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The Little Engine That Could

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Maria Aguilar has been working at the Cornelius Public Library since December 2004. She started as a part-time library clerk and was later hired as the Latino Outreach Coordinator. Maria earned her B.A. in Human Resources and Marketing from Portland State University. Maria currently oversees the outreach program, volunteers, Spanish collection development, and circulation.

The Cornelius Public Library is a 3,025 square foot library located in a rural town of about 12,000 residents. Over the past six years we have been able to provide outreach to our community's approximately 50 percent Latino population, thanks to two LSTA grants.

In 2008 the director, Karen Hill, applied for a LSTA grant to fund a three quarter Latino Outreach Coordinator, for which position I was hired. The project was so attractive that the Paul G. Allen Foundation matched the grant for a second year. Karen and I sat down to talk about the needs of the community, what we wanted to do, and how we could reach that goal in a two year period.

The first thing we decided to focus on was establishing and maintaining partnerships with local agencies, such as Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, Centro Cultural, Head Start and two of our elementary schools. We sat down with each of their directors or outreach coordinators to see how we could help one another, and how we could collaborate in future events. We listened to the needs of each agency and began planning how we could best serve our community and its residents. We started making ourselves more visible and promoting our services to the Spanish speaking community. We needed to break down the language barrier that seemed to be holding back many residents from coming into the library, and take away the misconception that our services come with a fee.

One of our main goals was to have more Spanish speaking patrons visit the library. This, in turn, would increase the circulation of our Spanish Language materials. We were able to accomplish this small hurdle by rearranging the library to locate all of the Spanish Language materials together. This made the Spanish Language materials more visible and accessible. Relocating several small collections made the Spanish Language materials seem larger. We received a lot of positive feedback from the patrons saying how much easier it was to browse for items and how it made the library visually attractive. To help us with the uphill battle of not having enough Spanish books, we have received several grants to purchase Spanish language books. A Meyer Memorial Trust grant of \$6,500 was the largest grant that helped us power through this goal. We were able to increase our circulation from 300 items a month in 2007 to about 900 a month



in 2008. We went from the thought of “I think I can” to “I know I can.”

After building the collection, we focused on attending as many community events as we could. We began promoting our services and storytimes by word of mouth, Univision (Spanish language television), community and agency listservs, and even held an open house. This helped get people interested in our library and the services we provided. We were reaching a great portion of our intended population. Throughout this process, we established valuable connections within the community that gave us the energy to keep chugging along with our goals.

Karen and I attended trainings in Early Literacy and integrated this material into workshops, handouts, and collection development. We restructured our Spanish Family Storytime and began a Language Exchange program. All of these things, among others, helped shape the path towards making ourselves known in the community and to our community partners. By the end of the second year, the City of Cornelius was enthusiastic about adding my position to the budget and therefore continuing our outreach services to the Latino community.

With the increase in library use and needs across



Maria Aguilar at Free Orchards Back To School Night speaking with parents about the various resources the library has.



Elizabeth Lopez and Maria Aguilar at a Children's Day event that attracts over 3,000 people each year.



Spanish Language storyteller Nelda Reyes engages the kids at our Spanish Language Family Storytime.



all languages and services came more responsibilities, limiting my flexibility to attend various community events and diluting our outreach efforts. Last year, we applied for another LSTA grant to hire an intern to support the great foundation we had laid out in 2008. This position helped increase the number of programs for Spanish speaking patrons. We restarted the Language Exchange program (which had been dropped) and added a Spanish computer class as well as monthly storytimes at our local Head Starts. During the spring, we were able to visit almost every classroom at two of our three local elementary schools, promoting the summer reading program and the library in both English and Spanish. This resulted in an astounding 31 percent increase in participation in our summer reading program for kids aged 0 – 13.

Despite having less than a full-time dedicated outreach position and constantly piecing together grants and other funds, the Latino Outreach program at the Cornelius Public Library has been very successful. All of our hard work and focus on outreach and increasing the programming has paid off. Our overall circulation has increased 49 percent in the past four years and Spanish language material circulation increased 16 percent during the same time frame. Even though we have found success in our outreach program, we continue to look for ways in which we can create new partnerships and introduce new programs for kids and adults. The work in outreach is never done, and we are thankful for the opportunity to create something exciting for our community and change “I think I can.” to “I know I can.”



Cha Cha the Clown at the Open House celebration of an Amo Leer grant of books received by the library.