

I am an American We are One Nation LAUNCHING A PUSH FOR ACCEPTANCE

Renata Soto's initiative collects hearts, reminds that everyone can belong



ANDREW NELLES/THE TENNESSEAN

Renata Soto, executive director and co-founder of Conexion Americas, says, "We all are inspired by the ... notion of an indivisible nation where everyone can belong ..."

Renata Soto

Location: Nashville, Tenn. **Age:** 44 **Profession:** Co-founder and executive director of Conexion Americas and co-founder and organizer of the #Indivisible campaign.

Mission: Bringing together concerned Nashvillians from all political stripes who commit to protect the ideals upon which this country was founded.

Recently, U.S. Rep. Congressman Jim Cooper of Nashville came to Casa Azafran to receive 300 post cards and hear students' stories.

"So we hope that through the #Indivisible campaign that people raise their hearts but also raise their voices," Soto said. "I am hopeful that a lot of people will find their voice — will raise their voice — that have not before."

DAVID PLAZAS

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Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit onenation.usatoday.com.

Casa Azafran, adorned with a multicolored mural atop five arabesque porticos, shines as a beacon on Nolensville Pike, the gateway to the international district in Nashville, Tennessee.

The building houses several nonprofits, which mainly focus on integrating immigrants into American society. Signs are in English, Spanish and Arabic.

Nashville's foreign-born population is about 12 percent, and the Southern city has developed a reputation as a welcoming community.

The rhetoric of the recent election, however, created fear among immigrant families that think that they might be targeted for deportation or discrimination.

Renata Soto — the co-founder and executive director of Conexion Americas, one of Casa Azafran's nonprofits — called on Nashville to respond through love and civic participation.

"We at Conexion Americas have launched a campaign called #Indivisible, which ... tries to remind everyone of all the dreams and aspirations that we share as a people and the inspiration that we draw either as a fifth-generation American or as an immigrant that came yesterday," said Soto, 44, a Costa Rican native who came to the United States to finish college and met her future husband.

"We all are inspired by the ... notion of an indivisible nation where everyone can belong and where everyone's roots and possibilities are celebrated," she added.

People, have been flowing into Casa Azafran to make the symbol of a heart with their hands and appear in photos that are being shared on social media and added to a growing wall mural.

They are also being encouraged to write post cards to members of Congress, advocating for policies that value Americans of all backgrounds.

Q&A WITH RENATA SOTO

What does it mean to be an American?

I am an American who is trying to build bridges so that we find the humanity in each other when we look into each other's eyes. We see the same fears, the same dreams, the same humanity. I am an American trying to build bridges and making sure that we uphold the values that have created this indivisible nation where we celebrate the roots and possibilities of all its people.

What moment motivated you to become part of this effort?

So, for now 15 years since we founded Conexion Americas, we have been dedicated to making sure that Latino families have the supports that they need to achieve the dreams that they brought with them, whether becoming a homeowner, starting a business and becoming an entrepreneur, and most importantly seeing that dream of children graduating from high school and being the first in their families to go to college.

What gives you hope?

I think that out of difficult times, trying times, testing times, beautiful things can come from that, and I do hope that as vulnerable as we feel right now, as fearful as we feel right now, as uncertain as we feel, I do feel a sense of energy from people who have not been engaged in the community.

What concerns you?

What we're trying to do through #Indivisible is to make sure that people have a way to connect to that sense of urgency to do something because we are concerned about the tone of the conversation in the country. We are concerned about the policies that might take us back 50 years.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

Through that campaign, we really hope that it is a way for people to show to each other in very visible ways, through making your sign of a heart in your hands, and showing it to each other, and showing the love to the Muslim Nashvillian, the Latino, the LGBT neighbor. It is also about remembering that if we don't use our voice every day ... we are also accountable and we are also responsible for what happens.

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