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Festival highlights ambitious plans for vacant building



By [Shehzil Zahid](#)

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#H.E.A.R.T.S., #Lincoln Recovery Center, #Mott Haven-Port Morris Community Land Stewards, #South Bronx Unite, #Virginia Ayress, #Young Lords



Photo: Shehzil



A plenero-led procession to the former Lincoln Recovery Center on E. 140th Street in Mott Haven on Sept. 7. Photos by Shehzil Zahid

The old Lincoln Recovery Center was once a lifeline to residents of Mott Haven and beyond, introducing acupuncture to aid in detoxification. Since then, the building has been closed for close to a decade, its windows and doors encased in metal, its brick facade splashed with halfhearted graffiti.

Community efforts to revitalize the empty building took a concrete step forward on the evening of Sept. 7, on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Young Lords. The community organization [South Bronx Unite](#) presented the mural at its third annual H.E.ARTS Festival. Its goal is to convert the empty building into a multipurpose community center for health (H), education (E) and the arts (ARTS) for local youth.



Virginia Ayress' "We Have a Story to Tell," a new mural on the former health center.

The mural's vibrant colors and evocative Mexican-inspired scenes bring new life to the weathered brick structure at 349 East 140th St. — and to the neighborhood that surrounds it. Inspired by immigrant children separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexican border, Chilean artist Virginia Ayress called her mural "We Have a Story to Tell."

"There aren't many spaces in the Bronx for health and art. Everyone is yearning for this and should have it," says Angelica de la Cruz, co-founder of the TRIBE Co-Create, a co-working space for entrepreneurs, activists and creatives who identify as People of Color.

"The mural brings the community together," says Pierre Obama, a medical assistant who lives in the neighborhood. "It brings a light to this neighborhood."

The event was also a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Young Lords organization, members of which founded the Lincoln Recovery Center. In 1968, the Young Lords reinvented themselves from a Chicago street gang to a civil and human rights organization advocating self-determination for Puerto Rico and other peoples across Latin America.

Walter Bosque, Co-founder of the Lincoln Recovery Center and former member of the Young Lords, was present to speak on the Young Lords' contributions to drug-recovery efforts in the South Bronx. Bosque emphasized the importance of reconciling the past, present and future, for the benefit of the community.

South Bronx Unite, working with the [Mott Haven/Port Morris Community Land Stewards](#) — a community land trust — have been trying to acquire the Lincoln building to turn it into a multipurpose community center.

Raymond Figueroa, a board member of the land stewards group, says his organization has retained an architect to draft plans for the building and secured funding to develop models of the space. The board is currently organizing to take stewardship of the building, which would place the building in the care of the land stewards group, he added.

The event began with a song-and-dance procession from nearby Brook Park to the Lincoln Recovery Center. The procession was led by the Pregones Theater, a traveling theater group based on Walton Avenue that performs original work rooted in Latino/Puerto Rican culture, and Nos Quedamos, the Melrose-based non-profit community development organization.

The evening concluded with a film screening of the "The People's Detox" by Jenna Bliss in the handball court across the street. The film details the Young Lords' efforts to acquire and launch the Lincoln Recovery Center in 1970.

"The event was incredible, powerful," says Stephanie Rodriguez, another resident. "This was a healing space, a space of resistance, solidarity, love and community and that's what our communities need."

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