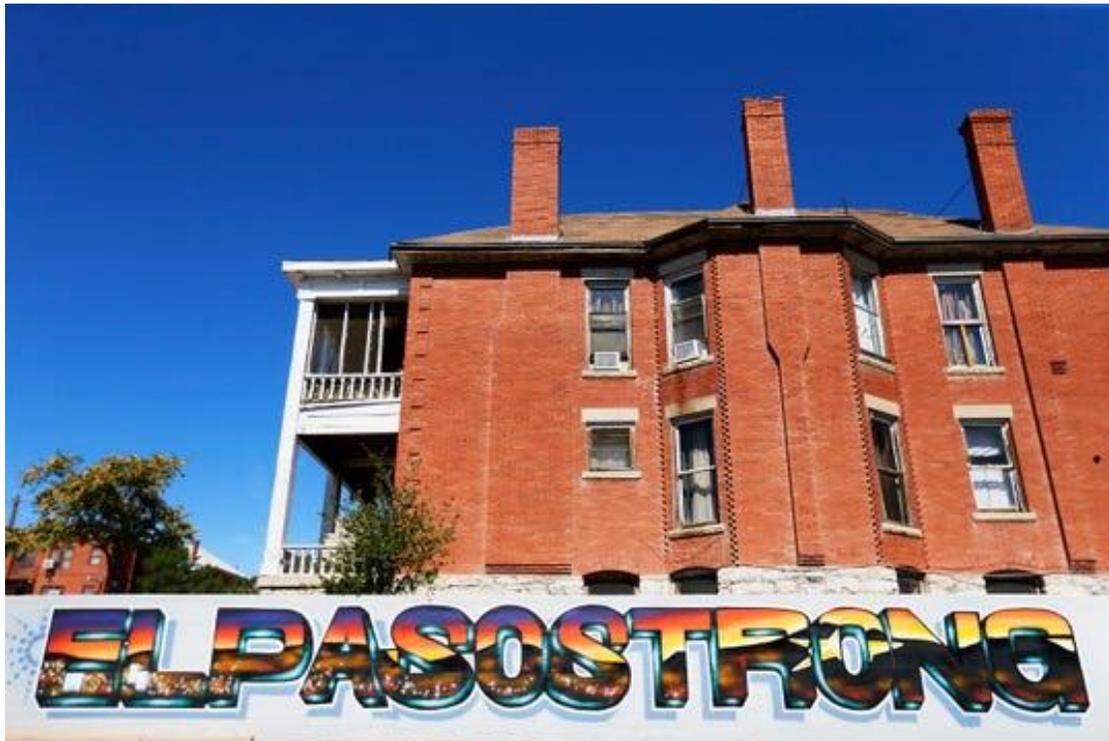


OPINION

El Paso response to mass-shooting shows power of arts in helping a community heal

Renard Johnson, Guest columnist

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Cadence mortgage company had an "El Paso Strong" mural created by local artist Gabe Vasquez. It is shown on Monday, Aug. 26, 2019, in the company's parking lot at 211 W. Yandell Drive. (Photo: BRIANA SANCHEZ/EL PASO TIMES)

In the wake of the horror and pain of last month's shooting, our community has come together to heal as one. From a deeply moving memorial at Walmart in honor of those so tragically lost, to the El Paso Strong murals and signs strewn all across our city, we haven't had to endure this pain alone. We've had each other, and by and large, we've expressed our emotions through art: photographs, drawings, poems, music and crosses created in honor of loved ones.

These works serve not only in loving memory of the victims; they offer a path towards healing. Their beauty provides a sense of calm and hope during the dark aftermath of this tragedy. Their creation provides an outlet for those of us grappling with grief. Walking through the memorial a couple of weeks ago, I found myself overwhelmed by sadness but also calmness and gratitude. The arts have always breathed life into our community and culture; now more than ever, they've come to symbolize the strength, warmth, and resilience of El Paso.

I'd never before considered the power of the arts in healing, but it is everywhere. According to findings in the Texas Cultural Trust's State of the Arts report, the use of the arts and creative arts therapy in hospital settings helps reduce patients' level of anxiety, pain, and length of stay. It improves the overall environment for both patients and caregivers, and helps them address emotional challenges by providing a safe outlet for releasing stress. The Texas Cultural Trust published these findings in their 2019 State of the Arts Report. Take a walk through the El Paso Children's Hospital's hallways, walkways, courtyard and botanical gardens, and you'll find it's filled with art — all kinds of creative sights, sounds, and designs intended to help patients and their families take their mind off of difficult times.

But providing a community with works of art and access to the arts takes resources and funding, and there's a whole economic component that most people don't see when we talk about the arts. In the case of the hospital, the El Paso Children's Hospital Foundation raised funds to procure the artwork for their facilities. In the case of other arts initiatives like Chalk the Block — where artists from all over the region come to Downtown El Paso to chalk and draw beautiful murals along the sidewalk and wall — the city invested in providing artists with a canvas of the entire Downtown area. And nonprofit organizations like Creative Kids Inc. have made it their mission to empower our youth by bringing the arts to communities that don't traditionally enjoy access to them. Support from the government, endowments, and private donors are critical to the success of these kinds of programs.

We have to keep going. Imagine the impact if we pushed even further to make the arts more accessible to all, starting with an increase in arts education in children's schools and an increase in funding and investment of community arts programs. Research from the Texas Cultural Trust's State of the Arts Report shows that children perform better in school when they're exposed to arts-related curricula early on: that drawing of a butterfly a child works on in art class may help them process their emotions, observe the world in more detail, and feel a sense of pride from having created something beautiful.

We may not know where someone's creative journey may take them, but we have to empower each other to find our path. Doing so will not only contribute to the wellness of each of us, but to the health and emotional well-being of our community as a whole.

Renard Johnson is the founder of METI Inc. and a Texas Cultural Trust board member.

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