

Westside CAN Center makes Christmas brighter for immigrants

Immigrants experience many difficulties upon arriving in the United States: culture shock and alienation; the challenge of new language acquisition; difficulty acquiring honest work free of exploitation – then, harassment from xenophobic groups when work is found.

Christmas time brings its own challenge. Namely, how to celebrate the holiday while the distance of family and native tradition leaves little cause for celebration.

The Westside Community Action Network (CAN) Center is trying to make Christmas feel a little more like Christmas this year for many Latino immigrants without means and without family in the city.

Westside CAN is one of seven community policing projects in Kansas City, Mo., designed to integrate the community into policing matters and police into the broader livability issues that matter to the community. CANs take a holistic and preventative approach to law enforcement, recognizing that a crime such as public urination, for example, once a problem along Southwest Boulevard, can be solved better by providing free access to bathrooms for those without homes than by giving them punitive tickets. Increasing the health and livability of a neighborhood will help decrease law violations, so goes the CAN philosophy.

As a result of such thinking, the Westside CAN Center, among many other functions, serves as a meeting place for immigrant day laborers, almost all Hispanic men, almost all in poverty, and many homeless without papers. At the Center these men have access to lockers where they can safely store their possessions, minimizing trespassing on neighborhood property to hide their bags. They are allowed to use the Center, complete with phone, bathroom, and kitchen, during the day as a place where they can wait for employers to come and offer work. This creation of a supervised congregation space has decreased violent street disturbances by 50 percent, according to CAN volunteers, and allows police to distinguish those on the streets seeking work from those on the corner pushing drugs. And, especially important at Christmas time, it has given these immigrant men a community space of their own.

“It’s great to have a center here to give them a sense of place, a place to come and talk and visit,” said Barbara Bailey, a volunteer at the CAN Center and a neighborhood resident. Having some sort of home for these men, where they can share the company of others who speak their native tongue and share their customs, goes a long way to making a holiday more celebratory, she said.

The Christmas preparations at Westside CAN have already begun. The men who use the site have built an eight-foot manger scene outside the building. One man created an altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe, a cultural fixture much more important than a Christmas tree to many of the men here. On the 22nd or 23rd a whole pig will be bought by the police officers assigned to the CAN Center. The pig will be slow-roasted for days by CAN volunteers and the men who make use of the center. Then on Christmas Eve, carnitas will be served for everyone during not one, but two Christmas parties, one Mexican-themed, the other Cuban-themed.

“For it being completely unorganized, it all works like clock work,” said Matt Tomasic, one of the KCMO police officers assigned to the Westside CAN Center.

Other than the gift of place and company, the men here also receive small but much-appreciated presents, such as a warm pair of socks, from Westside CAN director Lynda Callon.

“We always get gifts from her,” said Juan from Guanajuato, Mexico, a day laborer at the Westside CAN regularly. “It reminds us its Christmastime.”

When asked what the surrounding community can do to make a better Christmas for him and others at the CAN Center, Juan responded, “Give to Lynda.” Donations can be made to Westside CAN via their Web site, www.westsidecan.org.