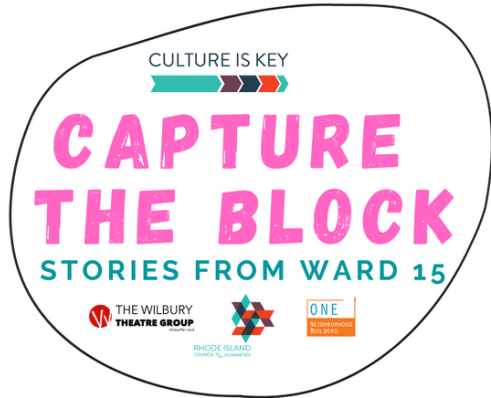


# Capture the Block – Stories from Ward 15: Building community block by block



**The Wilbury Theatre Group** has teamed up with The Rhode Island Council for the Humanities' Culture is Key Initiative, and will soon be presenting the fruits of their labor with *Capture the Block: Stories from Ward 15*. Culture is Key is an initiative to understand, test and evaluate the role of cultural participation on our state's civic health. Working in collaboration with journalist **Ana González** of The Public's Radio, and with support from ONE Neighborhood Builders, The Wilbury Theatre Group solicited stories from neighbors in the Olneyville section of Providence who were willing to share their experiences of loss and resiliency in the COVID-19 pandemic. The project will culminate in *Capture the Block*.

In keeping with their mission, The Wilbury Theatre Group, being a nonprofit theater company that engages our community in thought-provoking conversation through new works, artistic director **Josh Short** contacted González for this collaboration. "The very real and human impact that COVID-19 has had on our neighborhood this year is heartbreaking," says Short. "As one of the neighborhoods hit hardest, our friends and neighbors have seen their lives change drastically over the last 12 months. It's our hope that *Capture the Block* provides a forum for remembrance and mourning through storytelling that helps our community in its healing, while amplifying the Humanities' Council call for the urgent need for increased civic engagement from all of us."



Ana González

Due to social distancing, González and Short had to get creative in their fact-finding mission. “The way we wound up doing it was like sample size. We weren’t able to go into the streets and talk to people, so we brought in about 10 people, of all different ages, to come and talk about the pandemic. We spoke with two high school students about the pressures of learning from home. They are taking on extra responsibilities themselves. One had to teach her younger sibling how to use Google Classroom because her parents don’t speak English,” González explains. “We also spoke with some parents about the stresses and challenges involved for working parents.”

“When we started this project almost six months ago, the world was in a different place,” says González. “We were hopeful that the pandemic would be over and done with by 2021 and we would be able to have an awesome in-person event with popcorn and hot chocolate, celebrating the streets of Olneyville *in the streets of Olneyville*. Obviously, we were wrong. This pandemic has taken so much from us. So, Josh and I decided to change the direction of our event to help our communities begin to heal by remembering all that we’ve lost and celebrating all that we’ve gained.”



Josh Short

The pandemic has created a space between neighbors that’s hard to fill, leaving us all feeling detached.

“Afterward, Josh and I talked about how really great the experience of interviewing people and hearing their stories was, that it was nice to at least share the thoughts with people,” says González, who feels the sentiments span from low to high. “Sometimes it’s painful, boring, silly or weird — everything from sad to hopeful. Being able to talk with the community is really helpful.

“The RI Council for Humanities started this as a pilot program. They want to support cultural institutions in the state on a civic level,” she says. “They’re learning in this process how museums and other cultural venues engage in the communities on a civic level, and I think they chose that word because of how tumultuous this past year has been — not just with the pandemic but politics, job security, because it’s been such an intense time for everybody. I was just kind of brought in as a journalist partner. They wanted to connect to these cultural organizations. I work with immigrants on very human interest stories and share their experiences. Josh asked me to get involved because of that. Olneyville is very Spanish speaking and I speak Spanish, so I was able to help Josh in the way he wanted help.” She is proudly of Puerto Rican and Irish decent.

As part of the Culture is Key initiative, five RI cultural organizations will undertake pilot projects where they will collaborate with local journalists to test and evaluate ways to further integrate civic engagement into cultural programming. These organizations span diverse disciplines including museums, libraries, theaters, festivals and youth programming. Each has a strong track record of delivering quality cultural experiences for diverse audiences across the Ocean State.

What’s next for González? “I’m still working on mosaics. We have a series of episodes for the summer. I’ll keep working with the immigrant population in the state, talking to them and helping them to communicate with each other. I think that’s so important in these isolating times.”

*Capture the Block: Stories from Ward 15* is streaming for free on The Wilbury Group’s Facebook and YouTube Channels on February 21 at 6pm. *For more information, visit [thewilburygroup.org/capture-the-block](http://thewilburygroup.org/capture-the-block)*