

How Diversity Enriches Lives

Every Friday morning the parish hall at Holy Rosary Church comes alive with sounds of fellowship and work as a group of incredibly diverse women come together for sewing classes to learn new skills, share stories, and support each other in their life journey. Against the background buzz of sewing machines at work, you can hear the distinct sounds of at least three languages being spoken in varying volumes and tones. You might also hear salsa playing and even see some dancing, to the delight and amusement of everyone. The Centro Guadalupano sewing group has met weekly for close to 20 years, and its membership has become increasingly diverse in recent years.

Centro Guadalupano, the outreach center for the church, has sponsored the sewing group since its inception in October of 1998. When a small group of eighteen Latina women began classes years ago, little did they imagine how the changing demographics of this East Phillips neighborhood would challenge their group's flexibility. Group leaders, Olga Camarillo, Maria Camarillo, and Concepción Guerrero were students in the early years, who took on the role as leaders after the initial funds for paid teachers were spent. The group has always represented a great diversity of members from North and South America such as Ecuador, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Guatemala – all having their own traditions, expressions, and cultures. However, a few years ago the diversity of the group extended further as Somali students, enrolled in Centro Guadalupano's daily English classes, asked to participate in the sewing group. With their inclusion, a new culture and language were introduced into the mix!

The new cultural group caused some initial challenges for leaders as they had to adapt their routine to accommodate and embrace the new students. However, rather than becoming an obstacle leading to frustration, the experience and learning of a different culture, religion, and style of garment to be sewed became part of the fun. Leaders discovered that some of the Somali women cannot use fabrics that have faces of people or certain animals. They also are not interested in making items like shorts or swimsuits that have always been part of the sewing curriculum. When the group shares a meal, the Latina members are now conscious not to bring food with pork, which the Somali members cannot eat on account of their religious beliefs. Even among the same ethnic group, there are differences in culture and styles. One Somali member may not use a fabric because the print contains a prohibited item, but another Somali woman will happily use it. Communication can be difficult with group members who do not speak Spanish and struggle with English. At times group leaders have to wait for a Somali speaking member with strong English skills to come and translate for a classmate.

Ifrah is one of the Somali students who is frequently called on to translate. She learned about the group while enrolled in Centro Guadalupano's English classes and began participating in the group just over a year ago. She loves that learning to sew is helping her save money! She also enjoys how everyone works together and helps each other. One of the cultural differences that Ifrah has noticed is that the Somali members like to talk very loudly, which stands out among their more moderate toned Latina companions. "I tell my friends to speak

more softly,” she says, but there have been no challenges that they can’t overcome with shared laughter and a willingness to learn more about each other’s cultures.

The sewing group celebrates several times a year with a group party. The first year they were all together, the celebration took place during Ramadan, and the Somali women brought food to share even though they were fasting and could not eat. When the Latina women realized this, they were astonished and grateful for this sign of solidarity and understanding. When the Somali members first came, they didn’t want to join in the prayer before meals that opens these group celebrations. Now, they all stand together while the Latina women say the traditional prayer before meals in Spanish and the Somali women say their traditional prayer in Somali. They acknowledge that they are both praying to God, and they respect each other’s distinct prayers.

“We are all immigrants.” That is the similarity that group leaders recognize as the most important. A desire for a better life for their families is the shared dream that everyone in the group understands. Sadly, many bonds are also formed over the shared experience of the loss of loved ones to civil wars and separation from family due to immigration. It is an experience that many immigrants and refugees can relate to.

Regarding the reception of new neighbors into the sewing group, co-leader Concepcion stated, “We had to learn to be more flexible and patient.” Aware of the many complex issues and challenges facing immigrants and refugees in today’s world, it is enlightening to witness, even on a small scale, people of different cultures and belief systems integrate, collaborate, and befriend one another by being united in a common experience. The original purpose of the sewing group was to provide community members with a marketable skill that would also help them save money in their own households. However, through the process of bringing together people of different backgrounds and beliefs, something even greater has taken place. Participants have learned that they are more similar than they likely thought and have learned to respect one another’s beliefs and customs. At Centro Guadalupano, we feel blessed to provide opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds in south Minneapolis to come together and form one united community.

