



Research Impacts Project

Documenting, Evaluating, and Valuing Impactful Research

The Rarámuri Dressmakers of Chihuahua City

The Rarámuris are a group of indigenous people from what is now known as the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Originally inhabitants of the deserts of Chihuahua, the Rarámuris sought refuge in the Sierra Madre mountains as they fled Spanish colonizers in the early 1500s. For millennia they made their lives in the mountains, relying on subsistence farming. However, starting in the 1970s climate change induced droughts and drug trafficking have forced many from their homes. Some have come to live in government-funded compounds, including Oasis, home to 500 Rarámuris. While these compounds provide a modest level of safety and security, they also present challenges to maintaining and preserving cultural identity and avoiding assimilation. Rarámuri women have used dress making and the trading of dresses as a way to discourage assimilation into mainstream Mexican society.

It is the story and politics of the Rarámuri dressmakers that Nicole Antebi, Assistant Professor of Illustration and Design, and her collaborators hope to share through a documentary project with the dressmakers of Oasis. Antebi, as well as nonfiction writer Victoria Blanco (who had worked with the dressmakers for many years) and documentary filmmaker Irene Baqué, were awarded funding in 2021 through the Digital Borderlands program to support the project. The team would work in collaboration and under the direction of Amalia Holguin, a Rarámuri dressmaker, nurse, and community leader in Oasis.

In July 2021, the project team traveled to Oasis and spent a week in the community. With a focus on building trust and better understanding the objectives and goals of the community, Antebi and her colleagues spent time in the dressmaking workshops and went through a formal process of asking for permission to engage the community and determine the process of engagement with the four women governors of the community. While some members of the project team conducted interviews with community members, Antebi started to work with the youth of the community to create a short stop animation film about the major differences between life in the Sierras and that of Chihuahua City. Through the process of knowledge sharing, skills building, and conversation, relationships were formed that would serve as the critical backbone of the collaboration.

In November of 2021 members of the project team returned to Oasis to meet with the governors and make critical decisions about what would and would not be included in the film and how funding would be distributed in the community. The project team and

community members were all aware of the damage that could be done by distributing money in uneven ways or ways that are not in line with the cultural traditions and beliefs of the community. Recognizing this, all agreed that it was important to distribute the funding in a way that not only values the time and expertise of community members, but that also reflects the ethos of the shared economy and Korima, a form of giving when you have an abundance, that Raramuri culture is built. While many decisions are yet to be made about the final allocation of funding, it is clear that this process will be guided by the community.

While this project is not yet complete, it tells us much about the challenges and opportunities associated with doing collaborative and impactful work across borders and cultures. For example, researchers and funders increasingly recognize the importance of providing financial compensation to project participants as a way of recognizing and valuing their time and expertise. However, in this context, the project team faced logistical barriers as the practices of the Rarámuri did not align with the expectations of the university. Very few people in Oasis have bank accounts and some do not know how to write, so university expectations of being able to electronically transfer funds or to obtain signed receipts were not feasible. At the same time, frameworks of individual-level compensation do not make sense, and are potentially harmful, when imposed on a community that operates on a shared economy. Through patience, persistence, and lots of listening, Antebi and her collaborators have been able to navigate these challenges. This case points to importance of thinking through how our institutional systems and policies can be modified to better support and enable work that is both impactful and culturally responsive and affirming.

The Research Impacts Project, funded by the Provost's Investment Fund, aims to help UArizona researchers, administrators, and leaders collect, document, and communicate the societal impacts of their research to community partners, funders, and others interested in the work we do.



Societal Impact