

Director of Casa ALBA Melanie has an exit plan

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GREEN BAY — Since opening its doors in February 2012, Casa ALBA Melanie, a Hispanic community resource center in the heart of Green Bay, has been a beehive of activity.

Sr. Melanie Maczka, a member of the Society of Sisters for the Church, has been ministering to Spanish-speaking Catholics in the Green Bay Diocese since serving as pastoral associate at St. Willebrord Parish in 1991. Today she is director of Casa ALBA Melanie, a community resource center that offers a variety of services to the Spanish-speaking community. (Sam Lucero | The Compass)

In addition to hosting a variety of educational programs for Spanish-speaking members of the community, Casa ALBA serves as a link between agencies catering to Latinos and the burgeoning Latino population.

The glue holding all things together is a smiling woman religious whose family roots are far from Latin America. Consecrated life and the desire to serve others are the underpinnings of Sr. Melanie Maczka's work as director of Casa Alba, located at 314 S. Madison St.

"Sr. Eileen Kelley, the foundress of our community, the Society of Sisters for the Church, said the church isn't this little cluster of people, it's the world and we need to be world conscious," said Sr. Melanie, whose grandparents came from Poland.

"For me, as a consecrated woman, it's not only ministering to others, but really, truly being taught and challenged and invited into a whole life that I would have never (experienced)," she said. "It's very humbling. There are times I wish I could reach out further than Wisconsin."

Since joining the Society of Sisters for the Church (an association of consecrated life based in Paterson, N.J., and sponsored by Bishop Arthur Serratelli), in 1984, Sr. Melanie said her ministry has evolved.

"I started out as a teacher, then became a (parish) director of religious education, then a consultant for the Green Bay Diocese and then a pastoral associate," she said. "That sense of ministry for me has evolved into one of social justice."

The path to Hispanic outreach began in 1979, when she took a volunteer position at St. Willebrord Parish, located two blocks west of Casa ALBA. Two years later, Norbertine Fr. Ken De Groot hired her as pastoral associate.

"It was about 1989 when Fr. Ken and I started hearing from the diocese that there were Hispanics in the area," she said. It triggered a year-long dialogue in the parish, which led to a welcome and celebration on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Dec. 14, 1991.

Sixth in a year-long series on men and women religious.

"From that point on, we got to know the Hispanics," Sr. Melanie said. She and Fr. De Groot took turns traveling to Mexico for a three-week language and cultural immersion program and St. Willebrord became the first full-service bilingual (English/Spanish) parish in the diocese.

The parish's outreach became a success and continues to be a source of welcoming to Spanish-speaking newcomers. What Fr. De Groot and Sr. Melanie found was that a lot of the needs Hispanics brought to them were beyond their ministerial roles.

“We didn’t know the community resources well enough and didn’t have the time,” she explained. “We were too busy doing church stuff.”

Fr. De Groot retired as pastor of St. Willebrord in 2011 and Sr. Melanie stepped down as pastoral associate in 2012. Their separation from parish ministry gave Fr. De Groot and Sr. Melanie an opportunity to look more deeply into the needs of Hispanics that they couldn’t address before.

“We sat down with a group of Hispanics and said, ‘What do you need?’ They said, ‘We need a neutral place where we can go to that feels like home, where we know they are going to speak Spanish to us, and we can get help,’” she said.

It was the framework of Casa ALBA.

“So the primary purpose of Casa ALBA is to network, to put people looking for services in touch with service providers,” she said. The program now has connections with more than 50 different agencies that service the Hispanic community.

“If a person comes looking for a particular need, we know who to connect them with,” said Sr. Melanie. “A lot of the agencies do outreach to Hispanics and they appreciate the fact, too, that if they have information, they can call us and get the word out.”

Among the areas Casa ALBA has succeeded in serving Hispanics are adult education, youth training, parent support and immigration.

In cooperation with Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC), Casa ALBA offers a Spanish GED program that allows participants to study for their high school equivalency diploma in Spanish. “We are the only site in all of northeast Wisconsin that offers a Spanish GED,” said Sr. Melanie. “In the very first group, we had 39 people in class and 19 got their GEDs. They are now working on their English and taking courses at NWTC. It gave them a sense of achievement.”

This year, 60 people are enrolled in the Spanish GED and 20 are on the waiting list. “What I’m finding here and at the diocese,” said Sr. Melanie, who also directs the Discipulos de Cristo formation program for Hispanics, “is that among Hispanics, there is a real hunger for education. They really want to learn, to be well rooted and to get ahead. It’s exciting for me to see people develop a sense of confidence and then that leadership.”

Immigration is an important issue to the Latino community and Casa ALBA offers programs to help families address immigration questions. Thanks to Sesini Law Group, volunteer immigration attorneys are available every Wednesday and volunteers have helped 300 Latino youth obtain legal status through the government’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Casa ALBA has also helped the Hispanic community hold listening sessions with law enforcement and elected leaders to discuss issues that are important to their daily lives.

She said she has told people, “We can be alongside you, but we are not going to speak for you. You need to speak for yourselves and they have been really developing that skill. ... It’s not just, let’s do it for them, but let’s do it for each other.”

Enabling the Hispanic community to overcome challenges and integrate into the larger community is the goal of Casa ALBA — and it’s part of what Sr. Melanie calls her exit strategy.

“I have an exit plan because I really believe the director should be Hispanic,” she said. “I want to work myself out of this position, so that whoever comes in is confident and that those who work with that person,

they trust each other. My dream is to see Hispanics feeling confident enough to assume leadership — and they are doing it.”

When the day arrives that Sr. Melanie does step down as director of Casa ALBA, she leaves a legacy of partnership and empowerment. She also leaves her name on the agency’s title, something she’s blishes to talk about.

“Casa is a common term for Hispanic center,” she said. “Alba means dawn, so it became Casa ALBA—and they insisted on sticking Melanie. So that was the community’s decision.”

As for her religious community, Sr. Melanie said three other Society of Sisters for the Church serve in the Green Bay Diocese. They include Sr. Mary Jo Bongert in Omro; Sr. Justina Ortiz at St. Willebrord, and Sr. Leticia Villarreal in Institute. She said the four sisters meet regularly.

Whatever the future holds, Sr. Melanie is sure of one thing: her life is forever changed by St. Willebrord Parish’s decision to open its doors to the Hispanic community.

“It seems that God has been drawing me more and more into experiences of the faith and ministry of Hispanics,” said Sr. Melanie. “My ministry and spirituality over the past 25 years is increasingly enriched and deepened by the goodness I am privileged to encounter daily in this wonderful culture.”

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