



**AJA** YOUTH + PHOTOGRAPHY  
TRANSFORMATION  
**Annual Report 2023**

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# THE CIVIL LIBERTIES PROJECT PARALLEL REALITIES 2023

The AjA Project X Mid-City CAN

**ATTENTION TO  
ALL PERSONS IN CITY HEIGHTS:  
THE CHANGE OF  
CITY HEIGHTS**

When it was time to pick a prompt, I thought back on a conversation with  
and when I was twelve or thirteen. The conversation was  
and gone into the living room. He probably  
ended up talking for a couple c

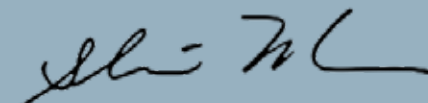
**Dear AjA Supporters,**

**Our 2023 year began with a major transition of our leadership team, staff, and our beloved office of 10 years. As a founder of this organization 23 years ago, I was called back into AjA to bring back its heartbeat. My direction for AjA is made up of three elements: collaboration, experimentation, and intention.**

**In 2023, we rekindled our relationships with some of our long-time partners in City Heights, and experimented with different art forms outside of our traditional mediums of photography and documentary arts. Additionally, we reinvigorated our existing programs with more intentions—bridging the gap between art and advocacy.**

**With the magnitude of devastation and injustices globally, parallel with the realities of what is happening here in our own neighborhoods, AjA needed to reflect critically on our mission. Our new initiatives aim to reposition art as a tool of political resistance and community resilience.**

**This could not have been possible without our community. Many friends and supporters believed in our vision as we navigated this complex period of transition. So I thank you for your support and hope that you will keep in touch with us.**



**Shinpei Takeda  
Executive Artistic Director**

## Mission statement

The AjA Project is a compassionate space for young people, activists, visual artists and educators to engage critically with issues that affect our community and realize our collective liberation through participatory storytelling and the documentary arts.





## Community impact

82 Youth Served

9 Programs

6 Sites

5 Teachings Artists

3 Fellowships

13 Fellows

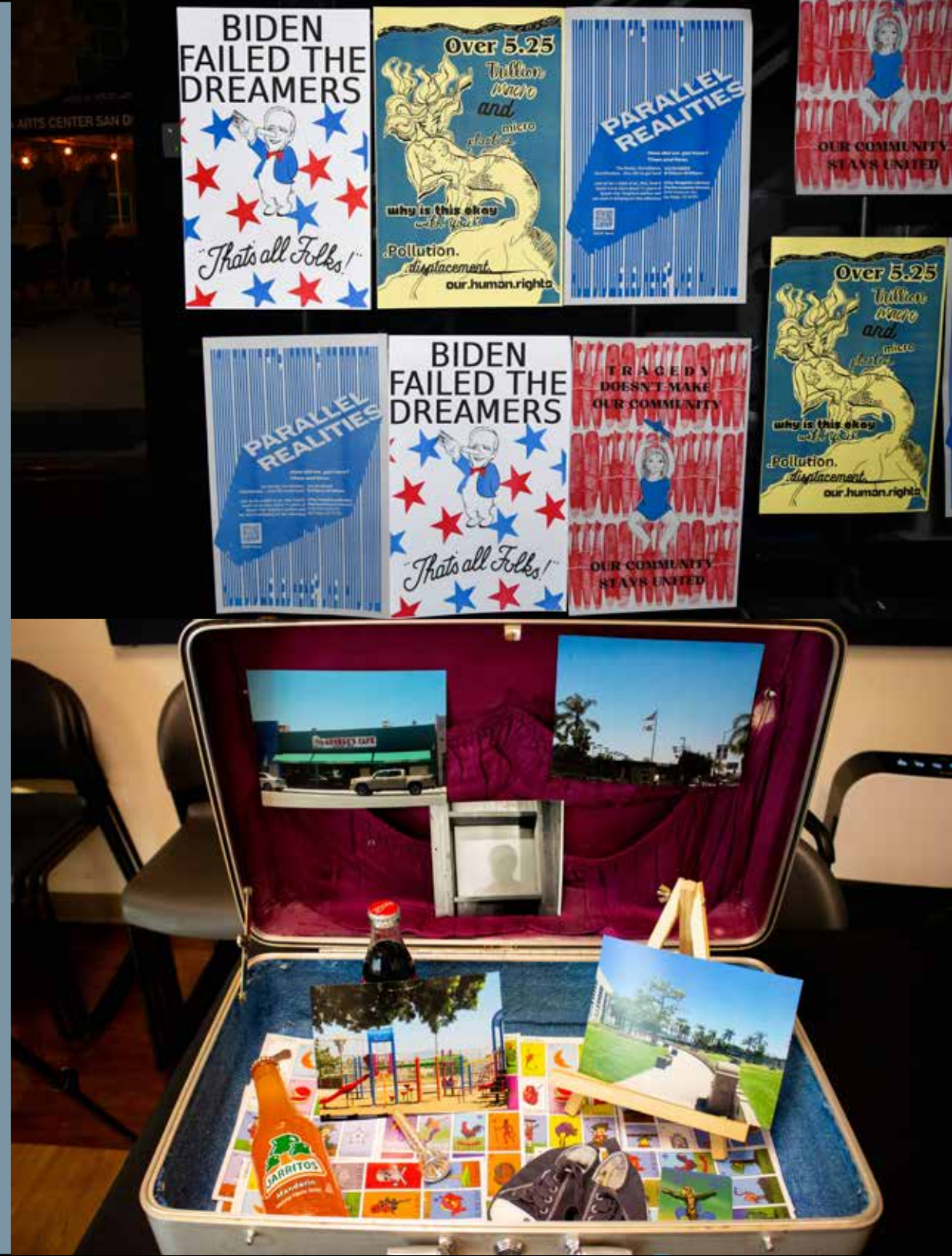
8 Exhibits & Events

300 Attendees & Visitors

## Civil Liberties Project

The Aja Project partnered with Mid-City CAN in 2023 for the third iteration of the Civil Liberties Project, a program rooted in studying the Japanese-American incarceration history during WWII.

Field trips to the Japanese American National Museum in LA, as well as to the local Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego, provided our youth an opportunity to explore history through its archives. We reflected on this through educational and art workshops, where the youth developed their own projects connecting the “parallel realities” of the past and present. The program extended into another fellowship in the fall, where three young fellows are using their knowledge from the summer to relate this history to the local issues of San Diego today.



## Counter Surveillance

The Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans (PANA) and The AjA Project collaborated in launching the final phase of the 3-year Counter Surveillance program. This youth fellowship is a rapid-response art production program to create a campaign against San Diego Police Department's proposed "Smart Street Lights Ordinance".

In the summer, 12 youth fellows worked with local artists to create textile-based visual aids and props that were taken to City Hall. This campaign continued into the fall, where fellows designed a large 8x10 inflatable camera to draw attention to the surveillance issue, inviting the public inside for discussion.



## Action

ACTION! is a documentary-based media program for migrant youth living in the San Diego-Tijuana border. The program sees documentary arts as a tool for political resistance— a way of putting the spotlight on local experiences and problems through the lens of those directly affected by the 30ft tall border wall.

AjA partnered with Espacio Migrante and Borderline Crisis Center to provide this program to over 15 children and teenagers waiting for asylum status. At the end of each program, participants understood how to merge professional techniques and equipment as well as DIY methods to produce short films.





## Back Alley Poetry

City Heights is a community of diverse immigrants and refugees that have incredible stories to tell. This fellowship invites young adults of City Heights to respond to the past 20 years of this city's history through a series of writing workshops and public performances.

This summer, fellows will also co-produce a semi-permanent weaving of poetry, image, and voice on a back-alley in the heart of City Heights. This will serve as a reminder of the narratives that are historically pushed off the "main" street, to refuse the erasure of those who have shaped it— despite the ongoing process of gentrification.



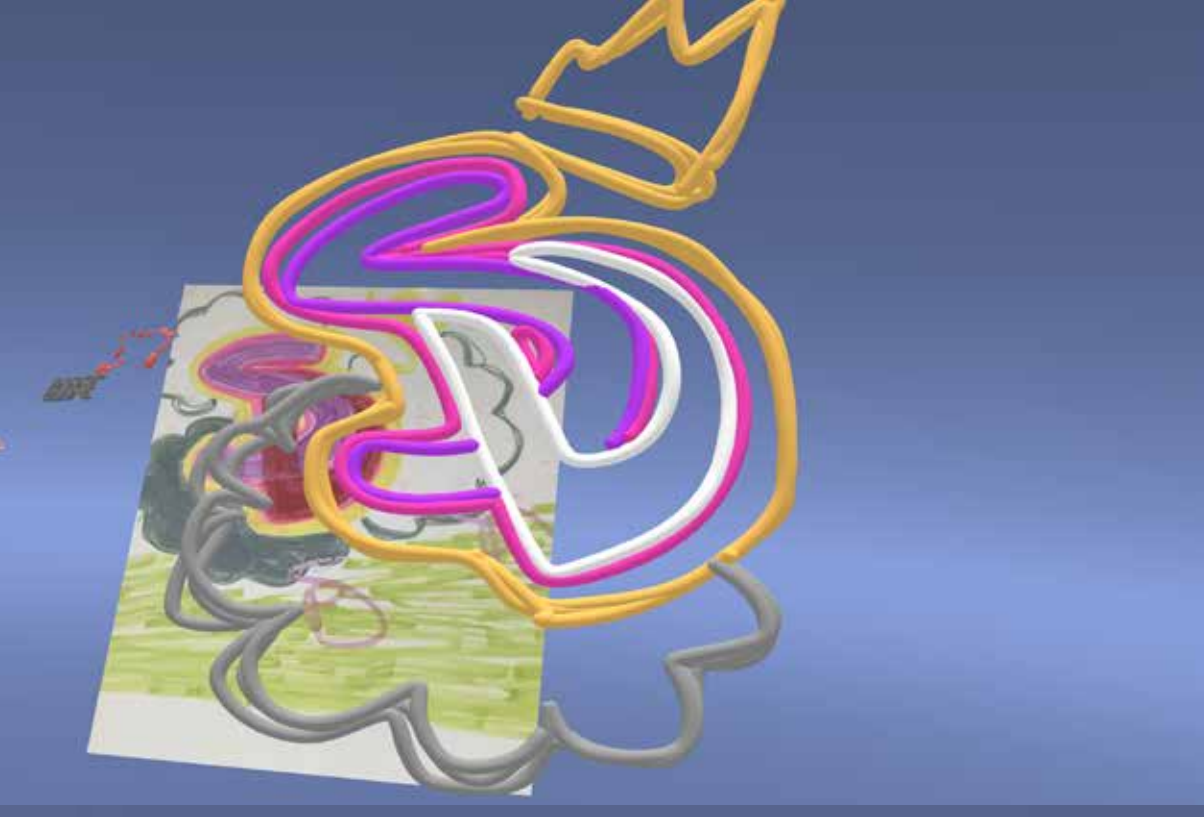
# Journey

Journey uses photography to engage students in the newcomers program at Cajon Valley Middle School to reflect on their journeys coming to the United States. These refugee and immigrant students are given the space to talk about identity and culture while adapting to a new place yet to be home. Students learned various photographic and creative techniques such as Point-Of-View and collage to represent their family's legacy and stories.



## Compass

Compass is a multi-year program that functions as a hub for community wellness— to foster a space for marginalized youth to explore their creative interests with access to artistic mentorship. In 2023, we partnered with The Monarch School and 37ECB to provide youth freedom to explore art mediums such as documentary photography and 3D/virtual art. Under the mentorship of our teaching artists, these students thought critically about how to capture their environments through professional equipment.

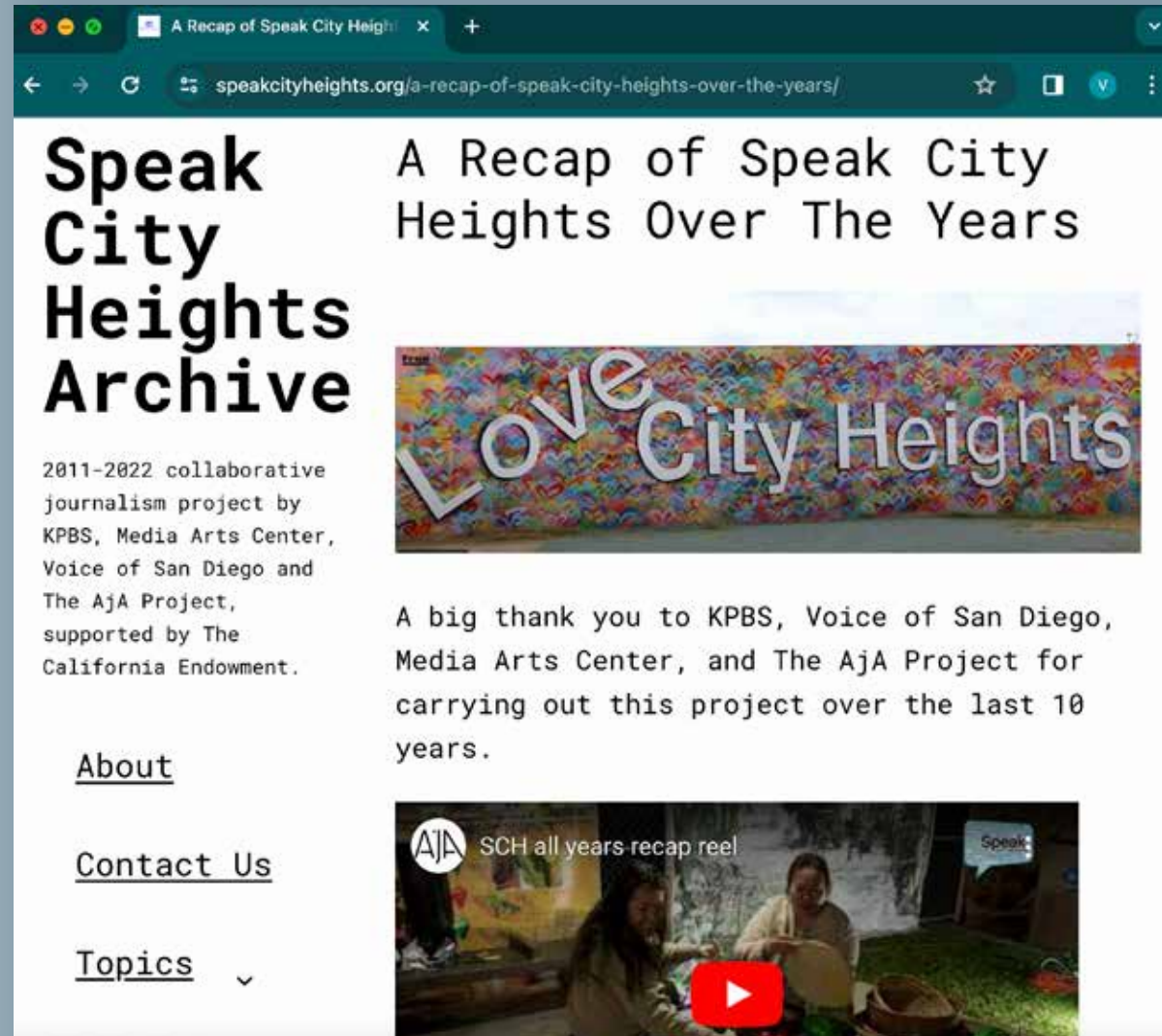


# Speak City Heights

2023 celebrated the end of the Speak City Heights project— a collaboration between The AjA Project, Media Arts Center, KPBS and Voice of San Diego. This media collaborative aimed to amplify the voices of residents in one of San Diego’s most diverse neighborhoods, City Heights. Over the past decade, we supported residents and policymakers in framing discussions about what constitutes a healthy community, its barriers and how to create shared solutions.

To wrap up this project, The AjA Project organized an exhibit highlighting the 11 years of media coverage. Parallel Realities: How Did We Get Here? Then And Now. invited the City Heights community to gather and discuss the history of City Heights and the local issues of today.

<https://speakcityheights.org/>



# Public Programs

**PARALLEL REALITIES**

How did we get here?  
Then and Now.

The Border, Surveillance, Gentrification... How did we get here! **12/5/2023**  
6:30pm-8:30pm

Join us for a night of art, film, food & teach-ins to learn about 11-years of Speak City Heights's archive and our work in bringing art into advocacy **City Heights Library Performance Annex**  
3795 Fairmount Ave  
San Diego, CA 92105



RSVP here!



**HOW DID WE GET HERE?**

**BOOK RELEASE @ VERBATIM BOOKS!**  
FEB 12, 2023  
3793 30TH ST, SAN DIEGO, CA 92104  
6-8PM TO 10PM

AJA

**A Comic Book about The History of City Heights**

Presented by  
The AIA Project  
Urban Habitat  
Haneen Oriqat, Author  
Chey Diehl, Illustrator

AJA

**EXHIBITION**

**THE CIVIL LIBERTIES PROJECT: PARALLEL REALITIES**

**AUGUST 11**  
**5PM - 7PM**

4305 UNIVERSITY AVE., Suite  
#640 San Diego, CA 92105

**EZRA SKERLECZ · JANEYRIS HENRIQUEZ · ALAN SEGOVIA · ASHLEY THANG · IVY NGUYEN · MIA OSUNA · GEORGE MAURICIO · PENELOPE ALCACIO · JANELLE BROWN · GABRIELLE GIST**

# Funders & Partners

