

CITYWIDE GENTRIFICATION CONVERSATION LAUNCHES NEW COLLECTIVE

BY DANIELLE KROLEWICZ

DENVER COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK (CAN) is a newfound collective made up of many organizations in the metro area including the Colorado Latino Forum, Indivisible Denver, Cross Community Coalition, Denver Food Rescue, Project VOYCE, GES Coalition, Ditch the I-70 Ditch, and Denver Homeless Out Loud, among many others.

“Who ‘we’ are continues to evolve,” says PJ D’Amico, community activist and member of the group.

In November 2017, Denver coffee shop *ink!* posted a sign outside its building in the Five Points neighborhood that read, “Happily gentrifying the neighborhood since 2014,” on one side and, “Nothing says gentrification better than a fresh brewed cortado” on the other. Many residents of Five Points and surrounding community members organized and attended protests of *ink!*, but also demanded larger action in regards

to rapid gentrification and displacement throughout the city. Denver CAN was created as a response.

Lisa Calderon, one of the founding members of Denver CAN and a representative of the Colorado Latino Forum, explained the thought process that led to creating the collective.

“What happens next, after the crowds and camera goes away? We were pretty clear planning that protest that it was more than a sign. If [*ink!*] changed the sign, so what, we would still have the problem of gentrification in our neighborhood,” Calderon says.

“Part of the struggle was...that gentrification brings some good things, like having more places to eat and having our sidewalks fixed and better bike lanes, etc. But that really wasn’t it for us. It was the fact of displacement at such a rapid pace is overshadowing the good that can come out of thoughtful development. It’s not about stopping gentrification in

terms of progress, but progress should not come at the cost of displacement,” explains Calderon. “Then we needed to strategize what that would look like and knew that was more than us. Gentrification isn’t a new fight.”

So the decision was made to continue that fight by unifying organizations that already exist and address the issues caused by gentrification, especially high cost of rent and living, homelessness and displacement. Denver CAN’s first mission was and is to create networks of connection across the city that hadn’t been there before — at least not in a sustained way.

In addition to building a city-wide platform for those already involved in combating the negative effects of gentrification, a major goal of Denver CAN is to identify strategies being used to do so, in order to reach a larger number of people who may be affected and not even know.

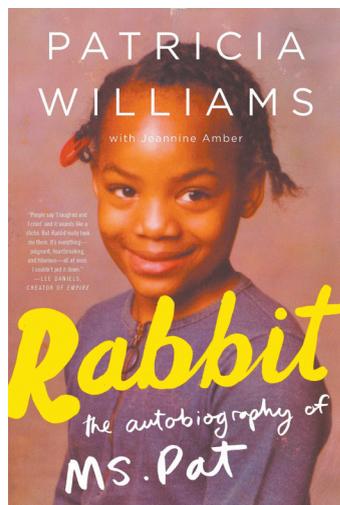
“When the city says, ‘we have had community input’ that usually means a small group of people they’ve selected,” says Calderon. “We are blowing up that paradigm and creating our own table of people not invited to the table. We don’t want to make the same mistake the city is by identifying a few folks as community, but reaching more people.”

Denver CAN put on the Gentrification Summit in December 2017, and, though numbers fluctuate, about 20 members continue to meet bi-monthly. Sub-committees focus on each of the four pillars talked about at the summit which are cultural preservation, affordable and attainable housing, political systemic accountability, and home and business ownership. ■

Find more information on Denver CAN, including upcoming actions and events, at facebook.com/denvercan5280/

LAUGHING IN THE FACE OF DEFEAT IN “RABBIT: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MS. PAT”

BY S.E. FLEENOR



“RABBIT: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MS. PAT” BOOK COVER

“RABBIT: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MS. PAT” is the harrowing tale, hilariously told, of one woman’s journey through poverty to becoming a comedian.

People often think they understand Williams’ experiences because of shows like “The Wire.”

“But TV doesn’t tell the whole story. It doesn’t show what it’s like for girls like me,” writes Williams. “How one thing can lead to another so that one minute you’re a twelve-year-old looking for attention, then suddenly you end up pregnant at thirteen, with nobody to turn to for help.”

Williams reached puberty at age 12 and with it came acne, curves that made her clothes too tight, and a new ability. “I’d found my secret talent: I had a lot of mouth.” She started crafting insults, known as “joning,” that would make the other kids back off. It was her ability to jone that caught the eye of 20-year-old Derrick.

When Williams became pregnant at thirteen, after being pressured into sex, she thought her dreams of being with him forever might come true. The only problem was that he was married. And had other girlfriends. And other babies.

After Derrick was arrested for dealing crack, Williams found herself without a means to provide for her family. “I’d never seen a girl selling dope before, but how hard could it be?”

Dealing gave Williams a life she had never imagined. She had enough food on the table and her daughters had stylish clothing. She was able to help her mother and siblings. Williams even welcomed her nieces into her home. All at 16 years old.

The dream she had built shattered when she was arrested. Williams served eight months in jail. When she was released, she felt ready to change her life. Derrick picked her up from the jail that day and as they drove to pick up their kids, he laughed at her dreams. Williams dropped it. “That’s the power he had over me. He could make me doubt myself and change my mind like nobody else.”

When Williams finally decided to quit Derrick, her life took a turn, for the better this time. She met her future husband, Michael, who encouraged her to stop hustling and get an education.

Eventually, Williams took Michael’s advice and started a job readiness program where she was assigned a caseworker. After

months of study, getting her GED and completing her medical assistant certificate, she found the perfect job. All they needed was to run a background check and the job was hers. It had been seven years since she’d been arrested, but it didn’t matter.

Williams felt defeated and went to her caseworker to share her pain. She did so in such a hilarious way that she was told she should be a comedian. In time, she made her way to the comedy club, which led her to more comedy clubs and podcasts. Today, Williams is a traveling comedian who you can see perform in cities all over the United States.

Throughout her story, Williams highlights the people who helped her along the way, calling them angels. In elementary school, it was her literacy teacher who taught her to read and to dream. When she was a young mother and a dealer, it was her business partner who taught her composure. While incarcerated, two women took her under their wing and told her she could do something different. After she was released, it was her caseworker who buoyed Williams. Finally, it was Williams’ family, her husband, children, nieces and nephews, that filled her heart. It was comedy, though, that made her complete.

Williams’ book contains insights that would be beneficial for anyone to read, but her work could be particularly useful to policymakers. Her manipulation sexually from an early age by older men could further highlight the importance of early, comprehensive sexual education and empowerment of young girls and women. The barriers she faced when seeking employment could inform voters and elected officials on the impact of required reporting of felony convictions. There are innumerable likewise examples throughout the book that could change how we conceive of and apply laws, policies, and services in impoverished communities.

Williams faced the numerous and seemingly endless challenges of her life and turned them into a way to make people laugh. Her sense of humor and impeccable comedic delivery aren’t just byproducts of getting by, but were survival mechanisms for getting through and out of poverty. This is the story of a woman who loves ferociously, gives without question, and laughs until we’re all laughing with her. ■