

What Is  
and What Can Be

**Women of Color  
and the Struggle for Justice  
in Cincinnati**

What is

home

community

ours

fair

action

?

Women of color provide important leadership in the city of Cincinnati, working in all sectors and volunteering their time for a better Cincinnati. Yet, as a group, they face a multitude of challenges, including an alarmingly high poverty rate, elevated rates of health problems, and other inequities.

The exhibition centers the voices and experiences of women of color in Cincinnati, sharing their visions of and hopes for the future. It draws on community-driven research coordinated by The Cincinnati Project at the University of Cincinnati.

[www.thecincyproject.org/whatis](http://www.thecincyproject.org/whatis)

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PRESS / SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

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**Maria**

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United States,  
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in a  
Golden Prison.

**Cabrera**

”

The Cincinnati Project

Archiving Activism

Maria Cabrera was born in a small town near Oaxaca, Mexico. Although she had strong relationships with her family in this area, she moved with her husband and young son to the United States almost twenty years ago to escape extreme poverty and create more opportunities for her family. Inspired by a desire to address the adversities she and her family have experienced, Cabrera has been involved in several activist projects in Cincinnati. She was particularly active in starting Casa de Paz, a house for Latina women who have experienced domestic violence. She has also organized actions including vigils to promote the development of Cincinnati as a sanctuary city, and more welcoming setting for immigrants.

“Archiving Activism” is an ongoing project led by Dr. J.T. Roane, Assistant Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Dr. Anjali Dutt, Assistant Professor of Psychology, both at the University of Cincinnati. The project seeks to emphasize, amplify, and digitally archive the oral histories of Black and Latinx women activists, organizers, and artists currently working in the Cincinnati region, as well as veteran activists

and organizers who have played roles in anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ struggles, efforts around housing, food, and healthcare, and work around mass incarceration. Dr. Dutt interviewed Maria Cabrera on April 27, 2018. The interview was conducted in Spanish, with assistance from Heyra Avila who interpreted. The following are translated excerpts from their conversation.

Is this the kind of life I want to live?

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**Cabrera** → When we first came to Cincinnati, life was good, I finally had my family together ... but it was sad also. We couldn’t go out that much. I was always at the house. ... Sometimes, as Latinos say, being in the United States, it’s like being in a Golden Prison, you can’t really do anything. ... It was sad to know that I couldn’t go out to the stores. I didn’t know where anything was. I didn’t speak the language. I didn’t even know where the hospital was.

Maria

I remember it was a Sunday and I started asking myself, “Is this the kind of life I wanted to live?” And I started crying. I didn’t have a job. I didn’t know how to get to the store. I was just really sad. ... My kids were small and they always wanted to play outside, but I didn’t want to go too far, because I would get lost. ... But one day, it was Sunday, and since the Xavier Church was really close, we walked there. ... My kids wanted to go in, but I remember saying, “No, no, no, they’re going to kick us out.” But I remember just peering inside. I was afraid that someone was going to accuse us of wanting to steal something, or just kick us out, and so all I could do is just peer through and look at the altar ... and as I saw inside I saw this statue of Jesus Christ, and I prayed to God that he would give me strength to open up the doors of opportunity for my children.

Cabrera

## Getting Involved

**Cabrera** → I had to learn how to get by and survive. I learned how to ride the bus, I learned to cook, and I started making food and would sell it to friends, or the friends that would come along the way. I remember a friend once gave me a pot that I could cook tamales in so I could sell them. And then one day, one of the teachers at Jose's school offered me a job cleaning her house. And so little by little, more opportunities would come. And I also remember being involved with the Health Promoters at UC, and also the meetings at Su Casa. When I joined that group I was always really active going to the meetings, and that's where I met a lot of new people and learned where I could access a lot of resources and opportunities for my family.

At that point in time, I was also selling beauty products. So with selling beauty products and selling food and cleaning houses, I was able to get enough money to pay rent, and thankfully I never struggled with the bills any more. ... I remember one time I told my story, I told myself I was never gonna cry again. But sometimes I find myself crying again because I start feeling those same things. I know my children have progressed a lot, but it makes me sad to think that they had to go through some of those things with me. But I thank God that they're getting ahead. And that's why I stay involved with my community; because I know there may be some families right now who are living through the same things I lived through.



# Dream

## Creating Casa de Paz

**Dutt** → And Jose [Cabrera's son] is graduating from Xavier this year?

**Cabrera** → That's been my dream, that's why I risked my life and his life to come to this country. ... One of the first houses I ever cleaned was by Xavier, and I would look at and I would say, "My kids will never be able to study there, only the rich kids can go there, the kids who's families' houses I clean." So when Jose got his acceptance letter there I remember he was so happy, and he got his scholarship money. He was jumping up and down; he was so happy. And I was just paralyzed; I couldn't even talk I was so happy.

**Dutt** → Can you tell me about your involvement in creating Casa de Paz?

**Cabrera** → It was born out of a conference I got invited to at Xavier. I remember hearing from ... the director of Casa de Paz in Chicago, and at this conference I kept asking her how she got so many women involved. She said we could talk afterwards. I stayed behind to talk to her and I told her that Cincinnati has a lot of problems with [domestic violence] and I would like to help. And she said, "Yes, that's exactly why I'm here," and she put me in contact with another person so we could get this started. ... And the next day "M" called me and she said, "Maria, someone wants to donate money for a house for women," and I said "Casa de Paz?!" And she said, "Yes, Casa de Paz!" and I was really excited and said we have to go to Chicago to learn. ... I tried to get other

# My

people to go, but only two of us went. It was a trip I'll never forget. ... When we got there I remember thinking, "Wow. There's so much support for the women here, and resources for the women ... the environment of peace and tranquility, everyone supporting each other." It was so great. If I would have had something like this when I was suffering, my kids wouldn't have suffered as much. I said, "This needs to come to Cincinnati." ... We worked with a lawyer; everyone worked so hard. It makes me really happy that so many professionals are involved now with more tools and resources. ... I know now that Casa de Paz is open, we can't completely eliminate domestic violence from the Latin American community, but we can prevent the suffering of the children. That's a huge dream and a great joy, knowing that I can prevent the suffering.

## Activism for Undocumented Families

**Dutt** → Can you talk a little bit about your activism on behalf of undocumented families, particularly right now, when you're in a particularly hostile climate towards immigrants and undocumented communities?

# I really want Cincinnati to be a sanctuary city.

**Cabrera** → I got the will to be involved when my kids were young, and I didn't have any resources. ... I remember I couldn't take my kids to the park or do anything fun, but we would always sit through the Worker Center's meetings. That's where I learned about a lot of immigrant rights and I got informed. ... My kids basically grew up at the Worker's Center; we would go every Sunday. ... Now there's a peace and justice group, and so whenever there's an action, we mobilize, and we get people involved.

**Dutt** → What do you think Cincinnati could do to become more welcoming for immigrants and the undocumented community?

**Cabrera** → I really want Cincinnati to be a sanctuary city. And one of my biggest goals is to educate people that we're not all bad. And for people to be able to report crime, because it's a security issue for our community, too. And educate people to not be racists and not just stop people for looking Latin American. Because there have been a lot of arrests, a lot of raids that are separating families. That's what I want to work towards.



## Resources

### CASA DE PAZ

Casa de Paz/House of Peace ministers to and with Latina migrant women and children who have experienced trauma and violence, especially violence that displaces them from their homes. It provides a culturally sensitive, caring community and temporary home where healing and growth can take place. This mission is carried out through supportive relationships and a competent staff who have an understanding of multi-cultural issues as well as gender-based violence, and who respect the unique emotional, developmental, and spiritual nature of each person. At Casa de Paz, we promote the dignity and self-worth of all of our residents, striving to accompany them through a process of stabilization, growth and flourishing. Casa de Paz/House of Peace's mission is to extend a safe space to Latina women and their families, connecting, guiding and supporting them unconditionally, without judgment and with inclusion and confidentiality, in order to facilitate their transformation. [www.casadepazcinci.org](http://www.casadepazcinci.org)

### SU CASA

The Su Casa Hispanic Center, a program of Catholic Charities of Southwestern Ohio, serves the Hispanic/Latino immigrants who are seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Founded in 1997, Su Casa is the primary provider of social, educational, language, employment and health care services to the Hispanic/Latino community in Greater Cincinnati. The mission is self-sufficiency for the poor and vulnerable of the immigrant community that comes to the U.S. looking for a better way of life for their families. Su Casa strives to become the place where Latinos/Hispanics individuals connect with their culture and develop ways to live healthy and fulfilled lives in the United States. [www.ccswoh.org/services/sucasa](http://www.ccswoh.org/services/sucasa)

### CINCINNATI INTERFAITH WORKERS CENTER

The Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center (CIWC) was established in March 2005 to mobilize, educate, and organize low wage and immigrant workers to achieve positive systemic change. The goal is to provide workers with the tools and support they need to transform their workplaces and communities as a whole. [www.cworkers.org](http://www.cworkers.org)

## Organizations

The Cincinnati Project (TCP) works for economic justice, health equity, racial equity, and improved conditions for women. TCP harnesses the expertise and resources from the University of Cincinnati faculty and students, and from Cincinnati community members, non-profits, governments, and agencies to conduct research that will directly benefit the community. [www.thecincyproject.org](http://www.thecincyproject.org)

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