

## Club points Sandy toward trust

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Monday, October 30, 2006

Author: GOSIA WOZNIACKA, The Oregonian

SUMMARY: Kiwanis | Fears are set aside as Latino and Anglo service groups learn to work together and value cultural differences

A few years ago, a new housing complex serving Latino farmworkers caused a small outcry in Sandy, the sleepy former lumber town that dubs itself "the gateway to Mount Hood."

"The neighbors were afraid to death," says former City Council member Dick Steiner, recalling public hearings on the plan. "They thought farmworker housing would bring down the value of their neighborhood."

Instead, a new organization eventually would be formed at the once-contentious Sandy Vista Apartments --one that would help break down ethnic barriers and mistrust in a town where the Latino presence has steadily grown with the blossoming of surrounding nurseries. Last month, the only Latino Kiwanis club in Oregon celebrated its first anniversary there and inducted new members and officers --Latino and non-Latino.

Kiwanis Club of Sandy H.O.P.E., which may be the only service club of its type for Spanish speakers in the state, even considered expanding its mission from that of the typical Kiwanis club. The global community-service organization serves children and young adults through volunteer projects, but Sandy H.O.P.E saw an additional challenge in breaking down stereotypes and fears between Latinos and Anglos.

And it would allow low-income immigrants to come together, learn new skills and contribute to the community.

"Part of our goal was to cross cultures --for (Latinos) to begin to see how we live and for us to see how they live," says Steiner, an English-only speaker who helped the group get started.

It was a mission that would have hurdles to clear. Sandy is no different from many small cities in Oregon, where the Latinos can remain isolated.

In the 2000 Census, the town was about 4 percent Latino, but that number has grown significantly. Sandy Vista Apartments, home to many Latinos, opened in 2004. It stands slightly apart on the town's eastern edge.

"It's a culture within a culture," Steiner says. "You could see them around, but there was very little interaction. There was tolerance on the part of Sandy residents, but that's about it, no understanding."

Olga Gerberg, a lively, bilingual Latina, was born in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. She had been part of Kiwanis International in Alabama and later in Canby and Gladstone. She always noticed she was the only Latino in the club and dreamed of opening a Kiwanis club for Latinos.

Eventually, she mentioned her idea to Steiner, who decided to help. He had worked in Hong Kong with the Mormon church and "became aware of the extreme differences between cultures."

Both Latinos and Anglos, however, were wary of the new organization and its goals.

"Olga and I went against the ordinary scheme of things," Steiner recalls. "Most people said it's not going to work."

Tensions in town fixed on stereotypes, such as gangs, and issues, such as illegal immigration, Steiner says. Many Latinos were afraid to venture out, Gerberg says, and some --coming from rural areas where they weren't exposed to

such service clubs --didn't want to join an unfamiliar club that also asked them to pay dues.

Members of the Sandy Kiwanis Club, active since 1947, questioned the need for a separate group, Gerberg and Steiner say. They didn't want the competition or splitting of resources. Other area Kiwanis groups asked why the Spanish speakers couldn't just learn English. And some were upset that members would pay only \$30 instead of the \$300 Kiwanis International annual membership fee.

Memories of segregation were also a concern for an ethnic-based club, but Gerberg and Steiner weighed costs and benefits.

"It wasn't just the language factor," Gerberg says. It was also culture, circumstances and abilities. Many Sandy Vista residents --farmworkers who earn between \$7,000 and \$12,000 a year --couldn't afford lunch at a restaurant. And unlike established Kiwanians, many of whom are retired, the farm laborers couldn't miss work for meetings.

"My goal wasn't separation of the clubs," Gerberg says, "but (separation) gave people the opportunity to grow at their own pace. This community belongs to them as much as to anyone else, and they should get involved in it."

"This is who we are"

Eventually, though, the efforts of Steiner and fellow Kiwanian Fred Proett began to change perspectives. The two mentored two dozen original members on how to fill out forms, run meetings and plan community projects.

Sandy Kiwanians even decided to sponsor the Kiwanis Club of Sandy H.O.P.E., which stands for Hispanos Organizados Podemos Educar, or Hispanics Organize with Power to Educate. The new club held a spaghetti dinner at Sandy High School and sold homemade tamales and churros at the Sandy Mountain Festival and Sandy Oktoberfest. From the proceeds, it awarded a \$500 scholarship to a Latino student at the high school and distributed about 70 bags of school supplies to children.

The two cultures started coming together. H.O.P.E. members attended some English-speaking Sandy Kiwanis meetings. They invited presenters who spoke English to their meetings. The clubs worked together at a community breakfast and a Thanksgiving dinner, and last month chopped and distributed firewood to needy families.

Non-Latino Kiwanians were guests at Latino birthday parties, baptisms and posadas --the Mexican version of Christmas caroling. The groups' members dined in one another's homes, and they started socializing in town.

"Here, this is how we eat; this is who we are," Salvador Doroteo Hernandez, a member of the Latino club, says about hosting Anglos.

"When we cross them in a store now, there are arms and hugs and all," Steiner says.

Hernandez, who has the large, rough hands and suntanned face of a nursery worker, says being the club's president for a year gave him confidence and connected him with local English speakers.

"I like the change that happened in me. Little by little, the fear left me, and I felt more sure of myself," Hernandez says. "If I had not been president, I would have never learned how to speak in public.

"Because I work in a nursery, I know the vocabulary for plants, but because of Kiwanis I had to learn to talk about other subjects," says Hernandez, who studied agriculture in Mexico 17 years ago. "It was important for me to learn some English, so that the Americans know what I think."

For outgoing Treasurer Raquel Gonzales, the club meant new skills and pride in volunteering. A Mexican-born stay-at-home mom, Gonzales has three U.S.-born children and a husband, who is a farmworker. Through Kiwanis, she learned how to write checks, collect receipts and balance a checkbook.

"My thinking is very different now from when I joined," Gonzales says. "This group helped me understand that giving to others is a beautiful job. I hope we can be a model for our children."

Seeing growth has made the club worthwhile to Gerberg. "Their self-esteem buildup, like wow, it just rose up," she says. "They learned that there is no reason to be afraid of American people."

The growth wasn't limited to Latinos, either.

"I didn't know much about them, except for the fact that they can't speak English," Steiner says. "I learned that you never know a culture until you're inside it. They are great people with big hearts and close-knit families. They just needed us to go an extra mile to build trust."

H.O.P.E. is busy preparing to help with the Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas baskets for needy families. Its members plan a Christmas tree sale to fund three scholarships. And in August, in conjunction with the city of Sandy, they will hold a Hispanic Festival.

The club --one of 15 Latino Kiwanis clubs in the U.S. --is now viewed as a model for future Spanish-speaking service organizations in Oregon. Latinos in Canby and Hillsboro are considering forming similar clubs.

"A lot of barriers have come down because of this club," Steiner says. "Tolerance has now moved to acceptance."

Gosia Wozniacka: 503-294-5936; gosiawozniacka@news.oregonian.com

---

**Edition:** Sunrise

**Section:** Local

**Page:** B01

**Record Number:** MERLIN\_8810278

Copyright (c) 2006 Oregonian Publishing Co.