

Nonprofits aim to increase board diversity

Martha Cruz, a project administrator at the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, is being trained to serve on a nonprofit board of directors.

By Brenda J. Buote GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 14, 2013

LAWRENCE — A handful of baby boomers exchange polite pleasantries with young professionals wearing shy smiles. A few already know one another, but most have never met.

To break the ice, the moderator begins with a game. Everyone gathers in a tight circle. A series of questions is posed. Those who respond with a nod must stand; those who shake their heads remain seated.

Who is under the age of 30? Over the age of 70? Grew up feeling they didn't have enough? Felt they had more than enough? Was raised in a home where religion was important? Attended school in another country? Speaks more than one language?

As the questions continue, one woman jokingly says she can skip her gym workout because she's had to pop out of her chair so many times. Others giggle. Everyone is relaxed.

And that is precisely the point. The goal of the game is to make the 28 men and women, strangers of different generations, feel comfortable enough to discuss issues often viewed as taboo — faith, culture, socioeconomic class — and explore how their personal experiences have shaped the way they view the world and one another.

The recent gathering, on Northern Essex Community College's Lawrence campus, is the result of a nonprofit venture that seeks to increase diversity on the boards of agencies serving this former mill city's most vulnerable residents.

Cristina Tejada and her sister, Emelissa Sacchetti, are pharmacists who joined the Cultural Inclusion program together.

The Cultural Inclusion pilot project, a partnership of [Jericho Road Lawrence](#) and the [YWCA of Greater Lawrence Inc.](#), is now in its second year. The participants include "recruits," young Latino professionals who want to give back to the city they love, and nonprofit agencies that are committed to welcoming minority board members.

"When we started this, we saw a clear inequity between the demographics of nonprofit boards and the populations they served," said Joan Kulash, executive director of Jericho Road Lawrence, a nonprofit that strives to address social and economic disparities in the region by strengthening local nonprofits. "It seemed unfair."

It is a central challenge for nonprofits in general — [on average, 86 percent of nonprofit board members nationwide are white](#) — and in Lawrence in particular, where few minorities serve on nonprofit boards though nearly 74 percent of residents are Latino or Hispanic and only 20 percent are white, the latest [US Census data](#) show.

The city's demographics have made it essential for organizations that support the community to seek out — and nurture — a generation of Latino professionals eager to give their time and expertise. But doing so successfully is difficult. Experience has shown that without training and support, newcomers with differing perspectives are likely to have trouble voicing their opinions in the boardroom.

Tejada distributes medication at the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, where Sacchetti also works.

"It's clear the work we do, in terms of the public health piece, is like a Band-Aid," said Martha Cruz, a recruit who works as a project administrator at the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center's Methuen office. "The lack of employment, violence, lack of higher education — those issues are at the core

of what plagues our community, so I see this project as an opportunity to . . . be part of a board that makes decisions that can address some of the needs of our community.”

Educational consultant Stacy Seward was among the first recruits to the Cultural Inclusion project and now serves on the initiative’s steering committee.

“I was on [the YWCA] board, but slowly faded away,” she said. “I didn’t know when I should speak up, how to contribute. After a while I stopped going. It felt like I had failed and I hadn’t failed at anything before. This program was like a chance at redemption, a chance to learn how to become a more active participant on the board.”

Over the course of several months, recruits learn the nuts and bolts of what board membership entails, from fund-raising to financial and legal responsibilities, with training provided by experts in each field. But the key to the program’s success, organizers and participants say, is not the recruits’ training — it’s that the nonprofits also are taking notes.

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“When we first looked at diversity, we thought we’d recruit a few people, give them some training, put them on boards, and they’d be good to go, but we quickly realized the issue is so much more complex than that,” said Clare Gunther, director of development for the YWCA of Greater Lawrence. “We needed to figure out why people became disengaged.”

The answer: They felt excluded.

One Latino woman who had agreed to serve on a nonprofit board went to a meeting of the governing group and was directed to another room — a fellow board member had assumed she was a client of the agency, rather than his peer.

To tackle that issue, both the recruits and the nonprofits receive “cultural competency” training, of which the initial game of questions was one aspect.

Through a series of exercises, participants learn to communicate across cultures, to be more inclusive and welcoming, and to view differences as opportunities.

“People came in with certain assumptions, but the process yielded enough surprises that it helped bridge the gap and made people check their assumptions,” said Groundwork Lawrence executive director Heather McMann, who participated in the program last year. “We learned that we all have a different role in these conversations about class, race, community development, and empowerment, but that everything we bring to the table is helpful, because really it’s all of us together that can make a change.”

The project has the support of Eastern Bank president Robert F. Rivers, who a few years ago became concerned that the bank’s board was almost exclusively made up of older white men. To break the cycle, Rivers made a conscious effort to recruit professionals of color, including Rachel Concepcion, manager of the bank’s Lawrence branch and one of this year’s Cultural Inclusion recruits.

“What they’re doing is very much in keeping with our mission,” said Rivers, noting that the project “breaks down one of the most significant barriers to diversification by developing a greater pool of potential board candidates.”

During the first year of the project, 10 recruits and six nonprofits — including Jericho Road Lawrence and the YWCA — were trained. This year, another six nonprofits and 14 recruits are participating. Many of the recruits are young professionals, Lawrence natives who left the city to earn their college degrees then returned to work at local companies, including Greater Lawrence Family Health Center and New Balance.

The agencies that joined the initiative include Esperanza Academy, an independent middle school for girls; Lazarus House Ministries Inc., which provides emergency shelter, education, and job training to the city’s poor; Neighbors in Need, an organization dedicated to feeding the hungry; Fidelity House Human Services, which provides services to individuals with disabilities; and the Asian Center of Merrimack Valley Inc., which strives to support Asian immigrants and refugees.

“We have tried and failed in the past to recruit board members from the Hispanic community,” said Neighbors in Need executive director Linda Zimmerman. “For us, the program has been really kind of game-changing for our whole board. It’s making us think about who we are and what we do, how all of our individual life experiences impact how we make decisions, how we lead. It’s a powerful process.”

The program has had a similar impact on Seward, who now serves as chairwoman of the YWCA board’s welcoming committee. In that role, she mentors new board members. “After going through the program, I am finding my work on the board to be significantly more rewarding,” she said.

Jericho Road Lowell, a Concord-based agency independent of Jericho Road Lawrence, was inspired to adapt the Cultural Inclusion project to create a diverse pipeline of board candidates in Lowell.

“Often, boards are so focused on keeping the doors open and the lights on, that diversity falls a bit further down on the list of priorities,” said Nancy Coan, director of [Jericho Road Lowell](#). “What we’re hoping to do is to move people from wanting to diversify their boards to creating an environment that would make people who look different and have different backgrounds feel welcome.”

Ultimately, the goal of such programs is to better serve the community, Gunther said. “It doesn’t make sense to have organizations serving the community with boards that don’t represent the community.”

Emelissa Sacchetti, 32, and her sister, Cristina Tejada, 28, who both work as pharmacists for the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, joined the Cultural Inclusion program together.

“I know my patients’ health concerns, but I want to be out in the community, and get to know more about our patients’ lives,” Sacchetti said. “I’d like to go beyond helping with health and medication information. I want to work with an organization that focuses on children’s education, adult education, or maybe food drives or a homeless shelter.”

Serving their community is nothing new for the sisters. As teenagers, they delivered Thanksgiving baskets to families in need and volunteered at Lazarus House and the [Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence](#).

“I’ve learned a lot from this [Cultural Inclusion] program,” said Tejada. “We all come into the program with different life experiences, but when we get together and talk about our goals, our objectives, we realize we all share a common goal — to serve the people of Lawrence.”

Added Sacchetti: “The fact that they are open to including people who reflect the city’s current population — that they want to recruit Hispanics and Latinos — says a lot about how they want to continue to serve the people who call Lawrence home today.”