The Heart of Creativity
The Home of Success
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2019 marked 85 years of service for New York City’s first and oldest Latino charity, Casita Maria! In advance of this milestone, during 2018 and 2019, our staff, board and stakeholders came together to develop Casita Maria’s five-year plan—a plan that allows us to work with young people, families and the community in a brand new way, and commits us to our future, while honoring our past. We hope that you—our Casita Maria community of friends and supporters—reflect on our legacy and feel the enormous pride and enthusiasm that we experience as we continue to be in service to children, youth, and families every day. This is an exciting time to be a part of Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education.

We know that youth and families make us the creative powerhouse we are and so we have worked hard to integrate the Creative Youth Development (CYD) framework into our programming, and it is now the central tenet of all we do. Every member of our professional staff is trained in the CYD method as a new, holistic way of working with over 1000 children and youth. The approach engages young artists and scholars and values their opinions and contributions. At Casita Maria, young people have a say in what they want to do, and we are meeting them where their own interests lie. It has been extraordinary to watch our young people grow and stretch into the space we provide for them; and it is an honor to do this in partnership with families and caring adults.

The use of this new methodology for achieving our mission is but only one of our accomplishments in 2018-2019. For the first time, Casita Maria’s work was published in Afterschool Matters, a peer-reviewed journal that highlighted our new teaching methods. The article, written in 2019, appeared in the 2020 spring issue. With this first venture into research and evaluation, we will ensure that in the coming years, Casita Maria is able to inform the fields of afterschool education and youth creativity and provide best practices based on our research, data, and results.

Amid these new approaches, we have enhanced our creative arts programs, engaging local partners in community arts projects, and creating a love of the arts in young people, parents, and the communities we serve. Casita Maria’s gallery installations, the South Bronx Culture Trail Festival and the CelebrARTE theater performances reach over 40,000 community residents, all in celebration of the culture, people and artistic expressions that contribute to a proud and vibrant Bronx community.

Casita Maria is thriving! Read on to learn about the successes we are having thanks to you and our supporters. Meet Casita Maria: The Heart of Creativity and the Home of Success.
Our Strategy

MISSION

Casita Maria creates a safe and welcoming community, enriching and uplifting youth and families toward success through shared cultural, art, and educational experiences and programs.

VISION

A dynamic and thriving community, celebrating arts & culture as integral to its vitality and success.

COMMITTING TO OUR FUTURE, HONORING OUR PAST

Can you imagine a future full of color and light? Music drifting in the air, dancing in the streets, and stunning murals on every wall? Casita Maria works every day to instill art and passion into every building, every street, and every child in the South Bronx. And we’re succeeding! We’re putting musicians on many corners, and murals on many blocks. The South Bronx is a vibrant and passionate community, and we’re bringing it to the forefront so the whole world can see it for themselves!

Over the past two years, Casita Maria took a big step forward and established a five-year plan. We spent months researching best practices, and we interviewed stakeholders across the board, including staff, parents, visiting and teaching artists, board members, and the kids themselves. We wanted to be sure that Casita Maria was headed in the best direction for the South Bronx community while staying true to the vision laid out by our founders in 1934.

As a result of our work on the five-year plan, we established six core strategies and six strategic goals to guide our work, policies, and programming in the coming years. Our new tagline emphasizes the work we do to meet children at the intersection of art and education.

CASITA MARIA:
The heart of creativity. The home of success.
ESPECT & LOVE RISE ABOUT
Our Core Strategies

1. We invest in arts and educational programming because we believe that the overall community is improved by young people who are happy, whole, and creative.

2. We build relationships with parents, caregivers, and others in the community ecosystem in order to better understand and meet the needs of the young people we serve and hope to serve.

3. We use a creative youth development approach as a foundation for all our work.

4. Our programming prepares young people for college and career readiness, and encourages positive youth development and engagement.

5. We are committed to supporting and building on the legacy of arts and culture that have always been a source of resilience, pride, and unity in our community.

6. We promote organizational values and practices that foster work-life balance and professional development in support of a workforce that positively and enthusiastically delivers on Casita Maria’s mission.
Our Strategic Goals

**BUILD**
recognition of Casita Maria as a historical organization, leveraging its assets and resources to prepare for growth and innovation in advance of its centennial.

**ADVANCE**
Casita Maria’s organizational infrastructure, support base, and professional workforce to ensure the stability and capacity necessary to accomplish our goals.

**SUPPORT**
the recruitment, development, and engagement of a growing and diverse board of directors who are passionate about Casita Maria’s mission, and committed to furthering our goals.

**ENRICH, DEEPEN, AND EXPAND**
culturally relevant programming and practices that promote mastery and build leadership among young people, families, and the community.

**ESTABLISH**
Casita Maria as a leader in arts and education, advancing and championing a proven model that builds educational and life skills, and increases career and college attainment for all youth.

**INVEST**
in the development of and access to new and emerging technologies, special initiatives, and opportunities for youth and families through strong partnerships that support 21st Century innovation and collaboration.
Our Values

**COLLABORATION**

“While I was in summer camp, it was my first time with Casita this year. You know, my mom is a single mother, so if they did not have Casita while the summer was going I do not know what would have happened. Because my mom is a hard worker...I do not know what I’d do or what my mom would do if we did not have Casita Maria.”

**Casita Maria summer camp participant**

4th grade

“When asked about their experience at Casita, participants indicated that they see Casita as a place where they make friends; learn to dance, and make music and art; and feel safe. All of these are strong indicators of CYD principles and a reflection of Casita’s commitment to creating a learning environment built on creativity, community, and self-expression.”

**Anne Dunning**
Arts Evaluator

**COMMITMENT**

“We have skilled and talented, gifted staff. They are just amazing at what they do. Everyone really is committed.”

**Casita Maria staff member**

**EMPATHY**

“I like that the people are very helpful and supportive. I like...the participants because they are nice and kind and make me laugh. I also like...the staff.”

**Washely M.**
5th grade participant

“I have dedicated my life to helping others, but mainly as an educator...I was given the honor to be able to work for Casita Maria as an Afterschool Group Leader...Casita Maria is not another job, it’s an opportunity to make a difference in this community with kids, and is a stepping stone towards a career in education.”

**Casita Maria staff member**

“How they involve the kids in arts, it’s so beautiful, it’s so meaningful for us and all the kids and the community. What we get in here is very special... I am a single mom and I would not be able to do this without the help of Casita, and I know a lot of mothers here agree with me on that.”

**Parent of Casita Maria participant**
“At Casita Maria, placing high expectations inspires youth to meet them.”
Casita Maria staff member

“We as the Puerto Rican community completely transformed New York City with our culture, art, theater, poetry, literature, dance, and of course music.”
Bobby Sanabria
Multiple Grammy Nominee, Co-Director, Bronx Music Heritage Center (speaking at the SBCT)

“Since I have been working at Casita Maria, [it] has challenged me in many constructive and positive ways. Working at this program, I have developed many skills that I can use in any future opportunity that may present my way.”
Casita Maria staff member

“The Bronx is now looking for leaders to bring a more positive, healthy way to life... They are trying to make it a better place, and I see Casita Maria as a critical partner in that effort.”
Parent of Casita Maria participant

“When I think about Casita Maria, I think about an organization that wants change in the community... I just really love the fact Casita Maria is here for change and growth for the employees and the students, and that's a wonderful thing.”
Casita Maria staff member

“Casita means a building of hope and the future leaders and role models for the next generation to come.”
Casita Maria staff member
"Casita Maria really makes my day! It makes me feel free to learn and do anything I want. Casita opens the door..."

Casita Maria participant
4th grade

"...without Casita, my mind would not be the mind I have now, with all the teaching and cool stuff, so thanks to Casita for making me a smart person!"

Maximiliano A.
5th grade participant

"She feels Casita is her 'second home.' Before coming here, she was always sad at home, she was bored. But since she's been coming here, she says she has fun and learns new things."

Parent of Casita Maria participant

"I don't look at Casita as a job, I look at it as a blessing. I feel that it's a blessing because I wake up every day and go to work around children. Being able to help children and make them happy and meet their needs is what makes me happy...Casita gives me an opportunity to love unconditionally and express myself through the arts."

Casita Maria staff member

"Here, kids learn many skills for life. They also learn to be themselves. My daughter learned how to speak out and be strong for herself."

Parent of Casita Maria participant

"Going into Casita Maria is a judgement free zone, and you are able to teach the youth with confidence. The South Bronx can be rough, and I feel that the Casita Maria team takes that negativity away and is able to bring a positive vibe."

Casita Maria staff member
Casita played a huge part in [my children] being more confident. They like to draw, they like to sing...they even teach me! They have a lot of stories from their time here and are so communicative and assertive.”

Parent of Casita Maria participant

“Casita Maria taught me how to write lesson plans...I also love the art gallery, because it teaches all cultures of different art work, which is awesome!”

Casita Maria staff member
Our Programs

THE HEART OF CREATIVITY

Casita Maria has a long history of bridging the arts and the community in the South Bronx. As the first and oldest Latino-serving organization in New York City, we’ve worked since 1934 to provide educational and creative opportunities for youth in our neighborhood. Through our programs, we provide a central hub for local artists to connect with the families in the area, share their creative outlooks, and provide access to artistic activities for the youth and families that might otherwise never get a chance to engage with similar works.

Our programs celebrate the neighborhood we live in, and provide an opportunity for youth to feel a sense of pride in their home. There are so many preconceived notions about The Bronx, what sort of place it is and what kind of people live here. The truth is that The Bronx is gloriously alive, and filled with resilient, creative, hard-working people. The children and families we serve deserve to see themselves in a positive light and take pride in the beauty, life, and creativity that is embedded in every block.
One of our recent and most exciting new activities is the implementation of our Creative Youth Development (CYD) framework. This is a set of revolutionary new methods for adults and caregivers to interact with and engage children, and it’s a complete cultural shift. We train every one of our staff in its principles, and expect them to uphold these values at all times. Our CYD framework demonstrates our commitment to the artistic advancement and personal growth of every child in our care.

CYD combines positive youth development principles with arts instruction, creative skill-building, inquiry, and self-expression. CYD programs:

- Are youth-driven and holistic
- Maintain high standards for creative expression
- Build on positive relationships
- Provide safe and healthy spaces
- Work to acknowledge and nurture participants’ inherent talents

“What is the ultimate success? Creative and self-expressed youth who are critical thinkers and leaders.”

- Haydee Morales, Executive Director, Casita Maria
“When I start dancing and singing, I just forget about the people. I do not see the people from the stage, so I just get going. It makes me feel like me, and I feel excited, even if I am shaking!”

- Casita Maria participant, 5th grade

With a CYD focus, Casita Maria provides a holistic and high-quality, professional experience for all participants. Youth aren’t treated like students; they’re treated like the artists they are. We provide gallery and performance space for them to exhibit their talents for a live audience, exactly the way a professional would. Our youth work in dedicated art spaces that are welcoming and nurturing of their creative talents, and they have access to high-quality, modern technology in order to learn and create.

The CYD framework also includes exercises on how to respond to conflict, and the staff and youth are all seeing a huge difference! There have been significantly fewer conflict incidents reported over the past year. We guide the kids through mediation, letting go of their bad days, and reducing the pressure to be perfect or “on” all of the time. We give them an outlet to talk about their feelings, to relax, and to feel seen by the adults in their lives. As a result, the children are becoming much more communicative, more expressive, and more willing to engage and talk about their feelings rather than fight.
Casita Maria nurtures young people starting in kindergarten, guiding them along the path to becoming young scholars, artists, and leaders. But once they reach high school, their focus shifts towards our College Bound and Career programming. We have an annual College Fair, and arrange for campus visits to local universities to expose our students to all of the options available, and give them an idea of what the college application process will be like. We offer mock college interviews, job shadowing, guest speakers, and workshops on writing essays and resumes.

In the past two years, we’ve expanded our career program to add workforce workshops. Professionals from a wide variety of trades and industries come to speak with our high school youth and talk about their work experience and career paths.

We also work holistically with students’ entire families since our youth may be the first in their family to graduate from high school or consider post-secondary education. We offer guidance on what to expect during this time of transition, and how parents and families can support a graduating student.
Creative Arts

There has been an explosion of interest and engagement from the community for Casita Maria’s Creative Arts programs over the past several years. About 40,000 community members, including children and their families, attend our exhibitions and performances every year. More people are requesting gallery tours for visiting exhibitions and recognition of all Casita Maria’s work is growing. And the community really appreciates having access to free, high-quality events. “People are stopping me in the streets to ask what’s next!” says Gail Heidel, Director of Creative Arts Programs. Audience numbers are increasing, and youth and community members are getting opportunities to engage with art in ways they otherwise wouldn’t.

“People are stopping me in the streets to ask what’s next!”

– Gail Heidel, Director of Creative Arts Programs
South Bronx Culture Trail Festival
The annual South Bronx Culture Trail Festival has changed a lot since its beginning in 2011. From a one-day event in its first year, the Culture Trail has exploded into a month-long celebration of the community and the arts. From its humble beginnings nine years ago, the Culture Trail has expanded to encompass the entire community, where Casita Maria partners with a multitude of local businesses, organizations, and South Bronx artists. From music to dance to murals to sculptures, over 25,000 people walked the South Bronx Culture Trail Festival in 2018, viewing curated exhibitions, stage shows, and performers of all kinds, including some of Casita Maria’s youth artists!

The South Bronx Culture Trail Festival isn’t only a place where the community can watch and see art and artists. It’s also a place where community members can engage and participate in the fun! The Culture Trail offers dance classes and art workshops where people can try out the art for themselves, feel it, engage it, and immerse themselves in it! We even offer the opportunity for our own students to participate and showcase their talents in visual art, music, and dance. The opportunity to perform for a live crowd, on a real stage, alongside established artists is one our youth never forget.

“The kids] are the future, and it’s our responsibility to make sure that we are leaving a good world for them to continue and move forward.”
– Melissa McMillan, Resistance Revival Chorus

“Music, customs, traditions, are part of the intangible heritage of every human being...Our intangible heritage survives – it continues to be passed on from one generation to the next.”
– José Francisco Ávila, Executive Director, Garifuna Coalition

“We have positive role models and events celebrating our culture.”
– Olga Correa, Artist & Hunts Point community member

“...we can understand what the arts are, what music is, what music does to Black and Latino communities. That’s what Casita Maria does.”
– Rafael Salamanca, NYC Councilmember
Casita Maria’s CelebrARTE program encompasses all of the exhibitions that are on display in Casita Maria’s gallery and theater space. Many of the artists are local to New York and The South Bronx area, and they celebrate the beautiful and varied cultural heritage of the families that live there. Photographer Abigail Montes, who worked on the Simpson Street Stories exhibition, held during the spring/summer of 2019, was a Casita Maria participant herself.

“I felt a sense of pride to see how far both Casita and myself had come,” she says. “Casita was there for me as a child, and Casita was there for me as an adult.”

In the past two years, Casita Maria has been able to invite more teaching artists to visit the center and engage with the students. The kids get the opportunity to participate in workshops with visiting artists and ask them questions about their work and their careers. One of the exhibitions, RESPECT, held in the fall of 2019, was a big hit, with the three models depicted showcasing Casita participants and a canvas available for visitors to tag with their name or a message.

“Tagging allows people to interact and connect. It’s very inclusive,” says artist Tim Okamura, who painted the original piece and left plenty of space for visitors to tag.

Every exhibition opens with a celebration—a gallery opening, complete with DJs and food, celebrating the new art at Casita Maria, and the new artist who will be visiting and interacting with the young people. These young artists get excited when they hear a new artist is coming, and that excitement spreads to their families and friends. Every celebration is a big welcome party for the artist, and the kids and their families love to be a part of it!
“Casita was there for me as a child, and Casita was there for me as an adult.”

– Abigail Montes, photographer, Simpson Street Stories
Our Impact

1000+ Program participants
40,000 Participants in Creative Arts programming

GROWTH IN TEACHING ARTISTS
200%

SOUTH BRONX CULTURE TRAIL FESTIVAL
385 children participated in 2019 Summer Programs
690 children participated in 2019-2020 Afterschool Programs

15 days of events
18,650 participants in 2019
25,000+ in 2018

Full implementation of Creative Youth Development framework throughout our youth programs. Early evaluation showed improvements in creativity and expression, resilience, leadership and teamwork and community engagement.
100 percent graduation rate for all high school participants

6,000 attendees over the lifetime of each exhibit

An average of 130 people at every gallery opening

Growth in high school students enrolled in programming

35 → 255

Growth in middle school students enrolled in programming

85 → 105

High school participants accepted to City College, John Jay, BMCC, BCC, Hostos, Rutgers, NYU, Delhi, Binghamton, Syracuse and Brown

22 of our College Bound seniors were accepted into a higher education program in 2018, and as of 2020, all are still in attendance and working towards their degrees.
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The Laundromat Project
Urban Health Plan
Whitney Museum of American Art
#Not62

Special thanks to NYC Councilman Rafael Salamanca and State Senator Luis Sepulveda.
Our Financials

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Fiscal Year 2018-2019: $3,077,616
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DESIREE CARO
Deputy Director

CHANNELL SCHMIDT
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