

What Are You Doing?

But be careful out there

By **Kat Avila** | Published on LatinoLA: January 19, 2015



"What are you doing?" I asked the teenage boy who was gleefully tagging a repainted space at [Santiago Park in Santa Ana](#). Alarmed, he jumped down the small ledge to look up at the bridge where I was standing.

Others emerged from beneath the bridge to see where the stranger's voice was coming from. There were probably five or ten of them altogether.

They looked so fresh-faced, ranging in age from perhaps 15 to the early 20s. A young adult with shoulder-length crimped hair appeared to be a leader. He wore a wide grin on his face.

A wave of sadness and great disappointment washed over me. These kids belonged in a boy band, or on a soccer team, or part of a visionary group that would put a person on Mars. Instead they were misusing their talents and potential to deface public property.

In case someone wants to dismiss this as petty mischief or "Boys will be boys," let me add that they have caused great property damage to surrounding commercial properties in a widening circle.

I said to the group, "Don't you think you should be doing something a little more productive...? So many people have worked to preserve this park, this precious natural resource..." Someone shot off a stream of pepper spray at my back as I walked away.

I realized this as my eyes started smarting, and I felt for my own canister of pepper spray in my pocket. The police would have to be called in, but the cowards would have hightailed it by then.

I thought...

...of the elderly woman wearing a prominent Christian cross who picks up trash in the park on her regular walks, and of groups of civic-minded teenagers of all cultural backgrounds whom I occasionally see doing the same.

...of an activist who is passionate about the maintenance and completion of a bike trail through the park. A paved trail up to Flower Street would keep the mischief down, but some locals have been against it out of privacy concerns.

...of volunteers who do habitat restoration in Santiago Park. They replace nonnative plants with native plants that better support the park's ecosystem.

...of efforts by myself and other birders who have helped document that 97 species of birds live in Santiago Park or use it as a stopover on their long migratory journey up and down the Americas.

...of people who think well enough of the park to have their birthday parties or have their

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I also thought of the forces working against the park. It's not always as obvious as taggers, druggies, and bike thieves. It's ignorance and inconsideration as dog owners let their pets run off leash or beer drinkers smashing their bottles against concrete.

The question of "What are you doing?" nags at me, not as a question for an impudent tagger but at myself. What can I do? There are grand productive and destructive forces moving through our world.

Right now, however, I am worried about one small park.

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