

## Program helps Latino women

**By Keely Stockett : The Herald-Sun  
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CHAPEL HILL -- When Marta O. Rodriguez moved to North Carolina from Mexico several years ago, she said she felt isolated and out of place.

"When we arrive, the majority of us are alone," Rodriguez said of Latino immigrants. "We don't have friends here, and we don't have family here."

But Rodriguez said that changed when she discovered the program De Mujer a Mujer, or "Woman to Woman."

Offered only to Latino women, De Mujer a Mujer meets once a week during the school year at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. The craft-oriented program teaches the women new skills, but also provides a forum for discussion about healthy behaviors and lifestyles.

Cecilia Henaine De Davis, the director of De Mujer a Mujer, said while the women learn to do things like make jewelry, crochet or cook, she leads group discussions that often focus on handling and preventing domestic abuse situations.

"The Latino community is not as open as I would like it to be because of the culture. We still have people thinking, 'He's my husband, he's controlling me, but he's not hitting me,'" De Davis said.

While not all the participants have experienced domestic abuse, De Davis said it's important for Latino women to be knowledgeable about the problem.

"In a way, I'm creating the etiquette for people to deal with abuse. I'm feeding the information through these women, so when their friends come to them, they know what to say and what not to say," she said.

De Davis established De Mujer a Mujer three years ago when she was working with the local Family Violence Protection Agency. She said she wanted a way to reach out to Latino women.

"We wanted to let them know that there's an agency that can help them professionally in a non-judgmental way," she said.

De Mujer a Mujer was not successful at first, but De Davis said she was convinced there was a need for the program.

"If the mountain won't come to you, you have to come to the mountain. I had to find where there was a concentration of the women," she said.

De Davis found that concentration at El Centro Latino. At one point, the program had a following of 63 women. Many of them followed De Davis to the current location at the Lutheran church.

De Davis said the crafts aspect of the program goes hand-in-hand with overcoming and preventing abuse.

"To do the crafts, you have to be creative and use all the senses," she said. "When they're in a domestic violence situation, they have to think quick and use whatever is around them. It's the same concept."

Rodriguez said the program also provides troubled women with an excuse to leave their homes; while it appears they're simply taking an art class, many of the women attend the sessions because they offer a safe and convenient oasis.

Although the emphasis is on domestic abuse situations, De Davis said De Mujer a Mujer covers other topics as well, including the importance of exercise, tips on healthy eating and the basics of the public school system. The women also have the opportunity to build their English skills.

Because of its success, De Mujer a Mujer recently received a \$1,000 grant from the Orange County Arts Council. Most of that money will be used to for child care services so women with young children can attend the sessions.

De Davis said she hopes additional donations and funding will allow the program to expand so all Latino women -- and eventually, women of other cultures -- can gain an understanding of their basic human rights and if necessary, learn to be self-sufficient.

"There's just so little opportunities for the Latino community," De Davis said. "I built this so they can have skills, but also so they can have good self-esteem and become independent."

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