

The Art of Advocating for Community

Two days before her graduation from the University of the Incarnate Word, Alejandra Escobar had a decision to make. Escobar '18 BA had been offered a six-week internship with the Incarnate Word Foundation in St. Louis, Mo., to work with the city's underserved Hispanic population.

"And they wanted an answer quickly," she said. While she prepared to cross the stage, Escobar knew it was an opportunity she had to take. "I really wanted to do something close to my heart during this time when [some people are] feeling prejudice against Hispanic people."

Two years working with the Eitling Center for Civic Leadership & Sustainability (ECCLS) and a social justice class helped prepare her to make the leap. Also, the foundation is a ministry of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word and had previously welcomed student interns from Incarnate Word campuses in Mexico. Escobar would be the first from UIW, thanks to efforts from Dr. Ricardo Gonzalez, ECCLS director, and Sr. Kathleen Coughlin, senior advisor to the president for leadership gifts and sponsored ministries.

In short order, she was working in St. Louis, meeting local leaders, school administrators and advocates, and participating in community engagement. She saw firsthand how many people

cared about social justice. Escobar said she was glad to be working with an organization trying to reconstruct the city's social dynamics and provide services to the relatively small Latino population, some of whom say they struggle to find a place in the city. "It's inspiring to see how they overcome that on a day-to-day basis," she said.

By working with leaders, researching community needs and listening, Escobar and the intern team devised a collaboration between the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (CAM) and the St. Francis Community



Alejandra Escobar



Services Southside Center, which provides summer camps for children ages 8 to 14. The interns assisted at the center for two weeks providing care and conducting daily reflections.

"We as a team came up with a plan to have children take a guided tour and have people from the museum go to their center to create a mural with them," she said.

The plan bridged a gap between the museum and the local Latino population and offered more art exposure for the young participants. Museum employees sketched a mural and divided the artwork into four parts. Children painted a section of the mural and put those pieces together to create the final image of a tree rooted in the earth, with people standing side by side under its branches. "To see the final product was exciting," she said. "Seeing that joy on their faces meant everything."

Left: Escobar at CAM in St. Louis. Center: The children's mural.



ABOUT THE INCARNATE WORD FOUNDATION

A HISTORY OF SERVICE

A ministry of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, the Incarnate Word Foundation has served the people of St. Louis for more than 20 years. In 1997, after the closure of the Incarnate Word Hospital, the foundation formed to continue the mission of the Sisters who had been working in the city since the 1890s.

CRITICAL IMPACT

Today, the foundation's work focuses on addressing community issues, root causes of poverty, education and employment disparities, among other issues.

SOLUTIONS FOR TOMORROW

It also empowers innovative projects through collaborative grants. Grantees address food insecurity, raise awareness of human trafficking and educate public school personnel about racial equity and implicit bias. Visit incarnatewordstl.org or follow @IWFSTL for more information.