

Many different threads have met in Morganton, North Carolina. It has a long history of textiles and is in fact reinventing one of the state's hallmark industries as the Carolina Textile District seeks to build a cooperative future for its participating businesses; one where they refer customers to each other.

A different industry, poultry processing, also exists in Morganton. While meat processing does not have the same legacy in North Carolina, or the South, as textiles, it has readily expanded over the past 60 years or more, changing communities along the way. In Morganton, immigrant and migrant laborers were drawn to the difficult labor which, in rural areas, can provide one of the fastest routes to owning a home and building a life.

Many of these immigrants are from Guatemala, and are indigenous Maya. Morganton now, is home to a larger community of Maya and you are just as likely to hear Spanish spoken as you are the Mayan dialect Q'an'Jobal. TOSS is a local arts non profit that advocates for the Morganton community at large, providing resources to a growing network of artists and students, so that they can reach their full potential in the arts.

TOSS is another example of how Morganton is redefining commerce in its community. In a visual representation of Morganton's many identities, and in collaboration with the NC Museum of Art, TOSS has driven a mural initiative to celebrate Morganton's local ecology, and to promote a deeper appreciation for the conservation and stewardship of the region, along with its cultural diversity, by celebrating the culture and talents of the Hispanic community in NC. Called *realidades del Sur*, or, southern realities, the mural project is born of the cooperative efforts of TOSS cofounder Katherine Ervin and Latinx artist Alexa Eliana Chumpitaz.

Alexa: Hello?

Karl: Hi, Alexa?

A: Hi.

KG: Hi, how are you doing?

A: I'm doing great, how about yourself?

Alexa has lived all over NC, leaving her mark in murals along the way. A first generation American herself, she has used her considerable talent to create a mural that speaks to Morganton's story as much as it does her own. Be sure to visit the Northeastern wall of 212 Avery Street in Morganton North Carolina, to see for yourself.

A: My name is Alexa Eliana Chumpitaz and I am a visual artist based out of Raleigh North Carolina. I've been primarily focusing on murals as well as graphic design for the state with their recycling program working with different local governments and municipalities to educate towns

and cities on proper waste disposal. So that's what I do during the day and in the afternoons I like to focus on contract work that often focuses on painting and commission and overall just focusing on building my mural base.

KE: My name is Katherine Ervin, I grew up in Morganton North Carolina that's where I currently reside and work.

KG: So go ahead, introduce TOSS and tell us what that's about.

KE: So TOSS is an arts nonprofit. It began in 2015 when local artists and arts educators identified a really dire need to support arts education in our region. Currently we actually only have 2 arts teachers in our 14 public elementary schools, many of which are classified as title 1 schools. So initially we began as an after school program, serving about forty students and then we began a series of workshops with community members in our public schools, to really teach creative thinking and critical thinking skills. So we began that way and over time we have developed a more public facing, public oriented art program as well. So that's been our work developing a series of public art projects around key issues that we really care about, namely diversity and inclusion and environmental stewardship. So a couple of the things we've done is a Maya in Morganton campaign to support the emerging Latinx family-owned business and free dinners to tell the story of that business, and the catawba scavenger hunt was a day long scavenger hunt celebrating the local ecology and conservation efforts in our region on our local greenway. And that was so fun that was about 200 participants last year on our greenway. It was just a really fun way to celebrate art and our beautiful environment. And then this recently, hometown walkabout, which is an art-based walking tour in downtown Morganton that tells the story of diversity and inclusion in our region. These are all things that we are working on and developing and we're really excited about.

KG: Yeah, it's an amazing thing that you have going on and it seems to have a lot of connections to community and industry. There's a big Maya population in morganton, Guatemalan. Could you talk a little more about why that is?

KE: So morganton is in burke county, and it's a beautiful place and like the region burke county is majority white and minority Latinx, african-american, asian american. however, morganton is home to a large population of Mayans. From a very specific region, from aqucatán, in Guatemala. And our region is very similar geographically but they did come as seasonal workers, primarily from Florida, initially. They came up to North Carolina to work in poultry processing plants and on farms. And I would actually encourage everyone to get this book called Maya of Morganton. It's an incredible chronicle of the struggles and the triumph of the Guatemalan immigrants who come to Morganton who come to this place to make it a more just and equitable place for them to live. It's really a fascinating story of resiliency and triumph over a lot of odds. So everyone check out that book it's great.

KG: So a lot of towns have gone through losing industry, whether it be textiles or other industry. And Morganton has a similar history in the Textile business. Can you talk about that industry a little bit, its present, and how the community there is approaching that in a new way or cooperative way?

KE: The Carolinas really have been a Mecca for textile and furniture manufacturing. And there have been a lot of things that have changed that, the reshoring of manufacturing after NAFTA and other issues that have made local and regional textile manufacturing more difficult. There's a declining workforce population and other things but we are really seeing a resurgence in the industries. There's a greater I think focus now on domestic manufacturing and sustainable practices. And there are some really interesting initiatives in our area to capitalize on sustainable practices and think more critically about resiliencies within supply chains so a great example of that is the work that the industrial commons and the Carolina textile district to elevate sustainable manufacturing processes. And think about just better ways of doing business. To really root wealth locally and support the working class communities that are here in our region. And TOSS has really been interested in supporting that movement and thinking about how to really promote economic development through creative thinking. We're really trying to think innovatively about how we bring opportunity and work to rural areas like ours.

KG: So it's kind of an ideal partnership, a creative organization, arts based organization with one that has roots in industry as well as sustainability. I think that absolutely seems powerful and sustainable one.

KE: Yes, I think so too and I think it's just fascinating that creativity is one of the most incredible resources at our disposal. And I think that's really helping our leaders connect those dots. So where and how do we cultivate creativity and innovation and entrepreneurial opportunities. We really have to start doing that at the beginning of our children's formation. So in elementary schools children need to be taught creative thinking and creative ideation because that is only going to assist communities in building more resilient economies in the future.

KG: Can you talk a little bit about how the project Realidades del Sur came about and just how that connects to what you've been describing and what TOSS does.

KE: Yes. So this mural was a really perfect melding of two of our key areas of interest as an advocacy studio. Celebrating our diverse communities and advocating for our environment. So we have been working, as I mentioned earlier, really closely with Little Guatemala, the emerging family-owned. The North Carolina Museum of Art reached out about coordinating a mural in Morganton celebrating the Latinx culture in 2019 around that theme. So it was really a perfect fit. At the time we were also working really closely with the foothills conservancy of North Carolina, our regional land conservation group. So we were working on some arts education and some creative workshops within our public school. Just working on conservation themes and helping our students understand what was in their backyard. So the program was called Our Big Backyard. So the mural kind of came from a place where we wanted to celebrate actual diversity

within our communities and also our bio-diverse environment here in the Carolinas. So we knew that the mural needed to be painted by someone in the Latinx community and we knew that we have a large hispanic population here in Morganton and we wanted to celebrate the diversity and beauty of our region. So we worked with Alexa to come up with a design and just what we need to get the project underway.

KG: I wanna hear about that process Alexa and also I understand that you've lived in different parts of North Carolina. I'm curious how Morganton compares, based on your travels around the state?

A: right, um so I thought this when Kat came to me and reached out about this opportunity I was like, yes, all about it. Like, it related to a lot of my background and how I grew up. Like I'm first generation born from both sides of my family here in the US. And overall it was just a touching piece in regard to celebrating our cultural diversity and bringing the Latinx culture. I pretty much grew up in Jacksonville North Carolina. My dad was in the military so we grew up on a military town and I moved to Raleigh in 2017 to expand my art endeavors and continue to explore and find new opportunities and it was such an honor and an amazing opportunity to also start continuing my journey as I'm continuing to make these murals throughout North Carolina. So I made one in the Piedmont a couple, and I also made one in the coast, in Jacksonville. And so, now I'm like ok, time to make my way over to the mountains. It's been such a fascinating journey. The process itself was just awesome. I love painting animals, I love painting plants, I love painting the outdoors. I love nature. And to also integrate cultural diversity is also phenomenal. I always put a little of me in every mural I've done. Like if it is little eggs here and there. Little easter eggs, like some personal jewelry, a shawl. Little things that unless people really know me they're like oh wow those are your earrings or oh that's your headband. Small. Little things. So when we came up with the idea of making it a profile of myself I was like yes this, what a bold move I love it. I do want everyone to know that myself inspires me and my culture inspires myself. Like, my artwork. Um I want others to know that this mural is me celebrating myself. My culture is a representation in my artwork. Both of my parents are from Peru. So, I do want some of those little, small, tiny, minuscule details that speak volumes about me that someone in the Guatemalan community can see and say oh they recognize that. There was actually a person who passed by the mural at one point who said "oh wow I love those earrings they remind me so much of my grandma, like my mom's side is from Guatemala and I'm also part Mexican and just seeing that reminds me of my grandma. And that's what I want to be. I want others to see that and see their culture too. I think the diversity of like the biodiversity in the mural. I want that to be also an educational factor. What I did is I chose flora and fauna that is primarily found in Burke County and I wrote all the names down at the bottom of the mural. That way people can also read what they're seeing. There's this one woman who passed by and said "oh my gosh I love this." It was her and a group of two friends who were doing their stroll by, and she pointed out this one bird and said this is this type of warbler, and then they read at the bottom that it was something else but they were really happy to learn the difference. I think that's the fascinating part of being to create mural that is so detailed and that has so much to look at that people can also learn. It's not just a pretty thing but it gets people thinking, and saying

“maybe I’ll go look for that warbler.” And that was pretty much the goal in creating this mural. It was like to celebrate my culture and to engage any viewer that’s coming by.

KG: What are the dimensions of the mural, how large is it?

A: Ok, so the mural is 58 ft long and 13 feet tall.

KE: It’s so big!

A: It’s massive. I did a mural last year and thought this is the biggest mural I’ve ever done and it came out close to 53’ and this one topped that off. It was immense.

KG: Did you engage Katherine and Alexa with the community in what you wanted the mural to be, and if so what were those conversations like?

KE: yeah well I can share just a little bit. Initially we talked with the foothills conservancy about what animals we should use and how we should go about the design and Alexa put together a few different drafts that we looked at together and we did have about 80 people from our community look at it and share their feedback on the 2nd or 3rd drafts. And then from there she implemented a bunch of their ideas to make the final draft. So it was really fun to get people involved in the process.

KG: Is that the same for you Alexa? In your other murals have you experienced the same kind of community engagement in your artwork?

A: More so I worked with private clients, this is my most community engaged mural I’ve done to date. But it pretty much goes the same, I have a rough idea of what to focus on and then I create a couple drafts and then I get feedback and then I incorporate that feedback and we just start going on the wall. Usually I get a response like “wow, I really didn’t see this coming this way and wow this is nothing like I would have imagined.” So that’s a really good response to just have a vision and a dream and being able to visually convey that.

KG: I had the chance to drive past it and um the scale of it is impressive and it’s a beautiful beautiful mural so everyone needs to take a chance and go up to morganton and check it out. I want to ask you both you’ve spoken so eloquently about how this mural ties together different agencies, the conservancy, art, and education. I wonder, in a sentence or two what makes you most proud about where TOSS, morganton, realidades del sur, other southern realities are headed? What are you most excited about?

KE: I can just share that the support and enthusiasm that we have experienced through this project is what makes me so excited about the work we’re doing. The North Carolina Museum of Art, local non profits, local businesses, our city, the foothill conservancy, so many people the NC arts council. So many people have contributed financially to the project and then it’s just really

incredible to see on a grassroots level all the school kids participating in it and teachers getting excited about the work and having that visual representation there to take those students to see and the response has just been tremendous and it makes me incredibly proud.

A: My feelings on the impact of this mural is pretty much the ongoing engagement with the community that it has. As I was doing the mural itself it was such a tremendous feeling to have so many people just walk by doing their everyday strolls, meeting the families across the street who will be looking at this every day and just the people who stop and say “this is amazing,” and standing their for 10 seconds, really having people engaged in that way makes me very happy.

KG: its a beautiful thing. Well thank you both so much for joining me. I’m excited about the project and where these different organizations are headed. Thank you both, if there’s anything else you’d like to share at this moment please feel free but I’m so grateful for your time.

KE and A: Thank you, thank you we really appreciate it.