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News

Community Center works to improve Westside neighborhood

By Marty Denzer
Catholic Key Reporter



Marty Denzer/Key photo

Hopeful men spend their days reading Spanish-language newspapers, drinking coffee or colas, and chatting in soft Spanish while they wait for jobs.

KANSAS CITY - Over the past century, Hispanics from Mexico, Central and South America fled war, poverty and political strife in their homelands

and came to the U.S. in hope of a better life. Thousands settled in the Kansas City area, lured by job opportunities on the railroads, in meatpacking and service industries.

Hispanic culture (e.g. language, food, religious and societal customs, music) was alien to non-Hispanics. When they arrived, the immigrants had to cope with discrimination in schools, stores, and in the workplace. Before the 1950s, Hispanics were seldom granted the basic services offered at the old General Hospital and by government agencies.

A four-bed clinic, now known as Cabot Health Services, opened at St. Luke's Hospital in 1906 to help low-income people, including Hispanic immigrants. Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish was established in 1914 to serve the Hispanic population on the West Side. In 1919, a group of Catholic women started a clinic and school for Hispanics,

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now known as Guadalupe Center, Inc. Guadalupe Center also served as an advocate for Latinos in the courts, schools and government agencies.

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Little by little, Latinos assimilated themselves into Kansas City society.

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About 38,000 Latinos were living in the Kansas City area in 1990. Ten years later, the 2000 Census lists 130,000 Hispanics living in the Kansas City region, an increase of 292 percent. According to Bernardo Ramirez, Guadalupe Center's associate director for finance and development, that doesn't include the numbers of undocumented Latino immigrants.

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But the old problems still exist for both long-time Hispanic residents and new immigrants.

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Because they don't speak or read English, many newly-arrived Latinos are unable to fill out forms that will help them get basic services, medical help or jobs. Christian Brother Dale Mooney of the diocesan Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry said that Hispanic families willingly open their homes to provide food and shelter to new immigrants rather than compelling them to seek other resources for help. They might approach parishes and service organizations if a trust relationship has been built, but that takes time, and the newly arrived Latino immigrant has immediate needs for food, clothing and shelter.

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As a result, newly arrived males often are forced to work as unskilled day laborers in order to put food on the table or send money back to families in Mexico.

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Day laborers paint, haul, dig, trim trees and shrubbery, clean and polish, lay brick and tile, build, demolish, wire and plumb - anything they're able to do for income.

For years, Hispanic day laborers loitered about the parking lot of Royal Liquors on the corner of Southwest Boulevard and Summit Street, waiting for potential employers. Rain or shine, they were a familiar sight.

According to Lynda Callon, community coordinator of the Westside Community Action Network Center, those who did find work often found themselves victims of "theft of services," - not being paid for work completed - because they didn't have a working command of the English language. Those who didn't find jobs all too often found consolation in drinking.

It became a vicious cycle.

Callon and the Westside CAN Center found a way to put an end to that cycle.

The Westside CAN Center, founded in 1995, is a neighborhood association with two Kansas City police officers assigned to the neighborhood who work on crime prevention as much as on law enforcement. One of the many community services offered by the CAN Center is a day laborer outreach program.

The CAN Center moved into a rehabilitated and refurbished building at the corner of Avenida Cesar Chavez (formerly 23rd Street) and Jefferson Street in February. The owner agreed to donate the lease on the building for five years. Local companies donated over \$150,000 in labor and materials to rehabilitate the building and create a safe, comfortable place for day laborers, about half of whom are undocumented, to wait for jobs, take a shower, wash their clothes and chat with friends.

The day laborers moved in on March 1.

"I've been busier than a one-armed paper hanger," Callon said. "We have about 50 to 100 workers a day come through here."

The CAN Center works with male laborers only. Female workers are referred to the Mattie Rhodes Center for job assistance.

The CAN Center usually opens at 6 a.m., and provides coffee, Spanish language newspapers, a bathroom, shower and a place to get out of the weather. A washing machine and dryer are available so the men can wash their clothes. There is a kitchenette where they can heat food they bring in.

Large windows face the streets so the men can see potential employers coming.

"By law, we cannot solicit or procure jobs," Callon said. "We can only oversee the place where they wait."

So she tries to make it as comfortable a place as possible. There are tables and chairs, a refrigerator, and fans to circulate air.

One of the pervasive problems non-English speaking day

laborers have is the theft of services, Callon said. They are often abused by unethical employers, who often pay the laborers below minimum wage or may even refuse to pay them at all.

"In Mexican culture, law enforcement is not their friend, so they are not used to going to the police for help with this kind of problem," Callon said.

"Having the two police officers assigned to the CAN Center helps. The men can say, 'We have a policeman. Pay us what you owe us or we'll go to the police.' We've had to tweak law enforcement procedures a little bit to make it work, but more of our laborers are getting paid without having to resort to harassment," she said.

Since about half of the laborers are undocumented, there might be some concern about arrests and deportation, but Callon isn't too worried about the laborers on the Westside. The Kansas City Missouri Police Department doesn't work as an Ad Hoc Immigration Service, she said. They have other things to do in a city this size.

According to Callon, an undocumented immigrant could theoretically remain in the U.S. forever.

"Some of our laborers have been here 20 years. It's unlikely that most of the recent undocumented immigrants would get permanent papers under the current immigration policies, because of poor education and low job skills. Even under family reunification policies, immigrants may find it hard to get permanent status," Callon said.

Callon, a Canadian cradle Catholic who relocated to the Midwest, is learning Spanish. The men tease her, calling her attempts at conversation, 'Lynda's Spanish,' but they understand what she is trying to say and do for them. And she understands them.

Manuel, Juan and Miguel lounge on folding chairs in a big open area near Callon's office. She is faxing a photocopy of Manuel's photo identification to an employer's payroll office to facilitate his getting paid.

Juan wanders into her office and points to one of the many plastic bags and backpacks on the floor. Callon nods and Juan grabs the bag and disappears into the bathroom. Several minutes pass before he comes out, hair combed back neatly and wearing fresh clothing.

With a smile, a "Gracias," and a wave, Juan walks jauntily out into the street.

Miguel drops his newspaper and trots to the side door as a U-Haul pulls up. A man steps out and the two begin negotiating. A few other men follow Miguel to the truck and with nods and gestures, a deal is made. Miguel hands the man a card with Westside CAN Center's address and phone number imprinted on it, and Miguel's name written on it.

These "business cards" act as a tool to help facilitate employment. The laborer's name is spelled out, and the address and phone number of the CAN Center project an aura of reliability and professionalism, as well as providing emergency contact information.

On May 2 the Westside CAN Center was awarded a grant from the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Callon plans to use the grant money to print more business cards for the laborers, add an extra phone line, and to purchase small notebooks and golf pencils to help laborers keep track of their hours.

The CAN Center welcomes donations of clothing and personal care items for the homeless day laborers.

The CAN Center also offers other programs and resources for Latino immigrants. Substance and alcohol abuse counseling is available through the Mattie Rhodes Center and Alcoholics Anonymous; HIV-AIDS testing and treatment can be obtained through local medical clinics such as Cabot Health Services and Samuel Rodgers Clinic, and Truman Medical Center, and Callon is working to get sexually transmitted disease testing and education programs started.

The CAN Center publishes a Spanish-language newsletter containing information on neighborhood issues and articles of special interest, such as bullying. English as a Second Language classes are offered at various West Side locations, including Mattie Rhodes Center, Guadalupe Center and several public schools. Parenting skills classes are also offered at the Mattie Rhodes Center, facilitated by Sister Dolores Sheehan, Carolina Uribe and Luz Flores.

Hispanic ministries of the Catholic Church have been a presence in the West Side and in other parts of the 27-county diocese for over 85 years. Most have begun with Masses offered in Spanish and grown to encompass both the sacramental and daily lives of Latinos who come to the

Kansas City area seeking new lives.

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