

# *Many Voices - One Community*

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## Reviews of Some ODEI Programs

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# Reviews of Some ODEI Programs

Danny Alexander

## **Abstract**

Danny Alexander reviews the accomplishments of the ODEI's programs on the campus of Johnson County Community College.

# REVIEWS OF SOME ODEI PROGRAMS

BY Danny Alexander

## WATSON PARK'S BEAUTIFUL MUSIC LESSON

Northern Style drum group Watson Park's performance Nov. 6 in Craig Community Auditorium was a remarkable learning experience for me. Growing up in Oklahoma (which I learned is Southern style), I'm familiar with pow wows. But it's one thing to go to a pow wow, and it's another to learn the kinds of things we learned at that performance.

When he wasn't drumming and singing, Ken Eastman, a tribal elder from the Crow Nation of Montana, acted as host for the evening's activities. He explained the meaning and function of each dance – the grass dancers making a place for travelers to camp for the night, the jingle dancers with the healing chimes on their clothes, the fancy shawl dancers imitating the beauty of butterflies and reminding us of our connection to nature. He talked about the athleticism involved in all of these dances, especially the chicken dance, which moved through three different rhythms and demanded a great deal of stamina. Mr. Eastman's wife, too, (I don't believe she mentioned her name, but they'd been together 42 years) offered a great deal of insight into the family work that went into creating the beautiful clothing each dancer wore.

Some of you might know I've written freelance music journalism for as long as I've taught English, and I found myself thinking about the often narrow-minded thinking about music that my favorite musicians and music writers try to fight. Everything about Watson Park's performances demanded critical thinking about one's assumptions about the role of music and dance in all cultures – from the way the music defied Western chordal structures, instead focusing on much more delicate ideas like tone and timbre, and the way the singers felt comfortable throwing a playful, English language c'mon into a song that celebrated the community as a whole and the evening we were spending together.

In mainstream music writing, we often refer to the improvisational impulse as a "jazz impulse," which comes from Ralph Ellison, as a term, but actually ties modern American music back to its West African roots. Watson Park's music also clearly has a similar impulse as

well as a great deal of craftsmanship and planning, all woven together into a seamless effect that leaves the listener uncertain whether those five hard bangs on the drum were part of a planned refrain or whether it was a momentary vamp. The music would very often seem spontaneous and unplanned but very intensely coordinated, and then, suddenly, everyone would drop in volume at the same time, or step back to make way for a solo riff, so either things were much more orchestrated than the casual listener might guess or something otherworldly was going on. But that's great music in a nutshell; it seems to exist at some point between the intellect, intuition and pure physicality.

One thing I did notice was the way the younger dancers and players tended to watch the older ones, waiting for them to lead the way in a new movement. And the multigenerational aspect of the evening was particularly moving and meaningful – the Watson Park troop ranged in age from, I would guess, 16 months to 60, men and women and boys and girls all sharing responsibilities to make the evening come off. At one point, the littlest one got a little tired and cranky and was taken out of the room, and two of the other younger dancers went out in the hall to help out. But my favorite memory of all may be the two jingle dancers, girls about 9 and 14, leaning against the wall and singing along with the men as they sang in their circle, just like girls singing along with the radio. It said something about how vital music is to all of us, how it connects us across all manner of cultural barriers, generational as much as anything else.

Then, of course, there was the moment when Carmaletta Williams and her daughter, Jacine (along with everyone else in the audience potentially), were invited down to the stage to join in the final, community-celebrating round dance. They both did a very nice job. It was a beautiful moment for the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Thank you, Sean Daley, for making this happen, and thanks to Carmaletta for supporting it. It meant more to me than I have managed to say here.

## ANTONIO'S GUN AND DELFINO'S DREAM DISCUSSION

We had a good discussion and way too many burritos Oct. 3 afternoon as we talked about Sam Quinones' book *Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream*. We talked a little about every major aspect of the book, starting with the two ideas in the title. Antonio is a character who crosses the border to get a tool he needs to solve a dispute back home; once he has it, he comes home. Delfino is a character that continuously inspires the people in his hometown of Xocotla with his punk stylings, his break dancing and, eventually, his homebuilding skills. But he can't find the challenge for his talents in Mexico, so he keeps returning to the States despite his desire to return home. In both cases, Quinones shows how the migration of Latin Americans to North America has little to do with wanting to be "Americans" and a great deal to do with the limits of the economy back home. If anything, the country that is losing out is Mexico because the best and brightest of its poor and working classes flee the lack of opportunity at home.

One of our participants, from Puebla, Mexico, talked about the other side of the story that is hinted at by the book. How people like Mitt Romney came down to Mexico and made their fortunes before returning to the States, or how the maquiladoras have been undermined by trade with China, so what economic opportunity there once was for the lower classes has been lost to the globalized economy.

One participant talked about how she was impressed by the industry that went into the black velvet painting industry described in "Doyle and Chuy Wrap Juarez in Velvet," and many of us testified to how the black velvet craze of the 1970s affected our hometowns and we only learned the real story by reading it in this book. That chapter, like the chapter about an opera house that sprang up in Tijuana, of all places, underscored the way people will create the culture they really need out of what's available to them. Tijuana developed

a relatively serious classical music scene, and Juarez managed to raise up a number of very talented artists who gained their initial training in the art of black velvet painting.

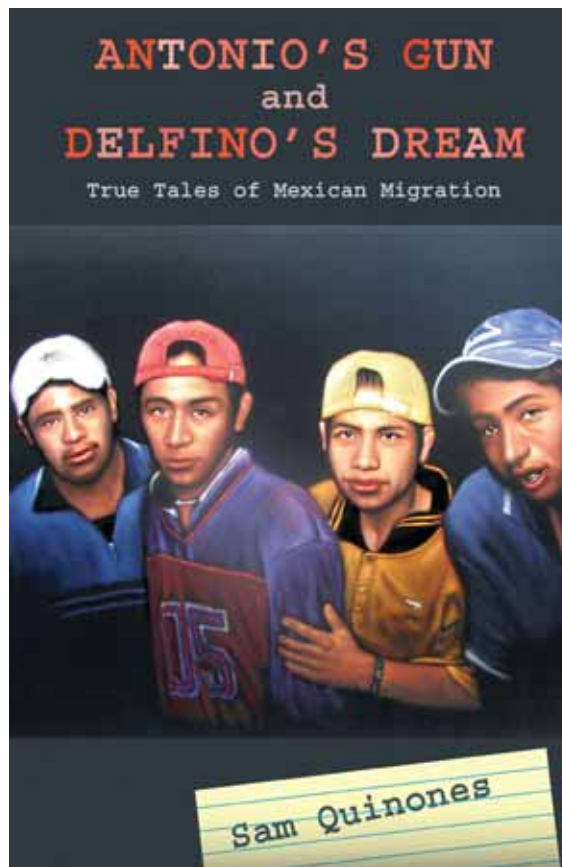
Another chapter that was a favorite for discussion was "The Saga of South Gate," which showed just how dirty politics could get when a Mexican-American politician exploited PRI tactics, but we also noticed the similarities to our own current electoral system. The inspiring part of that story, as with each of these stories on some level, was the way people found their way to overturn the corrupt political system that ruled their lives. How did they do it? House-by-house discussions, taking the time and offering people the respect of deeply-involved political discussions, something all but missing in our dominant culture.

The book was initially picked because of *A Soccer Season in Kansas*, which described how Garden City, Kan., came to rally around its almost all Latino team, made up of workers from the IBP plant (owned by Tyson foods). In what we tend to think of as the most reactionary section of the state, white and brown had some rough transition, but found a way to come together for the sake of their team and their community. Also, out of the team success, several players wound up being the first in their family to go to college, and even

some of the soccer players' mothers went back to college to encourage their children. Also, a women's soccer league formed after the inspiration of the male team, and they would come to be the champions of future seasons.

What we all agreed was that these warts-and-all stories of an America in transition offered a vision of a new America being born. And it's a hopeful vision. It asks us to reckon with some tough questions regarding the new globalized economy, but it suggests people can rise to the occasion, time and time again, if we have a little faith in our potential.

Thank you, everyone, for making such a rich and thought-provoking discussion come to life.



## A GREAT WEEK FOR DIVERSITY

Sept. 25 was an incredible day for diversity events at JCCC. It started with a showing of the film *Audism: Unveiled* in CC 211. It's a wonderful, funny, touching and politically challenging film. Hosted by Shawn Brodbeck, a stimulating question-and-answer session followed. Even after the powerful documentary *History Through Deaf Eyes*, which showed Sept. 23, and the discussion of the book *Deaf Like Me*, led by Kim Krebs on Sept. 24, I learned so much more during this session that I began to realize just how far I was from truly grasping my ignorance of Deaf issues and the diversity of Deaf culture. Thank you for everyone involved in all of these activities.

For more, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRu0t-f30VU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRu0t-f30VU)

At 2 p.m., Allison Smith hosted a showing of *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo* in the Hudson Auditorium. Her talk and the half of the film I was able to see (before I was pulled away to a meeting) offered a much richer, more textured and intellectually complex portrait of Kahlo's personal life, philosophy and politics than I've seen in other works about her. It was also a terrific primer on the development of both Mexican muralism – from nationalism to socialism – and what Ralph Ellison would call the blues impulse in Kahlo's work.

Then, at 7 p.m., the call of Kahlo's work was echoed and answered in that same space by a diverse explosion of poetic voices in the form of Kansas City's own Latino Writers Collective. ODEI director Carmaletta Williams welcomed

the group, and writer and artist Jose (Joe) Faus hosted the event. Several writers from the group's first poetry anthology, *Primera Pagina*, including Faus, Gabriela Lemmons, Gloria Martinez Adams, and Xanath Caraza read poems in Spanish and English and Spanglish about everything from the Day of the Dead to frying buneolos in Kansas to the vitality of the Latin American political struggle despite its dilution in American popular culture. JCCC students Carlos Duarte and Miguel Morales spoke of personal relationships that resonated with political significance. And Sofiana Olivera read a short story about being a student advanced for her English skills and rejected for the same reason. That fireworks display of distinctly beautiful and musical voices defined diversity in its own right and inspired a fantastic question-and-answer session that lasted until almost 9 p.m. I had several comments and questions in my head at the beginning of the session, but the students and other attendees said all of it, leaving me happy to simply applaud and, as one guest said, "eager to go home and write." Special thanks to Toby Klinger for bringing her students, who impressed all of us as a dream class, eager and engaged and perceptive.

And thank you to Susan McGarvey and Kay Rozell for a day of very hard work. And Carmaletta, of course, and everyone mentioned above, including the 125 or so people who attended the events.

I gained more than I can even begin to explain here.





## HISPANIC EXPERIENCE AT JCCC

Sept. 9's panel, *The Hispanic Experience at JCCC* was a tremendous success on many levels. First, the panelists – counselor Gloria Rosso, student Carolina Deardorff, library aide Miguel Morales, and the leader of the newly formed Latino club LUNA, Will Suarez – gave thoughtful, engaging and informative testimonials regarding their experiences before they came to the college and at Johnson County Community College. Assistant Professor Steve Werkmeister, who moderated the program, also joined in on each question posed to the panel with his own experiences as the product of both Mexican-American and German-American family backgrounds.

Topics discussed included the feeling of being caught between cultures, some panelists feeling that they were always “the other” or “not one of us” in any cultural setting. Panelists also addressed many points of conflict and misperception between the Latin American community and the predominant Anglo community in Johnson County. Some of these included concepts of time and the value of family and personal relationships, personal space, perceptions of race, ways of showing affection and the value

of blue collar labor versus academia.

Many audience members participated in the generally lively discussion, and several suggestions were raised for ways this campus might be made more welcoming to its Latin American population. Much of this revolved around more frequent events where students, staff and faculty can gather to celebrate and validate the experiences of students from various cultures in our community. The panelists also stressed the value of community outreach, involving families and community organizations in activities (such as this one) on our campus. This vision of outreach to community and family also extended to ideas discussed regarding how we might increase the enrollment of Latin Americans as students and recruitment of Latin Americans to serve in staff and faculty positions on campus.

All in all, it was a thought-provoking and moving event. Many people attended, and the discussion continued well past the two hours set aside for it. Thank you to all of the panelists and attendees for making this first ODEI event of the fall semester an unforgettable experience.