

Meeting the Community on Its Own Terms in Tucson, Arizona



Photo credits: Tucson Water

Tucson Team

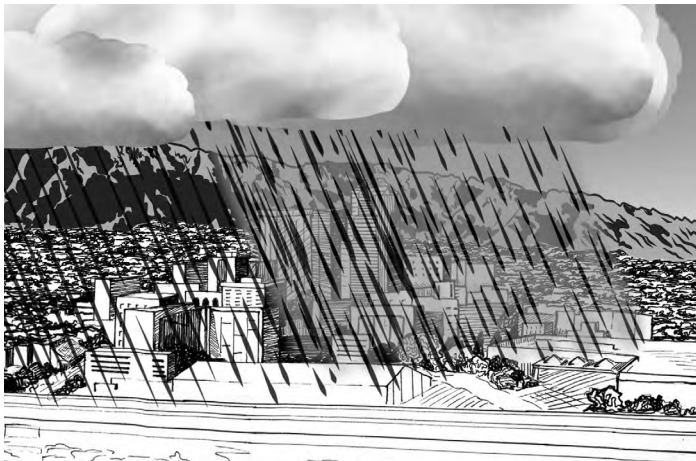
Artist:

- **Alexandra (Alex!) Jimenez**, Chicana printmaker, illustrator, and graphic designer

Tucson Water:

- **James MacAdam**, Superintendent, Public Information and Conservation
- **Fernando Molina**, Public Information Officer
- **Kelly Wiehe**, Project Manager, Public Information and Conservation Office

Animation still from the *Monsoon Mixtape*, a series of songs by Tucson musicians that celebrate the city's summer rains. *Credit: Alex! Jimenez*



Background

In the semi-arid Sonoran Desert, water conservation is always front-of-mind for Tucson Water. Climate change and urban development have increased heat, droughts, and led to more unpredictable monsoons, which historically provided much-needed seasonal water to the region. Although Tucson has made significant strides on improving water resilience, drought-like conditions make water stewardship and community-wide planning for climate change ongoing and urgent. Recognizing that “how we adapt together as climate change intensifies will require new strategies and tools,” Tucson Water applied to the Accelerator to engage the public more directly in caring for and protecting their watershed and strengthening conservation efforts.

However, before Tucson Water could engage with the community to envision the future, it had to reckon with its past. Like many cities, the utility has a complicated legacy with many of its lower-income communities and communities of color. The utility had chosen two areas to focus on with the Accelerator project: Ward 1 and Ward 5. Water has played a significant role in the culture and history of these areas, even before Tucson was founded over 200 years ago. The flowing Santa Cruz River and surrounding springs sustained the early residents and settlers. Groundwater wells supported agriculture and industrial uses as the area grew.

This area also has a history of water contamination, primarily due to past industrial practices. Starting in the late 1940s, an industrial aircraft cleaning solvent called Trichloroethylene (TCE) was illegally dumped in southern Tucson, where Wards 1 and 5 are located. A substitute compound considered to be safer than TCE was then used in the 1970s, resulting in the introduction of a second contaminant called 1,4-Dioxane. The area has also been contaminated with PFAS compounds, likely originating from aircraft fire suppression practices around the Tucson International Airport. Since 1994, Tucson Water has been operating a Superfund site charged with cleaning up the contaminated zone. It currently operates 10 extraction wells and an advanced oxidation treatment plant that has successfully contained the contamination plume and reduced concentrations of contaminants in the area. While the contaminated wells were closed and the city's drinking water has been safe for decades, residents remain skeptical. The utility knew it needed to focus on healing this legacy of harm and rebuilding trust with these communities so they could be partners in water stewardship and equity moving forward.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

The utility first explored working with the Arts Foundation for Tucson and Southern Arizona to select an artist. But information and support received when attending the ArtPlace Summit encouraged utility staff to explore the wide range of artists doing community-based work, and more importantly to explore including the community in the process from the beginning. As a result, the utility decided to create a selection panel including four community representatives from the two target Wards alongside Kelly Wiehe, Project Manager at Tucson Water and lead representative for the city on the Arts Accelerator Team. Community representatives provided input into the RFP and selection criteria, reviewed applications, interviewed finalists, and selected the artist.

The panel received 19 applications, which they narrowed down to three finalists before ultimately selecting Chicana multimedia artist Alexandra (Alex!) Jimenez. Alex! has a strong sense of place in Tucson: her family has been in the city for four generations, and she currently lives in Ward 1. She uses photography, illustration, printmaking, and design to create works of art that speak to her heritage and sense of community. She is also trained as a scientist and cares deeply about water conservation.

Approach: Deep Listening

To engage the community around water, the team had to meet people where they were. Having grown up in the community, Alex! knew that contamination was likely to be the most top-of-mind water issue for many community members. "Right now, the public is disconnected from both water and the utility. The monsoons used to be more regular, but now we are experiencing droughts. We go months without rain. And on top of that, there is a lack of trust from the community towards the utility due to historical contamination of water quality in the same areas now experiencing a lack of water," says Alex!.

Artist Spotlight: Alex! Jimenez



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Artistic Practice(s):

Alex! is a former scientist turned printmaker, illustrator, and graphic designer living in Tucson, AZ. Her heritage as a fourth generation Tucsonese grounds her work in the Sonoran Desert. As a Chicana artist, she uses her Mexican heritage to explore issues of identity and culture in the Southwest.

Portfolio: <https://www.Alexclamation.com/>

In the summer of 2021, the community-utility relationship was further complicated when the utility discovered new contamination of PFAS chemicals in the water supply, prompting them to shut off several wells and upgrade their treatment facilities to handle the chemicals. The utility was proactive and transparent in dealing with the problem, but the legacy of mistrust led to a strong public reaction, setting a challenging stage for the team's community engagement. Alex! says, "we know that water contamination always affects impoverished communities the most. In Tucson, we are dealing both with having had a contaminant 20 years ago and finding a new contaminant now. This weighs heavily on the community's mind. I have realized that the first step in this process needs to be hearing from the community. Community needs must supersede other agendas, and then we can see how a project can begin to meet those needs."

Alex! began by listening to the utility and communities. She and the utility had regular meetings to discuss water challenges in the two Wards, as well as how community priorities could be addressed. Alex! reached out to community groups and met with neighborhood associations. At first, she did not broach the topic of water with the community, which she worried might feel too abstract or even trigger people's trauma. Instead, she listened to what people cared about and focused on building relationships. A significant part of the community in these Wards speak Spanish, and sharing stories, experiences, and needs in their primary language was important for communication and trust-building.

This listening process took more time than expected, but the utility realized the value in these open-ended conversations, which provided deeper and more authentic interactions with the public than the utility's typical channels. James MacAdam, Superintendent, Public Information and Conservation says, "I don't want these conversations with community members to stop. We want to figure out how to institutionalize this [after the Accelerator] so we can continue to engage with the public in this way."

Pilot Projects: The Chubasco Channel and On-the-Ground Art Engagements

The Chubasco Channel

Out of these conversations, a couple projects emerged. Keeping with the core theme of listening, the team decided to engage communities in the identified areas through a compilation of shared experiences with water and Tucson's changing weather patterns.

In the summer of 2021, the team invited the public to record the sound of "chubascos" on their phones. Chubascos are intense thunderstorms that pass over the Southwestern United States in the summer months. The storms are driven by hot, dry air that mixes with moisture traveling northward via strong winds from the Gulf of Mexico and Sea of Cortez, forming monsoons.¹ The monsoons are referred to as chubascos in southern Arizona and New Mexico, due to Portuguese influence in the region ("chuva" in Portuguese means "rain"). Chubascos are quite localized, so while one neighborhood may experience torrential rain, a nearby neighborhood may just experience wind or experience nothing at all.²



Participants enter The Chubasco Channel Monsoon Experience, which plays segments of the Chubasco Channel monsoon recordings and lightly mists visitors as they pass through. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*



Participants emerge from The Chubasco Channel Monsoon Experience, which plays segments of the Chubasco Channel monsoon recordings and lightly mists visitors as they pass through. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*

Community members across Tucson submitted these monsoon sounds as well as memories of an experience during a monsoon like “playing in the water after a storm passes or getting caught in a downpour with someone you love” on a project website (<https://www.tucsonaz.gov/water/chubasco>). Along with community members, Alex! and a team of audio storm chasers recorded the monsoons throughout the summer. Alex! is now working with a sound engineer to process the collected audio into a long-format soundscape. The Chubasco Channel will allow people to listen to the monsoons during the dry months and will serve as a citizen-generated archive of the increasingly scarce monsoons. The team also commissioned six local musicians to use the audio archive to create original music for a 2022 Monsoon Mixtape. The team hopes these ways of engaging with the monsoons will help the community positively connect to water and become more conscious of the way climate change is impacting local rain patterns.

On the Ground

Alex! also wanted to engage the community in person in conversations around water. Inspired by the work of artist Amanda Lovelee in St. Paul, the utility purchased an “art bike” that Alex! will use to travel around and collect stories about people’s experiences with water, using prompts like: *What makes you hopeful about water?* and *What makes you fearful about water?* James puts the goal this way: “What I want to come out of these conversations is that the community has a sense of belonging—that the utility belongs to them. I want people to know that Alex! is there on our behalf. And I want us to stay in this conversation for the long haul—I want to be having conversations with people, too.”

Alex! felt strongly that it was important to be a consistent presence in the community, so while the art bike was being constructed, she hired three youth art ambassadors to help her run community events on the city’s south side. Alex! painted sidewalks weekly in the Fairgrounds neighborhood, culminating in a community painting event where participants created a mural featuring a poem written by a resident. She then moved to the Rose neighborhood for three weeks, inviting students to join her in painting a bridge walkway after school. A resident donated the wall of their house for another community-painted mural.

Tucson Water Artist-in-Residence Alex! Jimenez with bilingual poet, performance artist, and DJ Logan Dirtyverbs Phillips. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*



Día de San Juan Celebration

The Accelerator project culminated in a celebration at *Día de San Juan*, a traditional festival in June to celebrate the start of the monsoon season.³ It included a sound installation on the now dry Santa Cruz River, debuting the Chubasco Channel soundscape and the Monsoon Mixtape. This sound installation underneath a bridge utilized projections to create an immersive monsoon experience.

Lessons Learned

Go where people are.

The Tucson team did this both literally and figuratively. Alex! went to meetings of community groups and attended community events. She staged her art-making events in local neighborhood parks at times when people would be available to attend and will continue to take the art bike to community gathering sites. Moreover, rather than coming in with a preconceived idea of what the project should be, Alex! took the time to get to know community members and to listen to what mattered to them. Out of that process, a collection of interventions emerged that tapped into and reflected the community's positive *and* painful experiences with water. Without this kind of process, it is unlikely that such authentic engagement would have happened. The team talked about how different this relational engagement approach was from how engineers often see it as a means to an end, which merely informs the community of a new policy or asks them to accept an infrastructure proposal. In contrast, Alex!'s approach was an effort to get to know people and their concerns without an agenda.

Be intentional about ethical community engagement.

From the beginning, Alex! thought deeply about how to engage the community effectively and ethically. In Accelerator peer exchanges, she asked questions of other artists about how to get buy-in from community members not just from upper-level staff at nonprofit organizations. Peers acknowledged this is a challenge everywhere and offered suggestions of ways forward, including partnership through existing community events and activities. Alex! consulted one-on-one with Trapeta Mason, the artist with the Philadelphia team who had many years of experience with community engagement work. Alex! also grappled with how to ethically acknowledge and compensate for the labor being asked of community members to participate. She asks, "when is it appropriate to compensate people for their stories? To offer an honorarium for participating?"

I want to acknowledge community members' time and the value of their cultural knowledge. I would like people to feel like they've been given something."

Part of ethical community engagement means respecting the existing knowledge and expertise of the community and not just thinking of them as the beneficiaries of knowledge provided by the utility. For example, often low-income communities are already exceptional conservationists. Alex! says, "on the south side we have a term, *repaje*, which is a Mexican word for making something new out of leftover parts. We already have genius in our local community. People know about water harvesting and conserving water because they live in a one-room adobe house with nine children. When the water utility comes in with experts to talk about greywater reuse or water harvesting, I want to know how we connect that with the community knowledge that already exists."

Stay open and adapt in real-time.

Tucson Water had never worked with an artist before, though staff had some ideas going in about how they would select the person (from a roster) and what the focus of the project would be (water conservation). As they participated in the Accelerator, however, staff began talking to community members and realized that they needed to change their approach. They revamped the application process to ensure community members directed the selection, and once Alex! was on board, the utility and artist took time to get to know each other and explore possibilities for many months before refining a project idea, even though it extended the project timeline. Kelly Wiehe, Project Manager for Public Information and Conservation at the utility notes it was not always easy to work this way. "The utility usually operates more formally, defining projects and drafting RFPs according to the desired outcomes," she admits. Attending the ArtPlace Summit was a unique experience and gave them the confidence to try more process-oriented work, which they feel yielded much better results. Kelly says, "I am a very process-oriented person and comfortable iterating strategies. It isn't always easy to communicate specific goals or desired outcomes to others, but if you focus on trust, it usually works out." James agreed, saying, "I loved that it was open-ended. I really enjoyed the process."

Commit to an Artist-in-Residence over the long-term.

Halfway through the partnership—and even before a community project had been fully designed—the utility decided that the experience of working with an artist was bringing so much value that they wanted to continue working with artists on an ongoing basis. First, they matched the US Water Alliance’s Accelerator funds to extend Alex!’s term for another year. Tucson Water is also working with the city to identify resources to support an ongoing Artist-in-Residence program. Increasing the utility’s creative capacity and approach to community engagement provides a new lens through which to look at a shared history and new ways to think about a shared future.

Challenges and Tensions

Right-sizing expectations of artists, communities, and projects.

Alex! is the first to admit she has a lot of ideas, and yet there came a point in the project where she realized they needed to pare things down and focus. She has a background as a bookkeeper, and after calculating the time spent on outreach, relationship building with the utility, and other necessary onboarding tasks, the team realized that some of the project ideas they came up with were not feasible within the time-frame and budget. Building trust in underserved communities is a long-term goal; the team understood this aspiration would not be accomplished within the course of a single project. They had to think about what intermediate steps would put them on the right path.

In part because she grew up in the community, Alex! was highly sensitive throughout the process about engaging people in a way that *gives* something to them rather than asking for something *from* them. She says, “building trust is very hard to achieve, especially with a community that is stressed economically and socially and lacks time. We need to have reasonable expectations about what an art project can accomplish. I will consider it a success if people walk away with a good experience. Art is a low-pressure and fun way to learn something new. I want to leave people feeling excited because they live here. That is something we can continue to build on over time.”

Creating space and time for utility staff to engage, including and beyond the project team.

Although Tucson Water was dedicated to the project and supportive of Alex!, staff sometimes struggled to find time to meet regularly or provide specific guidance. The PFAS crisis compounded this, as several team members were pulled in to deal with it in real time. This left Alex! unsure of the parameters of the project or how she should engage with the community. The team eventually found its flow, but Kelly notes that the utility must work to better support artists in the future and maintain a more “reciprocal” relationship.

The utility team learned a lot from working with Alex! and would like other utility staff to have the opportunity to benefit from collaborating with an artist and learn from the artistic process and perspectives as well, but the pace and orientation of the utility’s day-to-day work makes this a challenge. Kelly notes the arts work “has stayed somewhat capsulized within the Public Information and Conservation Office. Alex! did a great virtual presentation that was well-received, but keeping this project front-of-mind for other staff was at times challenging.”

Connecting the project to longer-term goals and priorities.

Before working with an artist, the utility did not have clearly-established expectations and had not outlined goals for partnerships. The utility was open about their desire to hire an artist to help them explore new ways of being with the community. This allowed for a project to emerge from the community listening process. However, a clearer idea of what the utility wanted to gain from collaboration and how that connected to their larger goals of trust-building and authentic community engagement would have helped give Alex! direction and refine ideas earlier. As Kelly says, “we knew we wanted to listen to and build trust with people in particular areas, but how does that roll up into the bigger picture of our mission as a utility? How do we continue that work after the project is finished? Next time, perhaps we would spend more time on the front-end engaging with the artist internally, with staff learning arts methodologies that might help us develop new ideas and approaches.” Because Tucson will continue working with artists in the future, they intend to spend some time thinking strategically and planning for integrating arts-based work with their larger goals and mission.

Read the full compendium here: <http://uswateralliance.org/initiatives/water-arts-and-culture-accelerator>.

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James MacAdam, Superintendent, Public Information and Conservation, Tucson Water

Guests gather underneath the Cushing Street Bridge along the Santa Cruz River for the release of the Monsoon Mixtape. *Photo credit: Tucson Water*



Notes

- 1 Cathy Rymer, "The Arizona Monsoon," University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, 1997, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://ag.arizona.edu/maricopa/garden/html/weather/monsoon.htm>.
- 2 "Chubasco," Wikipedia, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chubasco>.
- 3 "Praying for Rain: Día de San Juan Celebration in Tucson," Arizona Historical Society, June 24, 2020, <https://arizonahistoricalociety.org/2020/06/24/dia-de-san-juan-celebrations-in-tucson/>.



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