

Llano Grande Center for Research and Development



May 2008

www.llanogrande.org

STUDENTS TO EXHIBIT RED BARN RESEARCH

For years, the land has sat dormant, almost unassuming, smack dab in the middle of Elsa and only a football field's length from the city's water supply. If not for the large rusty tank that reads "DANGER: SULFURIC ACID," many would probably not



Llano Grande staffer Delia Perez and Llano Grande students investigate the opening of what is believed to be an underground chemical storage bin at the former Red Barn Chemical site.

recognize it at all as the site of a former chemical plant, today being investigated by Llano Grande Center students.

On the corner of 4th and Hidalgo Street, the barren property that once housed the Red Barn Chemical Company for more than 30 years is now at the center of a major research project being led by Llano Grande students who are addressing concerns they've heard from many in the community.

The exhibit, to be held the evening of Friday, May 23 at Edcouch-Elsa High School's Fine Arts Center, will feature student findings as well as community perspectives on the Red Barn Chemical Company.

Student interest in this site actually began four years ago, when former Llano Grande staffer Ernesto Ayala led his Economics class through a similar

project where the youth interviewed local people about the site and the effects this company had on the community. Those students later produced a short documentary that featured those stories and helped to raise some awareness in the community.

This semester, with support from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and the State Farm Good Neighbor Citizenship program, the Center's social studies research methods class is revisiting the site to see what effects, if any, the chemical plant had on the surrounding neighborhoods, and if there is anything they can do to rectify that.

As part of the project, students have resumed filming oral histories with residents who live near that area, or who actually worked with the Red Barn Chemical Company, to understand the different perspectives of living with a chemical company.

The renewed interest this year in Red Barn began as the students, who are studying local

see RED BARN, pg. 4



Students in the Llano Grande class visited the site and documented evidence of what they think is contamination through photos, videos and reflections of what they experienced.

LG CENTER HOSTING FIRST COMMUNITY U

Educators, organizers and activists from across the country are making their way to the Llano Grande House this May to engage in a cooperative learning process that could transform how people think about their community.

The Llano Grande Center, with support from the Center for Ethical Leadership, is hosting Community U, a three-day gathering May 16-18 where participants will share knowledge and ideas with each other about ways for creating meaningful community change.

Along with fellows from Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) sites, Community U is expected to draw teachers from various grade levels, directors of community foundations and non-profit leaders.

The purpose of the Community U is to offer a learning experience rooted in the rhythms and realities of community life. It is about viewing community and people as the new “texts” and about re-imagining how community change practitioners can engage in higher learning.

The intent is to share actions, practices, ideas, and outcomes from our own work with others interested in developing collective, place-based leadership to advance community change. Community U is intended to catalyze community action for those who come and participate.

There are still an extremely limited number of spots available for Community U. For more information, please contact the Center at (956) 262-4474.

CENTER HELPS TO COORDINATE NATIONAL RURAL ASSEMBLY



For more than ten years, the Llano Grande Center has challenged traditional models of teaching and learning in the classroom, encouraging teachers and students to question state mandates and rethink where our knowledge should come from.

Today, that progressive idealism has propelled the Center to the forefront of a national movement that is challenging federal officials to rethink policies affecting rural America.

Llano Grande is part of the steering committee organizing the second National Rural Assembly, taking place in Washington, D.C., June 16-18.

The National Rural Assembly is a movement of people and organizations devoted to building a stronger, more vibrant rural America, with a goal of making the country stronger by improving the outlook for rural communities. The guiding principle of this movement is that an inclusive, prospering, and sustainable rural America improves prospects for the nation.

The National Rural Assembly is more than just a single meeting. It is a series of activities and partnerships aimed at building better policy and more opportunity

throughout the country.

Llano Grande staffer Delia Perez’s role on the steering committee has been to help inform the development of this movement and shape the agenda for the meeting. The Center has coordinated for a stronger youth presence at this year’s assembly and will facilitate the production of youth-created media to be presented by the young filmmakers during a plenary. Llano Grande also conducted research on educational issues and policy opportunities facing rural schools and will present its findings at the Assembly.

Other members of the Rural Assembly steering committee include the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Ford Foundation, Center for Rural Strategies, National Rural Funders Collaborative, The Carsey Institute—University of New Hampshire, League of Rural Voters, Rural LISC, Rural Policy Research Institute, National Congress of American Indians, Sustainable Northwest and Quitman County Community Development Organization.

To endorse this movement, visit www.ruralcompact.org.

AT THE CENTER OF THE ACTION

LLANO GRANDE HELPS TO BRING SHORT FILM *LOS SCAVENGERS* TO LIFE

It was lights, cameras and acting for Llano Grande as the Center helped to produce a short film this past March.

Partnering with Pump House Films, a production company headed by former Llano Grande writer-in-residence David Rice and director David Garcia, Llano Grande became the base of operations – as well as the set – for the short *Los Scavengers*.

The Center contributed the use of the Llano Grande House as well as additional resources for the cast and crew of the film. Llano Grande Program Director Juan Ozuna was also given the opportunity to be assistant director for the film.

Los Scavengers is based on a script written by Rice and Garcia that focuses on the exploits of four young adventurers who make money by searching for lost property in and around their small fictional hometown of Escondido. The plot is centered on a long lost treasure that the boys hear about from a local *curandera*.

Funded by Executive Producers Valente Rodriguez – an Elsa native and now a Hollywood actor – and Dan Alesia, the short film features a portion of the story in which Los Scavengers help recover a young friends' stolen bike. Shooting took place over three days at the Llano Grande House, as well as throughout Monte

Alto, with many community members, school officials and local businesses contributing their own time and effort for the film.

Producers for *Los Scavengers* have spoken about the need for South Texas to make its name as a valid setting for film production, with this film hopefully acting as the impetus for such recognition. Rice said the goal is to get the backing of a major studio to shoot the entirety of *Los Scavengers* here in the Delta Area. As part of this push, a website promoting the film has been created at www.losscavengers.com where visitors can view the trailer and photos.

Llano Grande has a long history with film, and continues to teach youth how to use movies to capture local stories. In 2000 Rice and the Llano Grande Center produced the independent short film *Chicanos In Space*.



top: Director David Garcia looks into the camera as actors perform a scene at the front door of the Llano Grande House.

second: Writer/Producer David Rice manages the production as Juan Ozuna and Marco Pena get ready for the next take.

third: The Llano Grande House board room was transformed into a piano parlor for one of the scenes involving local actor Pedro Garcia.

bottom: A dolly camera is used to capture one of the scenes taking place at the back of the Llano Grande House.

**PARENTS: WANT TO PARTICIPATE? FEEL FREE TO COME BY OUR OFFICE AT ROOM A1 AT EEHS,
EMAIL US AT INFO@LLANOGRANDE.ORG, OR CALL US.**

LLANO GRANDE VISITS CALI COLLEGES

A group of Llano Grande students came one step closer to realizing their California dreams this past March during a college trip on the West Coast.

Twelve students, ranging from sophomores to seniors, organized with the Center a visit to some of the most prestigious universities throughout the Golden State, including University of California-Berkeley, Academy of Arts University, Stanford University, Occidental College and University of Southern California.

This year, students had the opportunity to meet with admissions officers, professors and college students to learn more about higher education and what it offers. Llano Grande's prospective college students also had the chance to experience college

life throughout the trip, spending nights in dorms, attending classes and eating in college cafeterias.

The college trip is an institution started at Edcouch-Elsa High School by Llano Grande Executive Director Francisco Guajardo back in 1992, when he and a group of juniors organized a trip to visit Ivy League schools. The goal of the trip is to help broaden students'

perspectives on what is possible after graduating from high school.

Since 1992, the Center has taken students on college trips almost every year, with dozens of students attending and graduating from some of the most elite universities in the country. Support has grown for the trip, with Edcouch-Elsa High School now organizing its own college trips.



Llano Grande staff and students visited many campuses this Spring while on a West Coast college tour. Here the group poses for a picture while on the campus of the University of California - Berkeley.

from RED BARN, pg. 1

this semester, heard concerns from Elsa resident Felix Rodriguez, who was speaking to students during an oral history on the environmental landscape of Elsa during the 1960's and 70's.

Students have also been conducting a community health survey in the neighborhoods adjacent to the Red Barn site to get a better sense of what ailments are prevalent. Among some of the more pressing concerns that students have heard during their oral history collection is that many people fear the high rates of cancer and birth defects in Elsa are related to this site.

Along with documenting the site through video and photos, students are also looking into who may be responsible for the land, and have met with the Texas

Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) to discuss ways for investigating and cleaning up the space.

The Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum has provided funding to Llano Grande students through their City of Neighborhoods program, which teaches students ways to use design principles for creating community change. On exhibit will be photos, videos and other student work documenting their research, as well as architectural models designed by student groups, presenting alternative uses for the barren Red Barn site.

The State Farm Good Neighbor Citizenship program has also contributed to this effort, providing funding for Llano Grande's service learning efforts.