The Colorado Health Foundation™



From the Heart of Grand Valley

Clifton Community Leaders and La Plaza

When communities harness their own power, lasting change is possible. There are countless instances of Coloradans coming together to implement solutions that break down barriers to health and well-being. On the Western Slope, Clifton Community Leaders (CCL) and La Plaza have both used their power to create spaces that cultivate belonging for their communities.

Having a sense of belonging is fundamental to our physical and mental health. One way we build a sense of belonging is by having places to gather and form relationships with the people who live, work and play around us. Recognizing this need in their own communities, both CCL and La Plaza took action.

Spearheaded by community leader Jose Luis Chávez, CCL organized Clifton community members of all ages to advocate for the construction of a park—an amenity neighbors in Clifton had long dreamt of having in their community. The Colorado Health Foundation was alongside CCL for four years as they overcame numerous barriers, including conflicts with decision-makers. Their tenacity and determination paid off, and in 2023, Rocky Mountain Elementary Park opened.

They see the catalyzing community “win” of Rocky Mountain Elementary Park as re-writing the course of history in Clifton on how decision-making, power-building and transformation can (and must) focus community in every decision that impacts them.



Sean Dollard, program officer, joins the team of Clifton Community Leaders at the Rocky Mountain Elementary Park Celebration, Sept. 2023

I was fortunate to attend the park's dedication late last summer. It was one of the most beautiful moments I've ever experienced. One of the lead CCL organizers, Andres Sanchez, who had recently overcome a significant heart attack, was there with his daughter Heidi, a CCL youth organizer instrumental in advocating for the park. Andres and Heidi stood arm in arm as the sun set over the towering Grand Mesa, gazing out over the park – **their park space** – a transformed place to gather now and generations into the future.

In the Heart of Palisade, CO, five miles east from Rocky Mountain Elementary Park is La Plaza, a space that has long been woven into the fabric of the community but has been reimagined by executive director Nelly Garcia Olmos. Nelly and her star team of Latina leaders, Amanda Perez Herrera, Iriana Medina Leo and Geri Manzanares, fundamentally believe that bolstering the voice, power and self-determination of migrant farmworkers and all immigrants on the Western

Slope can rewrite the conditions of injustice in the region, all while remaining rooted in culture and belonging.

La Plaza itself is welcoming in every regard; the space's artwork explodes with colors dancing across every wall and rooms echo with laughter. La Plaza has

become Mesa County's most recognized, safe and celebratory hub for new immigrants and migrant farmworkers to Palisade. During my last visit, Nelly and her team shared their pride in the space they have galvanized around. With tears braided in joy and pride, they recounted how a community of newly arrived migrant farmworkers for the season came together for a celebratory meal at La Plaza. The bonds formed that night were so strong that several guests stayed into the evening to watch a movie and share meaningful space.

This story signaled for me that La Plaza, in the heart of Palisade, Colorado, is home. It is joy. It is opportunity.



Staff from La Plaza join members of the CHF staff for a meal

The stories of Clifton Community Leaders and La Plaza are testaments to what can be achieved when communities act upon their own resonant self-determination. The movement that materialized Rocky Mountain Elementary Park and the comprehensive, racial justice-centered re-imagining of La Plaza highlight the profound impact of having spaces rooted in a sense of belonging and connection. These community-driven efforts not only provide physical spaces for gathering but also nurture the culturally-rooted bonds that are foundational to well-being and communities that can thrive.

This underscores that by deeply investing in our communities, supporting each other, and working collaboratively, we can spur the conditions for more equitable and just communities everywhere.

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