

Crown Heights women's group bonds and empowers its members

by Promise Yee

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Divina Hernandez, Crown Heights Resource Center assistant, left, organizes the monthly women's club. She's pictured with Maria Yanez, Neighborhood Services management analyst. Photo by Promise Yee

OCEANSIDE — Once a month, for one hour, a special group of women meet up at the Crown Heights Resource Center to build their networking and public speaking skills. For most of the 40 women it is the only time they take to focus on themselves.

Women in the Noche de Damas (Ladies Night) group speak different dialects of Spanish, and some are monolingual Spanish speakers. Many have not held a job outside the home — most focus on family and raising children.

The group was formed two years ago. Divina Hernandez, Crown Heights Resource Center assistant, said she saw a need in the community for women to get to know each other and form a support network to help each other through life's daily challenges.

Each month, meeting activities help the women engage, network and speak publicly.

Hernandez partners with Goodwill, MiraCosta College, Vista Community Clinic, North County Health Services, and RISE San Diego to bring experiences to the group.

One activity asked them to bring a special family dish they cooked, and describe how it was made to the group.

During another meeting they saw a fashion show on how to dress for an interview and job.

The women also learned basic computer skills and how to set up an email account.

Over the past year the women grew in social skills, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Edith Castellanos, is a member of the group. She said the activities allowed her to be more open about herself and talk more.

“I’m more free, and happier,” Castellanos said. “I’m not dependent on my husband.”

Maria Yanez, Neighborhood Services management analyst, said the women are willing to seize opportunities and learn.

“They’re eager to learn anything new and improve themselves,” Yanez said. “Informally it (the group) provides leadership training. They learn to be self-sufficient and make decisions for themselves. It’s a remarkable group.”

Each woman has achieved her own personal growth. One woman spoke in front of a group for the first time, one went back to school, and another had her first job interview. Other women in the group gained the courage and confidence to leave abusive relationships.

On Dec. 29 the group met to celebrate their year together.

The night was all about them. The women, who are use to waiting on others, were escorted to tables at the Country Club Senior Center dinning hall, and served dinner and desert.

Women were seated next to other women they might not know, to further their social network and friendships.

A photo area was set up to take selfies, keynote speakers addressed the group, a slide show of their past year together was shown, and everyone took home a gift bag.

The message keynote speaker Dr. Beatriz Villarreal shared was anything is possible if you have a dream and work hard.

Villarreal told her personal story of gaining a doctor degree, working as the director of the counseling program at San Diego Juvenile Hall, and forming the Mano a Mano Foundation to educate and support parents.

“I’m living the American dream,” Villarreal said. “I’m doing what I love to do. In this country it’s OK to dream. Anything is possible.”

Speaker Blanca Castro May spoke of opportunities she pursued after immigrating to the United States 13 years ago. May earned a high school diploma, associate degree, bachelor degree, and is working on earning her masters.

Both speakers attended the event with their mothers.

Hernandez said group goals for 2016 include empowerment through education, and goal setting.