

A Latino Beat

Sense of Community and Family Traditions Motivate Volunteers

By Cathleen O'Connor Schoultz

Argentineans, Bolivians, Brazilians, Cubans, Mexicans, Peruvians, Salvadorans—in broad terms “Latinos” or *latinosamericanos*—are a rich and growing resource for volunteer organizations. The diversity of this loosely gathered group can be daunting, on either the explaining or the receiving end, but in general it includes everyone with roots in Central, Latin or South America, Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico, and depending on your point of view, natives of the Guyanas or Haiti.

Community leaders agree that to diversify an organization, one must take in the uniqueness of countries and individuals. Depending on whom you talk to, even the terminology is different. Although many people don't care either way, others find Hispanic incorrect, dated or downright insulting. And while some Mexican Americans call themselves Chicano, others say it's a term for academics, and that Mexican is perfectly serviceable, whether one is Mexican or Mexican American. About the only thing Latinos have in common, in fact, is that they're a somewhat invisible presence in the mainstream media—and that they hate to be pigeonholed.

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“My number one requirement for volunteers is a genuine love of helping the community,” says Walter Tejada, Virginia state director for the League of United Latin American Citizens, which is open to all but is primarily Latino in make-up. As director, Tejada oversees the state board, which in turn oversees three

councils handling voter registration, leadership and citizenship issues, respectively. Tejada likes the well-crafted but creative structure of LULAC, where everyone has a responsibility and all are expected “to chip in and do their parts.” But people can choose the areas they want to work in, such as employment, civil rights or health.

A revered institution, LULAC was founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, almost 70 years ago in response to the American annexation of one-third of Mexico's territory after the Mexican American

War. Seventy-seven thousand Mexicans became Americans overnight without their consent, and the society was formed to protect their interests. Today LULAC has 110,000 members and uses about 200,000 volunteers a year. The league has boards in nearly every state, as well as nine separate national councils in areas from women's, children or young adult issues to citizenship and education. It's a home away from home for thousands of new immigrants and an advocacy group and community resource. It helps



LULAC volunteers—200,000 strong—help each other through organized structures in almost every state.

Latinos to learn English, to retain Spanish or even to learn Spanish. While the national organization sets policy, LULAC is a grassroots organization with much strength at the local level. The organization's national education centers have helped about 100,000 students stay in school, and the group operates a large-scale scholarship program for Latinos in need.

In late February, Tejada's region completed an "SRO" citizenship workshop, held at the local Salvation Army headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, with which the regional LULAC has forged a volunteer partnership. Tejada says LULAC has always placed a strong emphasis on getting out the Latino vote, as well, which is about 50 percent nationally and even higher in local elections.

Who are Latinos? In the greater Washington metropolitan area, they're mostly Salvadoran and Bolivian emigres, as well as quite a few Peruvians and Guatemalans. Tejada himself came to the United States from El Salvador 20 years ago at the age of 13. Tejada says he looks for programs that might be suitable for bilingual presentation. And for new immigrants, even a few words of Spanish can make a difference.

"We're a channel into the mainstream," he says, and people make connections through small things.

Asked how many volunteers he has, Tejada exclaims "Never enough!" adding that in addition to the board and the three individual councils, the Virginia league uses up to 50 volunteers on any given day. While LULAC is hundreds of thousands strong and still growing, in many Latino communities, volunteering is just on the cusp of being discovered.

Know Your Volunteers

Carlos Tortolero says it's important to ask volunteers, especially Latinos, where they're from. "It shows them you care," he says. With a mission of showcasing the best in Mexican culture, Tortolero is founding director of the 10-year-old Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago.

He was born in Mexico but moved to Illinois at the age of three and grew up to become a history teacher and counselor. European Americans tend to see anyone

with Latino roots as the "other," no matter how long they've been in the country, he says.

"Some years back, I was given tickets to the World Cup soccer match, the U.S. against Italy," he says. "Actually I'm not crazy about soccer, but my son, is. He was about nine then." When the Americans entered the field, his son cheered wildly, provoking another fan to say, "Oh, you're rooting for America?" Dumb question, he says.

If you're a volunteer coordinator, be aware of the resurgence of art and activism in the Latino community. While many arts organizations across the country struggle to stay afloat, the Mexican Museum is flourishing. Tortolero directs a staff of 27, dispensing a handsome budget of \$2.8 million.

He works with many volunteers, both Latino and

not, and he says volunteering is not necessarily a part of the typical Latino's tradition. As a matter of fact, volunteering is an American invention, he says. The government pays for everything in Mexico, and other than the church, no one would think of asking someone to voluntarily part with money or time.

While touring the museum about five years ago, an entourage of Mexicans just didn't get the concept of volunteerism and philanthropy, he says. "At first they said why do you do this?" But they're getting the picture he says. "Now they ask me 'How do you fundraise?'" Tortolero adds with a laugh, "Even my parents don't understand about fundraising! They think I'm doing something illegal," he quips.

A fast-talking Chicagoan, Tortolero feels that the challenge of keeping up with San Francisco's art scene lends an edge to his city's arts energy. One of the special aspects of ethnic Chicago is that the local arts scene is as vibrant as downtown, he says.

Play to Strengths

Larry Baza used 200 to 300 volunteers on a single event last year, the annual Mexican music festival produced by his Centro Cultural de la Raza, which drew 11,000 San Diegoans. Executive director of the center, Baza calls himself a Chicano. He's a Mexican American whose family has been here for many generations, and



Volunteer Maria Luisa Estanislado cuts "Pan de Muerto" (Day of the Dead Bread) for LULAC's exhibit at the annual Mexican Fine Arts Festival.

Attract and Keep Volunteers

Here are some suggestions for working with Latino communities to broadening your organization's base of volunteers :

- Find ways to get your organization's message to the local Latino community. For example, the Washington, D. C., area has two Spanish language television channels, Walter Tejada says, a host of Spanish newspapers and two very influential radio stations. Latino volunteers are younger on average, and include many college students. The universities are a good place to advertise, and some will consider giving college credit for volunteer work.

- Think partnerships, says Tejada. The Virginia LULAC chapter is working with the Salvation Army, conducting workshops and establishing an office at the latter organization's Arlington, Virginia, headquarters.

- Patience is a virtue for volunteers, especially in multi-lingual situations. At Agape, part of the Hogar Hispano office of Catholic Charities of Arlington, Ramute Brzaukas coordinates a job bank line and an emergency evening and nighttime hotline. Many of her clients are new immigrants who speak only Spanish, and they're sick and in trouble when they call. "On top of that, sometimes the accents can be difficult to understand," even for native Spanish speakers.

- Don't assume someone speaks Spanish on the basis of his looks. Maybe a third of Latinos are truly bilingual. The rest have only one primary language. But do look for programs that lend themselves to a bilingual presentation. Even a few Spanish words can bring the feeling of home to a new immigrant, says Tejada.

- Create comfortable volunteer opportunities. Unlike an average older American, older Latinos in some communities are often on "a very fixed income," says to Larry Baza, without the reserves for volunteering. Even the cost of transportation can be insurmountable he says.

- It's a big world out there, so don't stereotype , says former history teacher Carlos Tortolero. "Mariachi music is only Mexican" for example. And don't use the term Hispanic. I'm not from Spain, says Larry Baza, with a chuckle. "It sounds like something the Census Bureau cooked up." Speaking of cooking, Tortolero reminds one that Puerto Ricans don't eat hot sauce, and as a matter of fact that the only hot Latin American cuisines are Guatemalan and Mexican.

- Junior and senior high school students have lots to give. And what a way to develop self esteem! Jacquie Morales says it was the "ESOL" or English as a Second Language teacher at her daughter's Arlington, Virginia, middle school who suggested that the 13-year-old volunteer with a special summer school program for some new immigrants. "She loved it," says Morales. Born in Bolivia, Karen Morales is articulate in Spanish and English after growing up in Arlington, Virginia. She and her cousin rode the school bus every day, her mother says, translating, encouraging and acting as role models for several young elementary students who spoke only Spanish. "It was wonderful, all the children fought to sit next to the big girls."

- Educate yourself. You have to know what's going on in the culture to understand history, says Tortolero. So let's hope you know Cesar Chavez from Julius Caesar, but in any case, do take advantage of the resurgence of interest in Mexican, Salvadoran and other ethnic art, and visit a museum or see a production. At Baza's San Diego cultural center, besides artists in residence programs and expansive exhibits, a group of talented local youngster expresses its roots in original improv theater. If you're on line, there are numerous applicable sites. For a look at alternative culture, try the Taco Shop Poets at their web site:

<http://www.n2.net/ecruse/progsTacoShop.html>.

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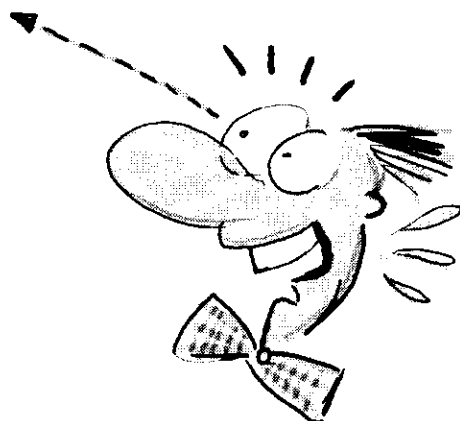
he sees his mission as the creation and preservation of the culture of indigenous people. Volunteers at the festival did anything from setting up vendor booths, where tortillas and beer were sold, to helping the musicians set up. Participants meandered through the Norteno music and Mexican polkas, a hybrid form created when Germans moved to Mexico with their accordions hundreds of years ago. Today's titles feature themes of lost love as well as the dangers of border

crossings and drug dealers.

To accomplish his mission, Baza works with a primarily Latino volunteer board made up of social workers, a judge, a marketing director and others. His volunteers are mostly young, he says, as arts volunteering is a very new concept in the Latino community, and appropriately, most are students. They often receive college credits for their work as

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Latino Beat

(continued from page 17)

gallery attendants, gift shop clerks or assistants in mounting art work and dismantling exhibits. The museum insists on at least a three-hour time commitment, Baza says, but other than that, he customizes volunteer opportunities for individuals: "College kids have very chaotic lives!" Baza has his college education in the theater and has been an arts administrator at several arts organizations and director of the county arts council.

Baza observes an awakening and self-enlightenment in his volunteers. "Spiritual values are expressed through art and culture," he says.

The surprise for non-Latinos who are working with Latinos for the first time, he adds, would probably be that "we are not a closed culture. We're one humanity," he adds.

The museum has shown work in every medium, he says, and from artists of all persuasions. "The only issue is whether the artists' works are relevant to our mission," he says, which is concerned with national borders. Those include Tijuana, "in our back yard," Baza says, "the most traversed border on the planet."

One exhibit this year features a collection of Afghani war rugs, he said, beautifully woven textiles illustrating the war planes and bombs of recent history.

A group of resident artists also works with the community in various programs such as a recent workshop for small children about fairy tales. ■