

# Storytelling & Advocacy with Oakland's Maya Community

During a recent bright afternoon in the courtyard of the Cesar Chávez Public Library in Oakland, Voice of Witness gathered with our community partners, East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (EBSC) and their Voces Maya team, for a brainstorming session. Our small group went back and forth discussing the structure for our workshop session at the upcoming Maya Cultural Festival, hosted by City College of San Francisco. "Before we talk about Voces Maya and the work we do, we want to show people why," said community partner Esmeralda Mendoza—"why we are preserving our cultures and traditions."

This same goal has been central to VOW's storytelling collaborations developed over the last year with EBSC, Voces Maya, and the storytelling coalition Amplifying Sanctuary Voices. VOW has worked closely with EBSC since 2018, initially connecting through the publication of *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America*. EBSC, a legal and social services nonprofit that has served immigrant communities in the Bay Area for over forty years, has become a vital partner for VOW in developing programming that utilizes the power of storytelling and narrative for advocacy and political action. VOW has worked with EBSC to co-host events highlighting immigrant voices and led workshops for community members on sharing their personal stories for demonstrations and campaigns demanding immigration policy reform.



Voces Maya is an outreach group within EBSC dedicated to sharing resources with Mam and Latinx people in the East Bay. Oakland is home to one of the largest Mam-speaking communities in the United States; Voces Maya estimates there are almost 15,000 speakers of Mam, an Indigenous Mayan language from Guatemala, in the city. The Voces Maya trilingual team attends community events like the La Pulga Flea Market to provide information to the local community about workers' rights, COVID-19 safety, preventing hate crimes, and "Know Your Rights" protocols for encounters with ICE. They also produce Radio B'alam, an award-winning weekly Facebook radio program broadcast in Spanish and Mam.



Photo Credit: East Bay Sanctuary Covenant

Earlier this year, VOW began working with the Voces Maya team to build their oral history skills. Our intimate workshops have focused on developing a trauma-informed, supportive space for participants to share experiences. What truly makes a story? How do you share who you are and what's important to you? For a community that has rarely received the mic from mainstream media, Voces Maya team members have explored how rich, resonant stories can emerge from "simple" prompts, such as telling the story of one's name. By encouraging participants to share at the pace (and in the language) that feels most comfortable to them, we're collectively building spaces for community healing, connection, and advocacy. In line with a mutual emphasis on growing support and solidarity across multiple organizations, our storytelling workshops have also included collaborations with Berkeley Repertory Theatre and City College of San Francisco.

"Storytelling in safe spaces helps participants to connect with their voice and know that their perspective, culture, identity, and dreams matter," says Lisa Hoffman, EBSC's director of development and communications. "The Voces Maya team is bringing healing and hope to their community by embodying their own stories and encouraging others to do the same."

VOW is excited to continue working with the Voces Maya team in the coming months, including moderating the group's workshop at the Maya Cultural Festival in San Francisco. Our partnership with Voces Maya is just one example of the new connections and mutual learnings that continue to emerge from our long-term relationships with community organizations like EBSC.