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MOVING FORWARD FROM OUR FOUNDATIONS

The enduring principles

"Tools and circumstances change; the principles that guide service to the community remain."

DANIEL MANZONI

Founder and Director of Festival Argentino USA

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OPINION ARTICLE

Moving Forward from Our Foundations

By Daniel Manzoni | Founder and Director of Festival Argentino USA

In times of rapid change, crises of trust, and debates that often drift away from everyday life, returning to our foundations does not mean moving backward. It means recovering the principles that allow us to move forward with direction. Times change, technologies evolve, and forms of participation are renewed, but certain principles do not expire: education, honesty, responsibility, cooperation, respect, and service to the community.

This conviction did not arise from a single reading or one isolated experience. It took shape throughout my life, between Argentina and the United States, through study, work, sports, community action, and nearly four decades leading Festival Argentino USA. It was also nourished by memories of an intense Argentina, where hopes for popular participation and social commitment coexisted with expressions of violence that ultimately caused profound wounds.

Politics Close to the People

Among the figures of those years, Dante Gullo represented for many young people the idea of bringing politics to the grassroots: going into neighborhoods, listening, organizing, and working alongside the people. What I retain from that experience is neither a partisan identity nor an attempt to imitate someone else's path, much less a justification of the political violence of the 1970s. I retain a broader principle that remains relevant: no leadership can truly understand a community while remaining distant from it.

Reaching the grassroots does not consist merely of delivering speeches or appearing when elections approach. It means listening before deciding, explaining clearly, accepting responsibility, and transforming concrete needs into possible actions. It also requires recognizing that trust cannot be demanded; it is built through presence, consistency, and results.

That lesson retains value in every institution. It applies to politics, but also to cultural, social, educational, and community organizations. When leaders lose contact with the people they claim to represent, structures may continue to exist, but they begin to lose their meaning.

Operation Dorrego: An Experience in Cooperation

My participation in Operation Dorrego remains in my memory as a distinctive experience from that period in Argentina. In 1973, after floods affected communities across Buenos Aires Province, young people and members of the Army took part in relief and reconstruction efforts. Amid a deeply divided society, that experience showed, even if only in a limited and temporary way, that people from different backgrounds could work together in response to a concrete need.

That period should not be idealized, nor should its contradictions be erased. Later history demonstrated the gravity of those divisions and of the violence. Yet it is also fair to preserve a human lesson: when there is a clearly defined mission of service, differences can give way to shared work. For me, the most valuable lesson was not political in a partisan sense; it was communal. Helping, organizing, and acting alongside others can create a common language where previously there seemed to be only distance.

Alberdi and the Need for Foundations

Long before that, Juan Bautista Alberdi had chosen a decisive word for thinking about national organization: Bases. His ideas accompanied Argentina's constitutional process and reminded us that no lasting project can be sustained by wishes, slogans, or temporary leadership alone. A foundation is needed to organize institutions and guide development.

"Returning to our foundations is not living with our eyes fixed on the past. It is examining the foundation so that we can build something better."

True foundations are not museum pieces. They must be able to engage with each era without losing their essence. Instruments, settings, and problems change, but the need remains to educate, respect the law, promote responsibility, protect freedom, and create conditions for cooperation. A society may adopt new technologies and modern discourse; however, if it abandons those foundations, it builds on unstable ground.

Therefore, returning to our foundations is not living with our eyes fixed on the past. It is examining the foundation so that we can build something better. It means distinguishing what is enduring from what is temporary: methods must be updated, but the values that guide action cannot be replaced whenever the political climate changes.

Sarmiento: Education in the Face of Privilege

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento brought this discussion to the decisive field of education. For him, a nation could not modernize while education remained reserved for particular sectors. Public schooling had to bring knowledge, discipline, and opportunity to the entire population, because without popular education citizenship remained incomplete and democracy could become a formality administered by a few.

His confrontation with sectors of the landowning elite was especially harsh. When a landowner is said to have objected that Buenos Aires was too aristocratic a society to accept common education without privilege, a reply attributed to Sarmiento echoed across generations: 'Yes, an aristocracy that smells of manure.' Beyond the anecdotal way in which the phrase reached us, it summarizes his impatience with a class that derived its prestige from land ownership while resisting the extension of education and opportunity to society as a whole.

Toward the end of his life, Sarmiento intensified his criticism of land concentration, favors granted to powerful families, and the expectation that the State would finance projects designed to multiply private fortunes. He envisioned an Argentina of schools, science, communications, small landowners, and industry. He ultimately found that part of the leadership preferred to preserve large estates, livestock income, and privilege rather than promote modernization that would reach everyone.

Sarmiento was also a deeply contradictory figure and must be read within his time. The point is not to turn him into a perfect symbol or conceal the debatable aspects of his thought and political action. What is worth retaining for this analysis is a warning that remains relevant: an elite may proclaim itself educated and progressive, but if it rejects universal education, protects its privileges, and distances itself from popular reality, it ultimately obstructs national development.

Alberdi and Sarmiento therefore offer complementary dimensions. Alberdi reminds us of the need for institutional foundations; Sarmiento reminds us that those foundations must support an education capable of reaching everyone. Institutions without civic formation may become empty, just as education without participation and community responsibility may lose its transformative capacity.

Arlington: Learning Democracy through Everyday Life

Between 1987 and 1988, I received civic training in Arlington County that broadened my understanding of democratic participation. There I observed that public life does not depend solely on major national debates. It is also built in local meetings, commissions, schools, community centers, and organizations where residents can express needs, propose solutions, and collaborate with institutions.

That experience confirmed for me that democracy grows stronger when there is access, information, and shared responsibility. Participation is not simply expressing an opinion; it also means preparing oneself, listening to those who think differently, honoring commitments, and accepting that the common good requires patience and continuity.

The training I received in Arlington did not replace my Argentine experiences; it complemented them. From Argentina I retained a sensitivity to social justice, culture, and community mobilization. In the United States, I learned other forms of civic organization, institutional planning, and local cooperation. Over time, both currents found concrete expression in Festival Argentino USA.

The Festival as a Grassroots Achievement

Festival Argentino USA began to be organized in 1987 and held its first edition in 1988. It was not born from a large company or a powerful structure. It arose from the grassroots: from people who offered time, ideas, work, contacts, and trust. Family members, volunteers, artists, exhibitors, sponsors, institutions, media outlets, and members of the public made possible a collective undertaking that has continued for four decades.

Along the way, venues, formats, generations, and communication tools changed. We moved from telephone calls, letters, and printed flyers to websites, electronic newsletters, social media, QR codes, and digital videos. Even during the pandemic, we had to reinvent how we came together. Yet the foundation remained: bringing people together through Argentine culture and strengthening ties between Argentina and the United States.

More than 55,000 attendances, over 300 artists, more than 350 exhibitors, and over 500 volunteers represent a visible part of that history. But its deepest value cannot be measured only in numbers. It lives in every artist who found a stage, every entrepreneur who had an opportunity to present their work, every family that shared its traditions, and every volunteer who understood that serving the community is also a form of civic education.

The Festival has never been perfect or free of obstacles. There were financial difficulties, venue changes, rainy days, uncertainty, and moments when continuing seemed too difficult. Its endurance was not the product of improvisation. It resulted from sustaining a mission, learning from mistakes, and returning again and again to the foundations.

Adapting without Losing Our Identity

Today, artificial intelligence, instant communication, and new platforms offer extraordinary possibilities. We can research, design, translate, organize archives, and reach audiences that once seemed inaccessible. But no tool can replace judgment, honesty, memory, or human relationships. Technology can help us work better; it cannot decide for us which values are worth defending.

This principle also guides the road toward the 40th anniversary of Festival Argentino USA, which we will celebrate on May 8, 2027, at Kenmore in Arlington, Virginia. The commemoration should not be limited to remembering what has been accomplished. It should help transmit experience, train new volunteers, make room for other generations, and strengthen an institution capable of continuing beyond those who founded it.

Adapting without losing identity is one of the greatest challenges facing any organization. If it merely preserves the past, it risks standing still. If it pursues every novelty without principles, it may lose its reason for being. The balance lies in modernizing our instruments while protecting our mission.

An Invitation to Rebuild Trust

Argentina and many communities around the world are experiencing a crisis of trust. We often expect immediate solutions from leaders, governments, or institutions, but forget that rebuilding also begins in nearby spaces: a school, a club, an association, a cultural organization, a community media outlet, or a festival.

Working from the grassroots does not mean denying the importance of the State, politics, or leadership. It means reminding them of their purpose: to serve people and create the conditions in which they can develop with dignity. It also means that citizens must accept their part, participate responsibly, and refuse to abandon shared spaces to those who seek only personal benefit.

After forty years, I do not present Festival Argentino USA as a universal formula, nor my experience as a perfect model. I present it as simple evidence that continuity is possible when a community finds a mission and sustains it through work. Many of the ideas that accompanied me were learned from teachers, political experiences, civic training, public service, family members, collaborators, and the people who participated in the Festival.

Moving forward from our foundations means recovering the best of those experiences without repeating their mistakes. It means choosing encounter over violence, education over manipulation, cooperation over isolation, and service over personal prominence.

The tools will continue to change. We will change as well. But if we preserve firm foundations - education, honesty, responsibility, respect, cooperation, culture, and service - we will be able to adapt without losing our direction. These are the principles that endure. And from those foundations, we can still build a better future.

Author's Note

This article brings together personal memories, civic lessons, and reflections developed throughout the history of Festival Argentino USA. It does not seek to establish partisan equivalencies or justify the political violence of the 1970s; rather, it seeks to preserve the democratic and community value of working close to the people.

FESTIVAL ARGENTINO USA

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Alberdi Returns to the National Debate

The recent reissue of Bases and Points of Departure for the Political Organization of the Argentine Republic, presented by Argentina's Secretariat of Culture on August 31, 2026, confirms the continuing relevance of a fundamental question: upon what principles do we want to build our future? From an independent, civic, and community perspective, this first issue of the Festival Argentino USA Journal offers its own reflection: moving forward from our foundations means recovering education, honesty, responsibility, cooperation, respect, and service to the community.

Official information about the reissue of Bases