

La Voz embraces Durham's Hispanic community, hopes to expand resources

By: Elizabeth Byrum
Durham VOICE arts editor

¿Hablas español? The staff and members of the Lakewood YMCA in Durham want the community to know they do.

The La Voz Spanish-speaking Advisory Committee aims to address the needs of the Latino community in the surrounding neighborhoods, as well as the greater city of Durham.

The idea for the committee began as part of a project design initiative (PDI) of the YMCA of the Triangle. Allie Boulton, the assistant program director at the Lakewood YMCA, and four other staff members were tasked with finding a target audience that was not already being served by the YMCA. In response, the group conducted interviews with ten Hispanic families in the community who had some connection or knowledge of the YMCA.

"What we learned is that we don't know a lot about what they really need and how to help them, so we decided to create La Voz, which is a Spanish-speaking advisory board," said Brook Oliver, the group fitness director at the Downtown Durham YMCA and an initial member of the project design.

Boulton agreed that there were a staggering number of disconnects to the Latino community, including overall miscommunication, a lack of translated resources and vague stereotypes of the YMCA. As a result, the YMCA's member pool does not completely reflect Lakewood's changing and diverse demographics, she said.

"There's a huge Hispanic community around Lakewood, but it's not the same representation outside the community and then inside the Y," Boulton said. "Our goal was basically to find out why that was."

While the committee is still getting underway, it already has ideas for some of the first steps it wants to take to connect with Spanish-speaking community members. Translating resources and signs around the YMCA as well as increasing the number of staff who speak Spanish are two of the main goals that have already been brought up.

"What small steps can we do to make sure the YMCA is for all?" Boulton said. "That's part of our mission: for all. Especially in a very diverse community, we want to make sure we are reaching all people in the community."

Boulton will help guide La Voz, but emphasized the importance that the

committee be volunteer-based and volunteer-led. In addition, the committee hopes to include representation from many of Durham's communities and organizations, Hispanic and otherwise, including the YMCA's own members.

"Our idea is that they will help make the YMCA more welcoming and genuine and passionate and accepting and all those things we strive to be with our voice and values for everybody," Boulton said.

Healthy spirit, mind and body

Ricardo Correa, pastor of el Centro de Albanza Naciones Unidas (CANU), which meets at Lakewood Baptist Church, was invited to participate with La Voz by Lakewood's pastor and plans to emphasize the spiritual realm of the community.

For Correa, the Spanish-speaking committee will bring many of the existing community resources to light for the Latino population and hopefully encourage further involvement.

"They have always been there, but the lack of knowledge, the present truth hasn't been actualized," he said.

Specifically, Correa wants to foster greater community ownership, which he believes is also a challenge for the current community.

"You have a new flow of residents," Correa said. "They just like the area, but they have not taken ownership because they lack the resources"

One of Correa's ideas is to start a Hispanic basketball league and to have it at night, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., in order to offer neighborhood kids a safe place to go. The YMCA is an ideal place to hold the league, he said, also emphasizing that the Hispanic community cares about basketball.

Get involved!

La Voz's next meeting is Thursday, April 18. Details are still being finalized, but anyone interested in volunteering should contact Allie Boulton for more information at: 919-667-9622

or:

Allie.Boulton@ymcatriangle.org.



Allie Boulton, assistant program director at the Lakewood YMCA, is helping to lead La Voz, a committee focused on reaching out to Durham's growing Hispanic population.

(Staff Photo by: Elizabeth Byrum)

"In that case, we will be battling gang issues with love," Correa said. "We will be battling obesity with activity and love because they will be surrounded by positive role models."

Boulton said that, overall, many directors and members are very passionate about the Hispanic community and want to make sure the right information is getting passed out to them. The YMCA already offers swim lessons, memberships, after-school programs, summer camps and workout classes. Scholarships are also available to help offset the costs.

For community, for all

Boulton said that for one of their previous planning meetings, Correa drove them around in his car to visit local businesses in order to engage in conversation on behalf of the YMCA.

"If we go and see them at their job, then maybe they'll come and see us," Boulton said. She added that face-to-face interactions were key to breaking down barriers. With this in mind, the project began with 10 family interviews at the families' homes. For many of the staff members, the interviews, which often lasted for several hours, were quite personal and sometimes even emotional.

Boulton recalled one interview where a daughter emotionally expressed her desire to spend more time with her mother and the conversation focused on how the YMCA can help foster such interactions.

"It means so much more if you go and knock on their door and say, 'Hey can I talk with you for a minute?' Boulton said. "That way you make those personal connections."