

Growing Together

In Washington County, Latino farmers are building cross-cultural partnerships with academic and nonprofit organizations to expand community health and food equity.



Adelante Mujeres Empowers Latino Farmers

The nonprofit Adelante Mujeres saw a clear challenge when the Latino farmers on its 12-acre La Esperanza Farm continued to struggle selling their abundant harvests. Adelante Mujeres provides courses in sustainable agriculture to low-income Latinos, and offers graduates small farm plots and a booth at the Forest Grove Farmers Market to sell their fresh produce.

But daunting social, linguistic, and technological barriers were making it difficult for the La Esperanza farmers to find diverse buyers for their organic vegetables.

Working in close partnership with Portland State University and the nonprofit Ecotrust, Adelante Mujeres piloted a program to connect La Esperanza farmers to local wholesale buy-

ers seeking fresh, organic produce. In the process, they took a hard look at how these farmers could support greater community health among the low-income residents of Washington County.

Above: La Esperanza farmer Araceli Roman and her daughters at the Forest Grove Farmers Market. Photo by Shawn Linehan.

PSU Students Engage Local Residents

The 12 current La Esperanza farmers and 15 Latino vendors at the Forest Grove Farmers Market participated in focus groups led by Portland State University Professor of Sociology Margaret Everett and graduate student Scott Ellis. The conversations drew out the farmers' priorities and concerns about marketing their products.

"I've worked with Latino neighborhoods to improve access to healthy retail options, and I was especially impressed by how motivated and knowledgeable these farmers were," Professor Everett reflected.

At the top of the list, the farmers wanted to know more about the shopping habits of local residents. They knew that low-income community members, many of whom are Latino, were facing a parallel difficulty: a lack of affordable access to fresh, healthy food in comfortable settings. How and where could Adelante farmers offer their produce to fill that need?

From the focus group findings, undergraduate students in Asst. Professor Betty Izumi's School of Community Health freshman inquiry course devised a bilingual survey that they sent to

"Este es un programa de aprendizaje. Nosotros estamos en el camino, aprendiendo... sí ya tenemos la satisfacción de estar proveyendo comida orgánica, fresca y cultivada localmente, tanto para nuestros clientes como para nuestras familias."

"This is a learning program. We are on the road, learning... We have the satisfaction of providing organic food, fresh and locally grown, to our clients and our families."

- Alfredo Sanchez, La Esperanza Farm

Ecotrust Introduces Farmers to Schools

The nonprofit Ecotrust shared its relationships within the farm to school community to connect the La Esperanza farmers to nearby preschools and public schools, which serve many vulnerable young people in the community.

Fernando Niño, one of the La Esperanza farmers, is now selling his fresh produce to Cornelius Head Start, an early childhood care center, and has built a relationship with the largely Latino staff.

providing food for my community," he said. "A barrier for me is that although I understand English, I don't speak it well. This is another reason why providing food to Latinos and the institutions that serve them will be a good marketing outlet for me."

This success has inspired three more Head Start programs in Washington County and two public school districts to establish relationships with the La Esperanza farmers.

"The opportunity is a good fit for me because I will be

Adelante Mujeres is also working with Ecotrust's

Opposite page: Rafael Cuellar with his daughter Crystal and son Angel on their plot at La Esperanza Farm. Photo by Shawn Linehan.

4,000 nearby residents. Nearly 30 percent responded, and three Urban and Regional Planning graduate students mapped the responses using GIS technology to overlay census data.

From their content-rich map, the graduate students identified neighborhood-specific tactics for how to increase awareness of the Forest Grove Farmers Market, evaluated locations and hours for new market stands, and worked with the farmers to make bilingual flyers, a website, and printed recipes.

online tool FoodHub (www.food-hub.org), which connects regional wholesale food buyers and sellers. Currently, Adelante staff host a profile on FoodHub to help La Esperanza's farmers market their products.

Ecotrust's relationship with Adelante Mujeres planted the seed to begin exploring ways to make FoodHub work for those who don't speak English or who lack computer access or literacy.



Partners Deepen Their Commitment to Food Justice

Adelante Mujeres is beginning a partnership with Oregon Childhood Development Coalition, one of the largest early childhood care and education networks in Oregon, serving over 3,000 children and their families every year. The farmers are also in discussion with other wholesale buyers to establish lasting partnerships.

PSU Asst. Professor Izumi is using this project as a model for how and why to engage undergraduates in community-based studies. Working with the La Esperanza farmers also gave the graduate students' GIS work valuable, applicable context, which Ellis is citing in an article to rebuff GIS programs that don't involve community participation.

Ecotrust is continuing its work to connect low-income minority farmers with schools. It recently began a two-year project to facilitate new connections between 36 lower-income school districts and small- to mid-size and minority-owned

food producers in Oregon and Washington.

All three partners learned that schools and preschools are some of the most equitable places to bring healthy food into the community.

"Despite Latinos' critical role in Oregon's food system, there are many children of farmworkers who never get a chance to eat the food that their parents work so hard to harvest," reflects Stacey Sobell, Farm to School Manager at Ecotrust.

"It's hard to think of a better fit than having La Esperanza farmers sell their produce to local school districts and Head Starts. In many cases, these organic fruits and vegetables will end up on the plates of the farmers' own sons and daughters," says Sobell.

The project partners also have witnessed that the wholesale market is an excellent outlet for Latino farmers, giving them a direct line to community mem-

bers who they might not otherwise access and allowing them to build long-term relationships with buyers that can weather the challenges they face as they learn new skills and maneuver the inevitable ups and downs of farming.

"How do we create healthy communities?" asks Anne Morse, Outreach Coordinator for Adelante. "We are trying to get these folks on the periphery of the local food movement to be more engaged." She has witnessed that multiple problems can be solved when the solution invests in people and connects them to their local community.

Morse attributes the project's success to its partners' collaborative spirit. Each organization brought distinct tools, skills, and relationships that deepened and broadened their collective impact. With greater knowledge and commitment, all three partners are continuing their work to expand food justice for farmers and eaters.

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