

Hispanic Outreach Center opens in Bartlesville

By Susan Albert

E-E Community Editor

When Mili Cappelletti moved to Bartlesville four years ago, she found that local Hispanics who were not bilingual had a tough time navigating through the social service system. For example, filling out forms at the local Health Department proved a nightmare for those who couldn't read English.

"I began helping them from my house and it grew and grew," said Cappelletti, originally from Peru, South America. "Soon it was out of control and took more time than I knew."

In January of 2004, the Washington County Health Department, working with a grass-roots initiative called "Oklahoma Turning Point," (Washington County Wellness Initiative) looked to community leaders to help identify needs regarding public health.

"Mili came to the meeting and spoke about the Hispanic needs," said M'Liss Jenkins, director of Social Services at the Washington County Health Department. "We formed a committee with the vision to open a Hispanic Outreach Center."

They met with Bill Taylor of ConocoPhillips, who had started a Hispanic Network there, and talked about needs, eventually forming a partnership.

The Hispanic Resources Committee volunteered their time in many ways," said Jenkins. "They held information booths at SunFest, at Wal-Mart's Womens Health and interpreted at flu clinics. They also helped get people signed up for Christmas assistance last fall."

Tom Perrine, human resources manager at Siemens Applied Automation, orchestrated the donation of furnishings and hardware to the Outreach Center.

On a return flight from Houston a year ago, Perrine met Juan Farias of ConocoPhillips, who enlightened Perrine about the organization of the Outreach Center.

"I found that interesting because I was looking for an employment gateway into the Spanish community," said Perrine.

Farias invited Perrine to the next board meeting, which he attended.

"They had office space, but no furnishings, and since Siemens was undergoing a remodel, we had a whole warehouse of furnishings," said Perrine, who is now a board member of the Outreach Center.

For the same reason, Siemens also had computers that needed recycling.

"We loved to see them go to a useful and productive organization," he said. "We provided all the office furnishings, a printer, fax, copier and four computer systems to La Casa Hispana."

With funds from ConocoPhillips, furnishings and hardware from Siemens, and a partnership with the Bartlesville Community Foundation, La Casa Hispana, located at 508 S.E. 5th Street, Suite A, in Bartlesville, opened its doors on Jan. 2. Recently, a grand opening ceremony was held.

Cappelletti said much of the Hispanic community already knew about the Center because of the committee work last fall. Flyers were sent to companies, Hispanic stores and the Health Department.

“We even had a Christmas party and invited the whole Hispanic community so they'd know where it was,” she said.

There are 14 members on the board of La Casa Hispana. Members hail from ConocoPhillips, the Washington County Health Department, Key Personnel, Siemens, United Way, schools and churches. Fabian Anda is president of the board.

Cappelletti, a professional translator, serves as program director. She spent many years as a teacher, translator and administrator while volunteering in the social services area.

The Center serves as a networking and referral center for the Hispanic community.

“We tried not to duplicate services,” said Cappelletti. “Most of the people don't speak English and with a language barrier, so many mistakes can happen when filling out a form. We can provide an interpreter if the person needs to go to DHS or get any service or benefit.”

Education is very important, too, said Cappelletti.

“For example, people in the Hispanic community might wait till they are so sick they have to go to the Emergency room because they don't know other services are available to them. We can help direct them to the services they need.”

Cappelletti said people are coming from all around to see the Outreach Center and what it has to offer.

“Since we speak Spanish here, they feel at home. It's new and the people prefer to go where they are well treated.”

In addition to the immediate area, they come from Nowata, Tulsa and cities in Kansas, she said.

“I even get calls from Dallas, Florida, Minneapolis, and help them on the phone. Often they ask about immigration issues,” said Cappelletti.

According to demographics provided by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, the 2000 census shows Bartlesville's total population at that time was 34,748 and the Hispanic population was 1,049 or 3 percent of the total population.

“I think there is definitely more Hispanics than that,” said Cappelletti. “Those that come here fill out a form, and I already have more than 100 families signed up with six or eight people in each family. In a couple of months, I expect to have 300 or 400 forms.”

The mission of La Casa Hispana, according to their fact sheet, “is to positively integrate Hispanics by networking information, capabilities and services, creating opportunities for full participation and contribution in the community. They believe in promoting a just and compassionate society, encouraging safe and healthy lifestyles, developing social well-being and economic opportunity and promoting a vibrant and inclusive community.”

Programs offered include:

€Information, screening and referral for: Schools and educational orientation, job search, English classes, healthcare, housing, legal aid, immigration

€Interpreters

€Community Resource Guide in Spanish

€Social services partnership

€Welcome new Hispanic individuals and families to the Bartlesville area

€Provide opportunities for the Hispanic community to come together for fellowship

For more information, call Cappelletti at 918-336-4242.