

Lack of Latino Leadership in Nonprofit Groups Exposes Wider Gaps in Santa Barbara County

To make inroads with communities they serve, 3 leaders say message of inclusiveness must be a priority and a policy

By Kellie Kreiss, Noozhawk Contributing Writer | [@NoozhawkNews](#) | October 22, 2016 | 2:30 p.m.

A growing Latino population in Santa Barbara County has yet to translate into increased representation in leadership and board positions with nonprofit organizations. This lack of diversity can lead to the homogeneity that causes community problems to be missed and voices to go unheard.

“You don’t understand it unless you’re living it,” said [Ernesto Paredes](#), a Santa Barbara native who has worked for nonprofits for almost 25 years.

Paredes, executive director of [Easy Lift Transportation](#), said he knows of only five Latinos leading local organizations.

“With all the organizations out there, that’s a very small (number), considering how many Latinos are served in this community,” he told [Noozhawk](#). “It’s telling you that there aren’t a lot of Latinos who feel that they can make it on the salaries and live a life here in Santa Barbara as a head of an organization.”

Low salaries are not the only issue. The makeup of the nonprofit boards is a factor.

Easy Lift Transportation executive director Ernesto Paredes suggests having workshops to get more people informed and interested in becoming nonprofit board members. (Noozhawk file photo)

“My best guess is that this (disparity) is a result of a majority Caucasian workforce and leadership teams in the nonprofit community,” said Victoria Juarez, executive director of [Girls Incorporated of Carpinteria](#).

“Organizations tend to hire and promote from within. Hence if, historically, the people in the field were/are Caucasian, then it would make sense that the majority of those moving into management and leadership positions would also be white.”

Paredes suggests this may explain the lack of involvement by the Latino community and other people of color.

“This is the issue now,” he said. “Boards are so homogenous. They are a reflection of who is on that board.”

“That’s why we get a lot of the usual suspects on the big boards, the higher tier of boards,” he added “This is by well-meaning, well-intended people. It’s not as if they’re trying to keep people off of boards; they just don’t know. Latinos are one thing, but African Americans — that’s even a smaller, smaller (number).”

This lack of inclusiveness also affects perceptions.

“The subtle message to the community every time that they do a big thing, ‘Man of the Year,’ is that men of the year look like this,” Paredes said. “Growing up as a Latino kid in this community, you look at that thinking, ‘Not me.’”

[Ron Gallo](#), president and CEO of [Santa Barbara Foundation](#), has hired people of color and diversified the foundation’s board since his arrival in 2008.

Victoria Juarez, executive director of Girls Incorporated of Carpinteria, says empowering youth is one way to ensure the Latino community’s participation in the nonprofit world in the future. (J.C. Corliss / Noozhawk photo)

“When I came, we had one minority on the board out of 20, and maybe one minority staff,” he recalled. “Now just walk through the office, it is much more diverse, as is the board. And that wouldn’t have happened by itself.”

“We made a conscious decision to reflect the county.”

To be successful, it must be a priority of the organization’s board and executive director, Gallo added.

Paredes also emphasized that there are “so many organizations that are built for the community ... (but) you don’t see any people from the Latino community.”

He added, “A certain community is represented (and) it’s incredible how many parts of this community are not represented ...”

Juarez, who works with young women to develop their leadership and advocacy skills, said empowering youth is one of the steps to ensuring the Latino community’s participation in the future.

“It is imperative to create a pipeline of emerging leaders that reflect the community we serve so that when opportunities do become available to promote, we have a diverse pool of applicants to select from,” she said.

Nonprofits and corporations need to make “a strategic and conscious effort to invest in those living in our backyard by providing mentoring, leadership development and experiences for them to grow with the knowledge that they will some day be at the helm in our community,” she said. “This is our responsibility.”

Leaders of nonprofit organizations can act now by creating an environment and culture that is “inclusive and provide safe spaces for (Latinos) to contribute to the dialog by sharing their talent and experiences,” Juarez recommended.

Paredes offers another suggestion.

“What we need to do as the Latino community is develop programs, a boot camp on ‘How to be a Board Member in This Community,’ ‘The ABC’s of Being a Good Board Member,’ so that when (people) finish this boot camp, now you have a pool of people who are prepared to be on boards,” he said.

He believes a boot camp can be done with the assistance of a foundation.