

WARRIORS OF AZTLÁN



Photos by Jesse Cammon.

Brown Berets members Eddie Alvarez, Diego Silva and Desiree McFadden.

By Roberto “Rob” Camacho

Barrio Logan is filled with countless nuances and intricacies that sets itself apart from just about any other neighborhood in the entire world. One of those various qualities is the long-standing legacy of self-determination and community defense.

While this can be seen reflected in the community’s history, its residents and the art plastered all throughout the neighborhood and Chicano Park, perhaps no group embodies these values more prominently than the National Brown Berets de Aztlán; who for nearly fifty years have been defenders of the Barrio and vanguards of Chicano Park.

It’s no coincidence that the history and politics of the Brown Berets can be seen across the walls of Chicano Park, adorning a myriad of murals painted throughout the years. For decades leading up to the Park’s founding, resentment grew within the Barrio as the neighborhood was rezoned as mixed residential and industrial in the 1950’s. This resentment grew as the Barrio was cleaved in two by Interstate 5 and was further divided by the Coronado Bridge, displacing over 5,000 homes and businesses.

Disregarded by the power elite, the disenfran-

chised residents of the Barrio increasingly became frustrated until finally discovering that the razed land underneath the Coronado Bridge, which the city had previously promised as space for a public park, was now the intended site for a California Highway Patrol substation.

Alongside a coalition of students, community activists, Barrio residents and others from nearby neighborhoods, through militant force and occupation, the Brown Berets helped liberate the land that would eventually become Chicano Park.

The twelve-day occupation and eventual liberation of Chicano Park was not only a defining moment in Chicano history and the City of San Diego; it was also a defining moment that helped cement the Berets as the paramilitary arm of the Chicano Power movement throughout the rest of the 1970s. Now, almost fifty years later Chicano Park is not only a monument to Chicano empowerment and self-determination; it has served as the home base for the Brown Berets.

The Brown Berets can trace their origins back to East Los Angeles in the late 1960’s at the height of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement after being originally founded by David Sanchez in wake of the 1968 East L.A. Student Walkouts. At the time, many young Chicanos were struggling to make

The National Brown Berets de Aztlán discuss the organization's past, present and future

sense of their own cultural identity and were faced with daily acts of discrimination.

The Berets were founded with the intention to help the Chicano community, specifically organizing against police brutality, inadequate public schools, farm worker's struggles as well as anti-war activism. Since its founding numerous autonomous chapters have sprung up across the United States. The National Brown Berets de Aztlán were one of several antonymous chapter founded during the 1970's and remains one of the most prominent and active chapters operating in the country today.

Today the Brown Berets de Aztlán are still active in Barrio Logan, led by Eddie Alvarez who serves as the group's Unit Commander. Alvarez joined the chapter five years ago after meeting David Rico Sr., Chairman of Berets and an original founding member of the chapter while at the annual Chicano Park Day celebration.

What started off as casual conversation gradually turned into a crash course history lesson as Alvarez spent the rest of day talking with the Berets. Fascinated by their rich history Alvarez regularly began attending Beret group meetings; meticulously taking notes, enthralled by the org's mission of Chicano advocacy and community self-defense.

"Our mission is to reclaim our history, to teach our history and to correct the lies that have been taught to us," Alvarez said. "Here in San Diego our main objective is to teach the people who they were, what they represent, where they come from and to be proud of it. I felt like this was my opportunity to step into a world where I can defend and give back to my community."

Within six months Alvarez was a full-fledged Beret. His commitment to the organization was cemented however, in the summer of 2014 after the National Brown Berets de Aztlán and several other chapters provided security at counter

demonstrations in the city of Murrieta; after a mob of far-right protestors surrounded several buses transporting Central American asylum seekers (mostly women and children), forcing the buses to turn around before they could reach a Border Patrol facility in the city.

Alvarez recalled the atmosphere of the demonstrations saying, "I wrapped my face in a bandana and all I felt that day was this hatred, just because I was there in support of people from Central America."

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- Eddie Alvarez, Brown Berets

Alvarez and a coalition of Berets from across the state went toe to toe with tea partiers, militia-men, and other far-right groups that showed up to intimidate pro-immigration demonstrators. Alvarez was awarded 'Sergeant of Youth' by the Brown Berets following the action and the experience cemented his commitment to the Berets.

"I was awarded for my bravery that day in Murrieta, I stood up to those guys, got in their face and they were shocked. A young guy standing up against all these ex-veterans that were built and ready to pummel and smash innocent little kids that are coming with their families from Central America. Just because they don't understand English doesn't mean they don't understand hate. It lit this fire within me and I realized we do need to do something about this."

The experience in Murrieta was enough to convince him that the Brown Berets were still a much-needed necessity in today's hostile and

turbulent political climate. A mere five years later, at the age of twenty-two, Alvarez is now the Unit Commander of the National Brown Berets de Aztlán.

Additionally, the Brown Berets have confronted numerous threats to Barrio Logan. The most prominent being several instances in 2017 and 2018 when groups of white nationalists and other right-wing extremists invaded Chicano Park, demanding that its murals be removed on the grounds that they're 'anti-American.'

Alvarez views the recent attacks on Chicano Park as the latest iteration of a long legacy of anti-Mexican hostility in the United States. "These groups want to come in here and try to vandalize, destroy and dismantle what we created. They already took our land and stripped us of our identities; now they want to come here and stomp on our monuments because their history is being corrected and we're learning the truth behind the lies of this country that were passed off as facts"

Alvarez also expanded on the importance of solidarity and the cooperation of organizations that helped drive the white nationalists out of Chicano Park. "That day showed the unity and solidarity between Chicanos and it showed the unity between other organizations and other standpoints of liberation and fighting oppression. It showed that when people put their differences aside and come together to defend something that's right, it can be done anywhere."

Alvarez also acknowledged that many threats facing Barrio Logan often come from within the community and the surrounding city itself. From hyper aggressive policing by the SDPD, to the ever-increasing threat of gentrification and even biased press from local media covering the community.

"The struggle is still the same, it's just evolved to modern ideals. Even though people say, 'racism has died' it hasn't died. Even though they say, 'police brutality isn't a big issue anymore' it is a big issue. Just because we don't hear it or see it through the media anymore doesn't mean it's not going on."

The SDPD has been a particular concern for the Berets, with several instances of police driving their vehicles through the park and harassing groups of park-goers having been documented by the Berets themselves after confronting overly-aggressive police. "Law enforcement is not here to protect and serve you," Alvarez said. "You may be taught to trust them, but they are not taught to trust you."

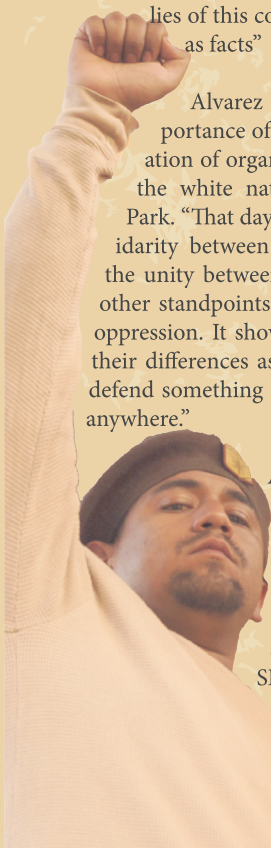
While the work of the Brown Berets is all tied back to the Barrio, the group's work is by no means regulated strictly to the realm of community defense. For the past seven years the organization has organized an annual community toy drive to help serve underprivileged children in the community.

"The toy drive started off with just three hundred dollars, four people and a couple kids; we've now been going seven years strong," Alvarez praised the drive's impact to inspire kids to give back to their own communities, "we show these kids that they can do it to. They can do it within their own schools, their own community. Everybody has a part, it doesn't have to be physical all the time."

Likewise, for the past nine years the Brown Berets also help provide the 'Viva La Mujer' scholarship, given to women who identify as Chicana/Latina planning to attend college. While sexism and machismo was rife within the first wave of the Chicano Civil-Rights Movement, Desiree McFadden an Officer of Aztlán in the chapter assured that women in the Brown Berets are treated just the same as their male comrades.

"As a woman, I will say that I am treated equally just as my comrades. I am treated with respect, and here in the Brown Berets de Aztlán it's recognized that women are needed in this movement and revolution."

Alvarez, follows up saying, "When you put on



that uniform there is no gender roll. We are here as warriors for the movement, and when it comes to warriors there is no sexuality.”

To some joining the Brown Berets can be a mysterious or intimidating process. There is no official website, no head office or application to fill out, becoming a Brown Beret requires going straight to the source and making direct contact with the Berets themselves.

Alvarez expressed the need for more young Chicanos and Chicanas to take up leadership roles within the organization as the founders continue to pass the torch on to a new generation.

“To anyone who wants to be involved with the Brown Berets don’t be afraid or [be] hesitant; but understand that it’s a big responsibility and it’s not a social club. It’s real work, and takes real effort and commitment,” Alvarez said regarding recruitment. “Chicano Park is our headquarters, this is home base for us. We’re always here, we’re casual people. Come up to us, hang out and talk.”

Chicanos and Chicanas of all walks of life, experiences and beliefs that align with the mission of the Brown Berets are welcome; the chapter only requires that applicants meet the age requirement of seventeen and up.

Alvarez, recounting his own experience enthusiastically encouraged that young people looking do good for their neighborhoods. “The Berets are a way to not only fight for your community, but to also find out about yourself and where your people came from and how you can make a connection to that.”

Alvarez stressed that although much has changed since the Brown Berets formed in the 1960’s, many of the same struggles Chicanos faced then still persist today. “The same oppressions that our people faced in past eras [are] still happening in a different way, the fight hasn’t ended. The Brown Berets still exist because that fight isn’t over and it’s important that we continue to carry that torch whether it’s another decade, century, millennium we have to continue.”