



CASE STUDIES IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

La Mujer Obrera, El Paso, TX

The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 was the equivalent of a death sentence to the traditions and livelihoods of women garment workers in Mexican border towns. According to Lorena Andrade of nonprofit La Mujer Obrera, women in the poor El Paso community clearly understood their status as “economic leftovers.” The community decided to see this change of fortune as an opportunity, reorienting its workforce and energies to create a new economy – one that cultivates the well-being of the community.

Direct actions and meeting immediate needs must be combined with long term plans. We as women have a right to envision a better community and we can work for it every day.

The garment industry built their community, but it was never designed with the health, well-being and enrichment of the women workers and their children in mind. So the women set about building something that made sense for them through La Mujer Obrera, a nonprofit, grassroots advocacy and development organization that focuses on issues related to the impact of globalization on the economic and social human rights of Mexican immigrant women at the U.S. Mexico border. “Once you figure out community,” says Andrade, “many doors open.”

La Mujer Obrera first created a new day care. With the children taken care of, they could focus their considerable energy on creating a new community development model, one which allows them to build a sustainable economic base rooted in fulfilling human needs in a community setting while offering permanent employment.

They next sought a physical “home base,” which they found in four abandoned garment factory buildings which they renovated to create Centro Mayapan—a collection of social enterprises that now serves as the home for programs that include a women-run day care, housing, restaurant, marketplace, museum, media, adult education, grocery store, micro-enterprise incubator, and artisan import businesses. As they considered what infrastructure

they needed to build and sustain the community, they turned their attention to how best to feed themselves. Here, too, they decided to start from scratch.

Fresh, healthy, local, and culturally-appropriate food was a central element of their plans from the beginning, but at first they were impeded by a lack of agricultural production. So they started planting fruits and vegetables in their yards and in vacant urban lots, and teaching others to do the same. According to Andrade, “It all goes back to food. When you have healthy food, you will have healthy people in the community. Traditional music, festivals, and traditions will naturally follow.”

In time their success in this respect led to increased demand for fresh, traditional foods. This, in turn, cultivated new farmers. As production increased, the women of La Mujer Obrera started a farmers market in their facility called the Mayapan Farmers' Market. Since its 2011 opening, the Mayapan Farmers' Market has operated 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every weekend during the harvest season and has spurred continued rebuilding of the local food system.

The group also initiated food service worker trainings, a monthly bartering table where residents can swap homemade foods with each other, and a new truck-based mobile market which serves rural, unincorporated parts of El Paso County every Monday.

The markets also feature artisan goods, traditional music, a weekly newsletter with recipes and information, and free workshops for the whole family including dance, cooking, ancestral health practices, and gardening. La Mujer Obrera has created a truly engaged – and engaging – community gathering place where none existed before.

In a community that lost its economic well-being, women who were “no longer needed” as laborers came together to create their own livelihood. In the process of meeting their immediate needs, they unlocked the community’s resources to help create a new economy – one based around celebrating traditional cultural values and building opportunity for residents.