

"If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."

Aspen Daily News

Growing an equitable community through shared personal stories

Monday, April 18, 2022

By Jacqueline Reynolds Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

Alejandro Jimenez came to America from his homeland of Colima, Mexico when he was a child. He grew up working as a farmhand in the fields of Oregon and navigating the United States education system as a non-native English speaker and formerly undocumented immigrant.

He had stories to tell — his own stories. In combating the generalized immigrant narrative, he started expressing his own true narrative through poetry.

Recognized as an award-winning poet and educator, Jimenez's stories are now shared in classrooms, publications and on stages across North America. He is the 2021 Mexican National Poetry Slam Champion, a two-time National Poetry Slam Semi-Finalist, an Emmy-nominated poet and has performed and spoken for students and audiences near and far.

The nationally acclaimed writer is coming to The Arts Campus At Willits (TACAW) on Wednesday night to share his stories and experiences with the Roaring Fork Valley. The event is free and open to the public and marks the first conversation in the Equity Speaker Series.



Alejandro Jimenez is an acclaimed poet, writer and educator from Colima, Mexico. As a formerly undocumented immigrant, his work centers around cultural identity, immigrant narratives, masculinity and memory. Currently living in New Mexico, Jimenez will open the "Equity Speaker Series," an initiative co-presented by TACAW and MANAUS.

Co-launched by TACAW and MANAUS — a social justice nonprofit based out of Carbondale — the Equity Speaker Series is an ongoing program to provide the entire community with access to experts in the realm of equity and antiracism.

The series is an initiative of MANAUS' Equity Action Project (EAP), a seven-week equity training program aimed to forge a regional community that dismantles oppressive systems and empowers leadership positions that are more representative of the region's diversity.

MANAUS began designing the

EAP in May 2020 as a response to the injustices illuminated by the pandemic and the racial justice movement that surged in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. The project officially launched in January 2021 and has since developed a subcommunity of individuals and organizations in the valley through its cohorts and intensive Diversity, Equity and Inclusion training.

While the larger EAP was conceived almost two years ago, the Equity Speaker Series recently came about in efforts to further engage the community in these conversations through compelling speakers and their personal stories.

“Our intention behind this is to create greater community dialogue around equity and the different forms of equity and create a space for these conversations,” said Bryan Alvarez-Terrazas, lead manager of the EAP. “So we’re looking for a way to bring in these different ideas, these different guest speakers to our community and how we can have widespread impact in terms of who folks have access to.”

Alvarez-Terrazas said part of the reason they wanted to bring Jimenez as the first guest speaker in the series is because the poet’s experience and narrative resonates with a lot of people who live in the Roaring Fork Valley communities.

“Having guest speakers come in to really validate and talk to the experience that a lot of folks in our communities have faced coming here either as immigrants or have seen growing up here with immigrant parents — that’s a lot of what we’re trying to address through this series,” Alvarez-Terrazas said.

Another goal of the Equity Speaker Series, Alvarez-Terrazas explains, is to center the voices of those who have typically been marginalized and really put them at the forefront to speak their experience and “speak their truth.”

Through working in the antiracism and DEI training space and from recent conversations with various consulting firms, Alvarez-Terrazas notes that

there’s been a “general decline” over the past two years in terms of how much attention and participation this type of work is getting.

“I think my part is making sure that we continue to shine a spotlight on this type of work and these types of narratives and conversations to make sure the work doesn’t unintentionally dissipate back into the backgrounds and disappear from the public eye,” Alvarez-Terrazas said. “For me, it’s about making sure that it’s an ongoing, living conversation and then that we invite the audience and our community to really reflect on these stories and how they can then shift in their personal and professional lives to become more equitable.”

Kendall Smith, director of programming at TACAW, said that being able to have this impactful speaker series commence at TACAW’s midvalley location helps in gathering people from upper and lower Roaring Fork communities.

“We’re always working to stitch the community together and be a place for that to happen,” Smith said. “Collaborating with an esteemed partner like Equity Action Project and having this series live in our space the whole time, I think is one of the best ways for us to put our foot forward; from our standpoint, anytime we can get people together and have these conversations, our community is better off for it.”

The first Equity Speaker Series event featuring Jimenez will take place at TACAW on Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public and reservations are requested. To RSVP, visit the TACAW website, www.tacaw.org.

