

From Trauma to Transformation: Master Call on Healing Through Financial Empowerment

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On April 25, 2025, a powerful community event titled *“Through Trauma to Hope”* brought together educators, social workers, students, and community leaders for a master class that explored trauma-informed financial empowerment. Hosted by the Asset Building Clinic (ABC), the UCLA CalKIDS Institute, and East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), this immersive gathering held in Boyle Heights offered a mental healing-centered framework to address the financial and emotional challenges facing underserved communities.



Dr. Joanna Karczewska, Director of Asset

Building Clinic.

The day opened with heartfelt remarks from Dr. Joanna Karczewska, grounding the audience in the urgency of integrating finances into social work, and for financial coaches to borrow clinical practices from social work. The event also marked the 10th anniversary of the Asset Building Clinic (ABC), an organization Karczewska created to provide space for such cross-pollination. Attendees then participated in an in-depth master class led by clinical social worker and Cal State LA's Practicum Director Hermila Melero, LCSW. Melero offered critical tools to recognize the ways trauma—particularly historical and collective trauma—disrupts a person's ability to plan for the future. She emphasized how survival responses can limit a family's financial outlook, and she presented strategies for building internal and external resources that foster agency and hope.

Melero's presentation included interactive discussions on how providers can create spaces that offer clients not only services, but also safety, choice, and belonging. "The antithesis of trauma is choice," she shared. "When we help people see a future for themselves, their families, and their communities, we create a bridge from survival to transformation."



Hermila Melero, LCSW Presenting Master Class.

Student voices were central to this gathering. BASW Candidate David Zarate delivered moving testimony on how ABC's mentorship and support programs have profoundly impacted his academic journey and sense of self-worth. "As a first-generation student and Boyle Heights native, I didn't always see myself in spaces like these," Zarate shared. "ABC didn't just show me what was possible—they walked with me every step of the way." His words served as a powerful reminder of why trauma-informed, community-rooted financial work matters.



In addition to robust programming, the day included a lively mariachi lunch celebration to commemorate the 10 year anniversary of ABC and the inaugural presentation of the ABC Leader Award. Honored was Alexi Bullara, a champion of equity and systems change, whose leadership has helped shape ABC's contribution to education and scholarship through ABC's CalKIDS Social Work Macro Project and Financial First Responder certificate training programs.

CalKIDS Institute Executive Director, Nayiri Nahabedian, highlighted the importance of CalKIDS and welcomed guests to utilize the service to support their clients. The event also featured a practical session on the CalKIDS Program led by Senior Program Manager, Dr. Mahagoney Borrayo-Gilchriest, provided attendees with clear steps for helping families access up to \$1,500 in savings for college and career training. This underscored the day's core message: by integrating trauma-informed care with financial capability programs, communities can disrupt cycles of economic hardship and create pathways to generational healing. The presentations ended with Elba Serrano, ELACC's Associate Vice President, thanking the guests and noting that the event was being held in an apartment complex ELACC converted into affordable housing. ELACC's leadership in community wealth building includes affordable housing development in the Los Angeles region and coalition building to legalize street vending in California. Its long standing partnership with ABC and now the CalKIDS Institute improves the wellbeing of Los Angeles' most underserved communities.



UCLA CalKIDS Institute team.

The *Through Trauma to Hope* master class was not just a training—it was a movement-building space where stories, strategies, and solutions converged. For more information, visit us at [ABC Clinic](#), [ELACC](#), www.CalKIDS.org, [UCLA CalKIDS Institute](#), [UCLA CalKIDS Institute YouTube](#).