

DIVER\$ITY Conversations: Las Fotos Project
Cobi Krieger Interviews Executive Director Lucia Torres

Las Fotos Project (LFP) is an LA-based nonprofit that addresses diversity in the creative workforce while applying innovative financial models. LFP's mission is to elevate the voices of teenage girls from communities of color through photography and mentorship, empowering them to channel their creativity to benefit themselves, their communities, and their future careers. Founded in 2010 by LA-based photographer Eric V. Ibarra, LFP has grown exponentially over the past few years. One driver of this growth has been their Creative Entrepreneurship Opportunities (CEO) program, which combines workforce development with an innovative social enterprise and diversifies the organization's revenue streams.

Current Executive Director Lucia Torres and I discussed the organization's staff, programs, and financial solutions to address the racial and socioeconomic disparities their students experience in the creative workforce.

Cobi Krieger

Thank you for speaking to me, Lucia. It's a pleasure to learn more about Las Fotos Project.

Reading LFP's mission, it's clear how the organization is committed to increasing diversity within the creative workforce. Before we speak about LFP's programs and their impact on the creative workforce in LA, I wanted to ask about your own part of the workforce: your staff. How diverse is it?

Lucia Torres

In recent years, demand for our programs pushed the need to grow our staff, and so Eric [V. Ibarra] began building roles for the organization that would support its growth. As the organization grew, Eric intentionally looked to hire people who reflected the organization's values. It was important for him that new staff members fully understood LFP's mission and fully embodied our organizational character.

Being an organization that is primarily BIWOC is very important to us because the very core of our work is to lift up young women of color and dismantle gender inequities in the arts and the creative economy. Almost everyone who currently works with the organization had initially engaged with us as a volunteer or as a student. Today, our administrative and program teams are 100 percent BIWOC. We also employ six part time Teaching Artists every semester (all women as well) and have roughly 35 volunteer mentors working with us every Fall and Spring; 90 percent of them identify as women.

In addition to staff and volunteers, I would say that our leadership and board are pretty diverse. Overall, we are majorly BIPOC, with roughly 30 or 40 percent of folks identifying as LGBTQIA. However, I should note that as an organization, we are very cognizant of the fact that we are a heavily Latina-led.

[\(All of our staff are also listed on our website\)](#)

CK

And how do you compensate your staff?

LT

Prior to his departure, Eric, myself, and the LFP board did some work around competitive compensation for the positions we were adding to the organization. This resulted in a transparent salary scale that is applied for all positions and available to all employees. A coordinator position, for example, starts at a \$20 hourly rate, which will increase with every anniversary year within the organization. If promoted to a manager role, the employee would earn the corresponding hourly rate, and so on.

We are also building a culture of mental and emotional wellness within the organization. In addition to their base salary, we also ‘compensate’ staff with scheduling flexibility and paid time off. I really try to encourage my staff to rework their schedules if they find themselves in a situation where they’re working late nights or weekends (for example, when we have events or conferences) so that they won’t feel burnt out by the end of the week.

CK

Transparency is extremely helpful, I believe, especially considering the typical opacity surrounding compensation.

This brings me to my next question – How important is it to address compensation in your training programs? Do you address compensation in the context of diversity?

LT

Extremely important! Our Creative Entrepreneurship Opportunities (CEO) program was sparked by a student who was looking for advice regarding compensation for her photography work. When training students, we address compensation not only in the context of skill-level or project breadth, but also in the context of their personal value. LFP aims to create a space for students to be vulnerable, talk about systemic gender disparities and the challenges that are especially faced by women of color, in regard to compensation and greater narratives about self-worth.

There’s a narrative placed upon girls, especially black and brown girls, that their value is measured by their productivity and not by their creativity. Produce more, say less. Narratives like this have gaslighted us when we’ve attempted to negotiate a salary, set the prices for our goods and creative services, or advocate for pay raises and promotions. The LFP CEO program isn’t just technically training our students for a career in the creative economy. CEO also plays a part in breaking the cycle of undervaluing the worth of women of color as professionals and creatives.

CK

Compensation and self-worth are closely connected. Though it is a monetary measure, a salary can still be a very poignant reflection of the value of one's work, skills, and professional identity. For that reason, the CEO program is extremely valuable to future creative workers.

Interestingly, the program has also become a valuable operation for LFP in the sense that it generates earned revenue, diversifies your revenue streams, and reduces your dependence on raising funds. Can you tell me more about the program's inception and its impact on your budget?

LT

CEO launched in 2017. Now, in 2020, the service fees LFP collects through the program comprise about 10 percent of the organization's income. CEO students become part of our pool of photographers who are available to be contracted for services like event photography, headshots, product photography, etc. The dollars that come into LFP through clients who contract these services are split three ways among the following entities: students who perform the contracted services, mentors who support those students, and the organization that pays staff who run the program.

We have had a lot of bumps in building out what this model looks like, and are still experiencing them, especially with COVID keeping us from providing services. That being said, it's incredible how the program went from training a few students to be freelance photographers, to now working with up to 24 young women entrepreneurs every semester.

This model hasn't afforded us full freedom in managing our budget, but it's definitely provided us with some viable sources of unrestricted funding that we can continue to nurture and grow for future sustainability.

CK

That's an exemplary way of innovating mission-based work. Creating earned revenue is so important for arts nonprofits, especially ones that are growing and have increasing administrative costs. Are there any other financial practices or models you use at LFP to sustain your mission?

LT

Before I joined LFP, I was working with an economic development organization, and having a lot of conversations about access to wealth. I was doing a lot of research on business incubators and learning about collectives. When I joined the organization, I was stewing in a bit of resentment for the nonprofit industrial complex, and this feeling that community-based nonprofits were at the mercy of people who hold and distribute traditional asset-based wealth.

With this in mind, last year LFP launched the Sister Circle, a program for women of color and non-binary individuals who align themselves with the experience of women, who are seeking to invest in younger women of color. In a sense, these individuals are all assets to LFP. Enabling them to connect and network strengthens our community. Naturally, COVID has caused some changes in our original plans, but the Sister Circle and LFP's networks are growing and we remain very active.

CK

Organizational affiliation and access to wealth are extremely important, and sometimes overlooked, facets of inequity. Similarly, wealth (or lack thereof) is a greater contributor to racial economic gaps than income.

As a culturally specific arts organization, what challenges have you faced while interacting with funders and especially while trying to raise unrestricted or general operating funds?

LT

Raising general operating funds is a challenge for most organizations, and I can understand why funders want to focus on programs to ensure investments have a direct impact on communities and discourage bloating administrative expenses or other unethical practices.

However, the same issues we see with pay equity among creatives of color and women creatives replicate themselves in the nonprofit sector. I've had several conversations with other nonprofit leaders of color regarding funding, especially unrestricted funding. A common thread has been that arts administrators of color need to work especially hard to develop relationships with large-impact funders and also convince them to provide unrestricted funding. This is because we don't have the relationships to legacy wealth that perhaps other white, male administrators or white-dominated boards carry with them.

At LFP, we constantly weigh the financial ties and cultural and professional assets of prospective board members. Do we onboard members with deep connections to wealth, but no real connection to our organizational community? Or deep connections to our community and work, but not to wealth? At LFP we've been prioritizing the latter and exploring what it means to bring "wealth" into the organization by redefining value and considering people's time, skillsets, and knowledge.

Another challenge is that when general operating funds are available, they often depend on what value staff bring to the organization. This value is typically measured by academic or professional 'expertise,' which overlooks an employee's cultural connections and experiences. As a community-based arts organization, this gets extremely frustrating and feels alienating. LFP constantly searches for ways to have our community members engaged with our work. This could mean a local artist or a student's family member with a relevant skillset. Funders will often demand some sort of justification for having them be paid through operational funds - for example, seeking additional partnerships to validate the individual's work. This is taxing and discouraging. Funders aren't making the connection that general operating funds are truly an investment in BIPOC creatives, fueling their professional growth.

Recently, as funders are renewing their focus on addressing racial equity through programming, this is especially frustrating and somewhat ironic. LFP was founded upon values of racial equity, and these values are visible in its mission, programs, staff, and leadership. We already have a diverse staff and board, and we already work with youth of color, providing them with tools to counter disparities they are likely to face in pursuit of a creative career. Demands funders may have for an organization like LFP become yet another burden, born from systemic white supremacy, for arts administrators of color to bear. Considering LFP's visible commitment to

diversity, when funders ignore it, that makes us all feel as if we and our work are invisible. Asking BIPOC organizations to restructure their organic community model to fit what a 'consulted' model of inclusion looks like is incredibly injurious for BIPOC communities who have constantly been fighting to be seen and heard.

CK

What compromises have you had to make in regard to compensation? How has that affected your operations and programs?

LT

In some cases, lack of operational funds have forced us to reduce the number of Teaching Artists. This immediately reduced the programs we were able to offer and the number of students we were able to serve. This cycle has us chasing our own tail - trying to reach numbers of participants that funders want to see engaged through their program-centered funding, but not having the capacity to provide classes for these students because we aren't able to allocate funds to pay our staff.

In 2020, we also had to reduce the entire staff time because of COVID. The whole organization went down to 30 hours a week. This was a really difficult decision, but one that we had to make in order to remedy the loss of revenue we experienced when our service fee contracts were canceled, and the loss of potential funding from foundations who changed their focus to disaster-relief or health services. While we reduced our staff time, we didn't reduce our programming activities, and so we've all had to either readjust our work plans for the year or put working on certain strategic goals on the back burner in order to keep our programming running. We've been managing our expenses quite well during this time, and I don't have any fears of having to let go of staff. Actually, we'll be able to bring everyone back to full time very soon. That being said, it's been exhausting. Several of our funders were very understanding and very caring about the situation, mostly those from private family foundations. But we are still feeling the pressure to prove that our organization is 'essential' during this time as a way to justify our administrative costs.

CK

How do you think LFP would change if you couldn't afford to employ the diverse group of people you do now?

LT

I don't think we'd be the same organization at all. The reason LFP brings so many people together is that staff and leadership reflect the community that they serve. The relationships we build with our students are based on mutual trust and respect. One example involves a student, Rocío, and a staff member, Helen: *"Rocío keeps coming back because she has found a community of powerful women that she learns from every semester. Whether it's photography, school or life, Rocío is grateful for Helen Alonzo for always helping her realize that she can."*

Rocío entered the program and felt a connection with students because she saw that they have similar Latinx backgrounds. It started when Rocío engaged with Helen and discovered that they were both from El Salvador, which meant that they shared a very specific, unique experience of being Salvadoreñas in Los Angeles. Like many Central American individuals in Los Angeles, Rocío felt overshadowed in a city where people constantly equate being Latinx to being Mexican-American. This made the connection with Helen extremely important to Rocío. And this is just one example of such connections between our students, staff and mentors.

The most important aspect of this is that having staff members who reflect the diversity of a community provides a space of vulnerability and validation for our students. Students don't need to be anyone else other than themselves, and they can explore their own narratives, in their own voices - and have mentors who are not only empathetic to their stories, but have personal connections to them as well.