father's head bowed, refusing to look at anyone.

We all drove back to Beeville, with my Tio Alberto trying to converse about unrelated things, trying to make our father forget what had just happened. In later years, the sadness and embarrassment wore off somewhat, but our uncles never stopped teasing my father for "missing the train" or "se le paso el tren!" Worse than that, they kidded him, "It took your lunch and suitcase!" "y se llebo tu lonche y el velis!"

**Note:** This story was told to me by my older brother, Ramon. I was too young then to remember the events that took place that day.

One day, some elderly ladies were singing Christian hymns, accompanied by someone playing the center's piano. I told my kids, "This reminds me of something."

We lived in a barrio whose name I forgot, but which I think was cantaranas or "where the frogs sing." I know it sounds like some wild place, but it was just a poor neighborhood where Mexican and African-American people lived. Across the street from us, lived a Black family whose elderly grandfather lived with them. This man would gather with other elderly Black men in his yard, under a tree and drink coffee, talk and sing Christian hymns together. My grandfather, who often lived with my family would sometimes join the elderly "Negritos" to drink coffee and try to converse with them, although he could not speak English very well. Still, he enjoyed their company and he especially liked their singing. Sometimes the elders would sing

a hymn which my “buelito” knew in Spanish. So he would say (the best he could), “I know that one in Spanish,” and would proceed to sing it. My grandfather, like all members of his family, were mostly Protestant; Presbyterian, Pentecostal and so on. Since most Blacks in our neighborhood were Protestant Baptist, I think, we knew some of the same hymns they sung at church.

Our neighbors across the street had a young son about my own age, named Leroy. Leroy and I would sit on the ground around the elders, drink coffee and sometimes join in singing the hymns which we happened to know—he in English, I in Spanish.

Thomas Malonson’s Cuney Homes’ drama youth group, and my kids painting two murals, were motivated because they felt what they were doing was very meaningful and purposeful. Once the drama youths put on a performance called “The Death of O.D. Walker.” O.D. standing for “overdose.” It told the sad story of a young man who gets addicted to, I forget what, either cocaine or heroin. But one day, he overdoses and dies.

The final score is arranged like a funeral service inside a church. It is an open coffin with O.D. Walker laying in it, in dark suit and tie and so realistically seeming dead. The church’s pastor (another actor) is solemnly speaking about O.D. Walker’s life. The audience is 98% younger people from Cuney Homes. The place (Cuney Homes Community Center) is packed and it is early evening, already getting dark. All the lights are on.

The audience is fascinated by the story, being especially attentive to the pastor’s sermon about O.D. Walker’s drug problems. Suddenly, all the lights go off, leaving the place in total darkness. Some kids scream. Then a strobe light comes on somewhere behind the coffin flashing and pulsating in rapid motion, silhouetting the figure of the dead O.D. Walker as he begins to move and get out of the coffin. Now O.D. Walker is talking as he emerges from the coffin and

stands there speaking to the audience against drugs. He is speaking as the strobe illumination gives the scene a surrealistic feeling. I don't remember his words exactly, but he was explaining the danger and consequences of drugs. All of a sudden, the strobe light stops and the lights come back on. O.D. Walker stands there smiling. That was the end of the play, as I remember it, but the youthful audience remained seated as the actors and Thomas Malonson hold a question and answer session with the amazed youngsters sitting there.

Such were the kind of activities going on at Cuney Homes. Now my kids were getting a small stipend from the Mayor's Summer Youth Program. I tried to caution them against spending their little paychecks unwisely. On two occasions, I went shopping with them in downtown Houston, at 5 and 10 cent stores like Woolworths. On one of those occasions, I took one of my kids, who must have been 13 or 14, shopping downtown. He brought his little brother and another very young friend. Walking around, my kids said, "Let's ride elevators in the tall buildings!" The others and even I, quickly agreed. After one or two rides in different buildings, we got on another elevator and soon after, on the next floor up, a beautiful young white woman got on the elevator with us. She had brown hair, a great smile and was simply beautiful. She must have been about 20-23 years old. The kids started acting funny, trying not to let her see them looking at her, even giggling. To my surprise, and with the loveliest smile, she said, "Hi, how are you all?" My kids were shy, but said something like "fine" or "good." She seemed totally comfortable with her beauty, not one bit shy. When she got off at the next floor, she said "bye." My kids held the door open to look at her as she walked away. She turned her head and blew a kiss at us, and waved bye-bye, with her dazzling smile. They each were saying, "She blew me the kiss!" Another said, "She likes me." I, for one, remembered our sad experience in

Pasadena, the Dairy Queen incident and the large sign of the Ku Klux Klan and I was glad for the young lady being decent.

I must say that my kids had not been chosen for their artistic abilities, but simply by applying to the summer youth program. Yet, they all enjoyed painting or drawing and some turned out to be good artists. I took some of them to the Texas Southern University Art Department across the street from Cuney Homes to see the mural paintings there, done over the years by art students.

During the project's final weeks, my wife became very ill, and I missed some days at the mural's conclusion. The whole project had stimulated my wife also. In one of her hospital visits at the Texas Medical center, not far from Cuney Homes, I took my wife to see our murals there.

The indoor mural we entitled "Free at Last," and the outdoor mural we called "We Must Never Forget." I am proud to have painted with the youth at Cuney Homes, 1981–1982.

I was happy being able to share with my Cuney Homes' youth, my community's culture, as well as stories of my family and other funny incidents. What pleased me most is that they were *interested* in knowing and learning about "us Mexicans." I also learned much from those youths and it enriched my life from working with and getting to know them.

At the beginning of the mural project, I met with two staff members at Houston Housing Authority, which was one of our project sponsors. The two staff members were an Anglo man and a Hispanic. The two proceeded to ridicule our mural project which was about to start. It turned into a sad confrontation as the two, but especially the Hispanic, used the worst racist terms to describe our project, saying it was a waste of time. Day by day, over the 8 months our project lasted, the kindness, interest and respect, which the youth and residents of Cuney Homes

showed me, made my very grateful and happy, and I wondered how much better it would be if our two communities shared a greater solidarity, what we could do together.