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Bridge-Building in Sioux County

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Bridge-Building in Sioux County

Abstract

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Posting about partnering with immigrants in our communities from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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October 15, 2019

Bridge-Building in Sioux County

Mary Beth Pollema

Since 1968, the United States has been celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month. This period lasts from September 15 to October 15, a time frame that encircles the liberation dates of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. We take time nationally recognize the deep roots of Latinos, to learn more about the vital impact they have had in our country, and to appreciate the vitality they bring to American culture.

Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Alex Vasquez, director of Young Life in Sioux County, about his work in the community. He is speaking from several platforms that allow him to serve as a “bridge builder” between cultures within Sioux Center. Vasquez is a Dordt alumni (2018) who was originally born in Colombia and raised in Dallas, Texas. Throughout his five years of living in Sioux Center, he has increasingly become aware of his calling. He believes God has placed him in the ministry of reconciliation through the message of the Gospel and the forming of relational partnerships within the community. The following are excerpts of the conversation that I had with Vasquez about his vision for this work, as well as the joys and challenges he is experiencing and ways that the campus community can partner with him.

Tell me about the vision you have for your work as a cultural “bridge-builder” here in Sioux Center.

I believe there’s a lot of good people in this community and a lot of good resources. As well, there are a lot of needs, and the task is connecting both ends together. One way I have found to do this is with Young Life, which is directed primarily towards the

youth. What I've discovered is that the more I delve into the youth program in this area, the more I learn about the traditions and norms of Sioux Center. This has made me ask bigger questions about families and communities. I feel like it's a rippling effect, because as I'm trying to really spark a revival in one area, it starts affecting other areas of the community.

Young Life is one way you've been able to make inroads. Are there other ways that you're connecting with the immigrant population?

Young Life has been a platform for me, a vehicle to really make a difference in the areas that I'm speaking about. I believe that there are other ways, but in reality everything I've done has been in connection with Young Life. Another program, Juntos, is chance for me to connect to Hispanic youth in the area. I also have an office in Atlas, where I have the chance to act as an interpreter for people in the community, which includes advocating for immigrants. Every opportunity I've had to share my story—whether that's in a church, or an organization—is because of the influence of Gabriel Salguero, a speaker who came to Dordt last year. He said something that has stuck with me: he said it is one thing to do direct services and direct ministry really well; however, without advocacy you're never going to truly see a major change over the course of your ministry.

What have been some of the joys of this ministry so far?

For me, the joys of this ministry have been watching the transformation in peoples' lives. I'll give you an example. With Juntos, there is a mother who came in to learn about the process of getting her daughter into college. Through helping her mom figure out the ropes, we were able to help her sign up for FAFSA, for scholarships, and all these things. As a result, the daughter was able to go to college. Along the way, I was welcomed into the house, ate a meal with them, and did life with them without really promoting Young Life. The mother then said, "I want these girls to learn from what you've done and what you're doing. What are ways to do that?" This opportunity opened up a conversation, and ended up with me inviting them to camp.

These are girls I would not really consider churched, or that would have a great understanding of the Gospel. I watched them grow throughout camp, and after coming back from camp they said, "Alex, I want to serve in any capacity. I don't know what that looks like." In that story, I got to see transformation in the kids' lives and in the family—and not just spiritually. You see that they have grown in their vision of life when they begin to say, "We can do more. We can go to college. We can see a better future for our family." Ultimately, seeing transformation within a whole family is something beautiful. It wasn't just the result of one thing, either—it was multiple things coming together to make that happen.

I'm sure there are challenges. What are they?

Yes, there are challenges. When I first started Young Life in this area, I had just graduated and was excited. I was ready to make a difference, and I remember getting the notion that a lot of people wanted to tell me, "You're young, calm down. You don't know the ropes. You don't know all the challenges." My eager response would have been, "I know there's challenges, but I'm excited to go." There was also the sense of "We've tried, nothing happened" and quite a bit of people telling me, "Don't get political. Don't really put your name out there, or risk putting your reputation on the line." Another challenge that arose when I first started out in Young life was that of the difficulty I had fundraising.

Young Life is new to the area. How many years has it been here?

This October marks our first year. Most people don't realize that the organization as a whole has been around for years. It's interesting to me, because when I came and realized that there wasn't a Young Life here, I was surprised! I grew up with it, and that's how I came to know the Lord.

How can others partner with you in building community among the various culture groups?

One way to partner is to just listen, and try to understand. Regarding Young Life, that means sitting down and learning about the mission, coming to the events and discovering what's happening, and asking more questions. Another way is actually working in Atlas, raising awareness for people that are homeless—a shock in this very rich and wealthy area. We let them know that there are kids dropping out. It's through prayers, and partnering financially. It's giving of time. There's a lot of different things! The average church member will say, "Well, someone else will go. Someone else will do right." It's the white Anglo person saying, "I can't make a difference, so I'll just let someone else do it." It's the Hispanic saying, "Well, I can't make a difference, so I'll just keep my head down and let someone else do it." Partnering is something everyone can be more intentional about.

What should the dominant culture know in order to better serve the immigrant population?

Instead of doing ministry *to*, we should try doing ministry *with*. The moment the group you're doing ministry with knows that you're doing ministry *to*, you lose them. For instance, if you go to a specific community within your larger community and say that you're doing missional efforts for them, it's a slap in the face because they're your

neighbors. The focus should be on relationships rather than events. It's not about hosting an event once or three times a year and taking pictures. It's more about, "I want to get to know this person," and understanding that you don't want them to accommodate you, but you're accommodating to them. It's about always being in the posture of wanting to learn and understand from them. I believe that throughout my experiences here, I've really been growing, and one of the most important lessons I'm learning is that there's always two sides to the story.