

Reaching Out to a Challenging Community Update

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How do you organize a grassroots community meeting? Easy, right? Make a few phone calls, send out some notices, pass out some flyers. But what if the “community” have no phones, can’t read, spend part of the year in another city, and change addresses often?

These are a few of the challenges we have faced in building the Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP). MICOP was started 18 months ago to assist the Oaxacan immigrant community in Oxnard, California (a small farming community 50 miles north of Los Angeles). We still largely use word of mouth to draw over 60 people a month to our monthly meetings.

Mixteco Project began when a couple of Ventura County nurses decided to try to increase the usage of health care services, particularly pregnancy care, by the Oaxacan immigrant community. A series of small community meetings were held to explain how to access health care and other social services. These meetings succeeded because they spoke to immediate, concrete needs of the people, and because people were encouraged to communicate in their own language. Mixtec is one of 16 different indigenous languages spoken in Oaxaca, and is the language of the vast majority of Oaxacan immigrants in the Oxnard/Ventura County area.

At the core of the project today is Catalina Navarrete, a Oaxacan immigrant and former farm worker who works as a Mixteco translator at Las Islas Clinic, a large county-funded Family Practice Clinic where hundreds of Mixtec farm workers and their children receive medical care. Having had to learn to navigate the social service bureaucracy herself several years ago, she talks to a daily stream of Mixtec immigrants who file into her office for help with paperwork, medical, housing and personal issues.

Over the past year, a secondary layer of leadership has also been built. A number of Mixtec women come every month to volunteer their time in the Project’s activities. Most of these women are also farm workers, perhaps here a little longer, somewhat better established and eager to help the more recently arrived immigrants.

One of the biggest successes so far is the Literacy Project. Thanks to a small grant and the cooperation of the Mexican consulate in donating workbooks, two-hour classes are given every Sunday to help Mixtec adults learn to speak, read and write in Spanish. Most have never had formal education prior to the classes. Despite long commutes on public buses, 30 adults have

attended the classes, and we plan to expand to new times and locations. Mixtec volunteers assist the teacher with the classes.

At first, we considered conducting the classes in English, the language the immigrant children learn in school. But in the course of the discussion, it became clear that Spanish is the more important second language. It is the language of the agricultural community in California—the foremen, the other workers, the union leaders. It is also the language of the vast majority of people renting living quarters to the agricultural community. All throughout Oxnard, Spanish is the primary language. Adults may live there for 20 years and never learn English — it's just not necessary.

This phenomenon can be seen throughout Southern California, and no doubt in many other regions as well. In Los Angeles, when Asian small business owners arrive, they often learn Spanish before they learn English. It's more important to their survival. Ultimately, then, we decided on Spanish as the language of instruction.

Food distribution is another important ongoing activity of the MICOP. Non-perishable USDA surplus food is ordered once a month, and reorganized for pickup by families in need. Some emergency food is always available, and a mobile food pantry is being planned to meet the ongoing problem of lack of transportation. Over 20,000 pounds of food has already been distributed.

Mixteco Project's goal is building (rebuilding, really, since Mixtec tradition emphasizes social responsibility) a strong community structure. Meetings are run by Mixtec members themselves. English and Spanish speaking supporters come to meetings to lend support and make presentations on topics such as health care, safety, housing, education, domestic violence and legal issues. Each month, more community members speak out on the issues they feel are important.

For instance, last month two representatives from the Mexican Consulate came to explain how people could obtain Mexican ID cards, and how committed the Consulate was to helping people out. But rather than simply nodding in gratitude, members wanted to know why they had to wait all day at the Consulate, why they were denied ID cards for not having forms of identification such as birth certificates which don't even exist for most Mixteco people, why there are no Mixteco translators at the Consulate. The Consulate has already made some important changes in their procedures due to this community pressure.

The social upheaval the Mixtec people have experienced incoming to the United States is enormous. They have lived in the same area of Southern Mexico since at least 100 AD. Their way of life based on subsistence farming changed little over the centuries despite the invasion of Aztec and Spanish conquerors and the American tourist. Their language and culture remain strong. But severe soil erosion has made even a marginal existence impossible in many native communities. Children routinely marry and leave for northern Mexico or the U.S. at 13 or 14—often having only the name of a relative in a town like Oxnard. They arrive with nothing more than strong backs and a determination to survive. In place of small, cohesive communities based on generations of family associations, communities with shared traditions, language and beliefs, they arrive by twos or threes. Isolated even from other immigrants from their same Oaxacan towns, they are dispersed into a town of 100,000 people, most of whom share none of their previous way of life.

It is a brutal transition, and yet what is most striking about these people is their strength of character, their strong commitment to their families, their humor, grace and dignity. We, the non-Mixtec supporters in the project, are struggling to help them rebuild their community and succeed in their adopted homeland.

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