

WELCOMING TO ALL

IN SOUTH CAROLINA'S UPSTATE, A
SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION DRAWS
LATINO RESIDENTS TO THE LIBRARY

BY AIDA ROGERS



BIBLIOTECA 101 EVENT



IMELDA RADAI LOMELI SANCHEZ &
MEREB PEREZ-ARELLANO

**"ONE OF MY GOALS HAS
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-QUIENTELL WALKER

In a town of 4,072 people, it's hard to overlook 712 of them. Those are the 2020 census numbers for Walhalla, South Carolina's 108th largest city. Here, in this "Main Street to the Mountains" Oconee County seat, 17.5 percent of the population is Latino. For the people who lead the county's library system, it was unthinkable not to serve them.

"As an African American, I can recognize when there are some disparities within the community," said Quientell Walker, manager of the Walhalla branch. "One of my goals has been making the library a more welcoming place, regardless of education, sexual orientation, or culture. I want the library to be open to all."

But what if no one on the library staff speaks Spanish, and there isn't money to hire someone who does? And what if Latino immigrants, some with limited education, don't really know about the wealth of services libraries provide – and besides that, are intimidated?

Walker and Blair Hinson, Oconee County Library System director, knew what to do. They consulted Sarai Melendez, a lifelong library user and the daughter of Mexican immigrants. Born and educated in Walhalla, Melendez is a bilingual dynamo and former member of the library system's board of trustees. Her ability to create successful collaborations has made the Walhalla library a hive of Latino activity. Among a range of fun and learning events, the library has presented *Biblioteca 101*, a workshop – *with refrescos* – that introduced Latino residents to its many free and helpful offerings. Since that 2018 event, scores of adult Latinos have obtained library cards and are using the library.



GENESIS RODRIGUEZ, DAUGHTER OF SARAI MELENDEZ, AT BIBLIOTECA 101

"I see the library as the heart of resources," Melendez said. "It's more than a place to check out a book because of the community information there, about health clinics and income taxes, things like that. Libraries offer technology and internet access, and also librarians who have the knowledge and tools to lead you to credible sources and resources. If you're doing research, you need that physical person to guide you."

**"I SEE THE
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As with many libraries, Walhalla's Latino outreach program works because of willing and energetic volunteers. Knowing bilingual volunteers were critical, Melendez asked the two teen daughters of women leaders at her church to volunteer after school. Like Melendez, the girls were familiar with libraries because they exist in schools, and they could bridge the gap between their Spanish-speaking families and the English-speaking staff.

Also, their work would count as community service hours. Eventually, the girls' mothers, who came to the library to wait for their daughters to finish volunteering, became comfortable in that environment. And so Elizabeth Arriaga and her mother Mereb Perez-Arellano, and Zabdi Quinones and her mother Imelda Radai Lomeli Sanchez, formed the library's Cultural Outreach Committee. Janice Lovinggood, the library's administrative assistant and volunteer administrator, helped guide the effort. She had all four officially volunteer by completing applications.



ZABDI QUINONES AT
CINCO DE MAYO

"Imelda and Merab are just amazing," Lovinggood said. "If we have a program, they don't leave when it's supposed to be over. They help clean up. There've been times when we were meeting every week, and I was telling them we don't have to, I'm an old woman. But they wanted to, and that encouraged me."

Elizabeth and Zabdi led Biblioteca 101, which included a tour of the library, instructions about how to get a library card, use the card catalog and internet, and how to check out books and other materials. They also presented information about programming at other Oconee branch libraries, story times, teen programs, and book clubs.

Together Zabdi and Walker, the branch manager, used the computer to explain digital library services, including how to connect to the SC State Library and take a Department of Motor Vehicles practice test.

"The biggest thing is getting them to come into the library and feel comfortable, even though they felt their communication wasn't good or they were embarrassed to come to the desk to ask for help," Lovinggood said. "We stress to them that we don't speak Spanish but we're willing to help you in any way we can, and if someone doesn't help you, let us know."

Although Elizabeth and Zabdi have graduated from high school, and Zabdi is now at Tri-County Technical College, their younger siblings have joined their mothers on the Cultural Outreach Committee. They've presented several events to draw friends and neighbors, from movie days to making Christmas ornaments and Valentine's crafts. They've also celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month and Cinco de Mayo, and held a Covid-19 vaccination drive-through. Lovinggood estimates at least 100 Latino residents have participated in their programs. And the library has increased its Spanish language collection.

"THE LIBRARY IS BECOMING A MORE WELCOMING PLACE"

- SARAI MELENDEZ

For other libraries to duplicate Walhalla's success, Lovinggood thinks a key communicator like Sarai Melendez is critical and an outreach committee like theirs. "That's one way to get to know them and see what their interests and needs are so we can help them," she said. "We're a resource for the community and we want to be inclusive and include everyone – not everyone who looks like us."

Two local home-schooling mothers were so impressed with the committee's programs that they began having joint classes, with Spanish and English lessons for both sets of children. Public programs work best on Saturdays, with planning sessions on late weekday afternoons, when committee members were off work, school, and volunteering.

Programs and meetings stopped during much of the pandemic, but activities have resumed. And Mereb Perez-Arellano and Imelda Radai Lomeli Sanchez, natives of Mexico who understand and read English better than speak it, have developed the confidence to lead programs themselves. They always bring their native food.

"Whatever services the library may have to be supportive to the Spanish-speaking community, that's where I want to be," Lomeli Sanchez said.



To Melendez, the women are "champions" and "boots on the ground." She figures "there are plenty of Imeldas and Merebs" in towns where libraries want to do Latino outreach.

"I've seen how Imelda and Mereb are able to share their experiences with other people and tell them, 'Come to the library,'" Melendez said. "And the library is becoming a more welcoming place."

STATE SENATOR THOMAS ALEXANDER WITH IMELDA, ZABDI, AND BLAIR HINSON AT VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION DINNER

Not surprisingly, Perez-Arellano and Lomeli Sanchez were named the library's 2019 Volunteers of the Year. State Sen. Thomas Alexander attended the volunteer appreciation dinner and had his photo taken with them. "They were so happy," Melendez said, "and it motivated them to push for more growth."



BIBLIOTECA 101

Meantime, Melendez kept pushing herself, and in 2019 she was elected to Walhalla City Council. Age 29 when elected, Melendez is Walhalla's first city council member of Hispanic heritage. When she took her oath of office, WGOG Radio News reported that according to Judge Danny Singleton – who swore her in – half the audience at the Center for the Performing Arts were there for her.

But it was a bittersweet victory: To take her seat on council, she had to resign her seat on the library board. Still, she advocates for libraries, posting library news on her social media sites.

"Libraries are a precious resource for families to start children on their journey of loving to read," she said. "But libraries also are community assets, whether you're in a rural community or an urban one. We need to invest our time and money in our assets. We should build upon our asset, not take or break it down. We can maximize them to meet the community's needs."

WALHALLA LIBRARY ESTABLISHES MORE OUTREACH PROGRAMS

The Walhalla library has started a new program to help Spanish-speaking parents communicate with their children's teachers. Nivia Miranda, family liaison at James M. Brown Elementary, will spend Saturday mornings teaching parents how to contact their children's teachers by email. Miranda also will show them how to use Parent Portal to see their children's grades, attendance and assignments. A member of the Oconee County Library Board, Miranda also helped provide Spanish-speaking materials to the Community Family Resource Center, a display of free materials the library houses to help families support their children's education and development.

‘I wouldn’t be where I am now without libraries’

Sarai Melendez

By Aïda Rogers

As a child, Sarai Melendez would tell the staff at the Walhalla library that her mother was in the restroom when really her mother had dropped her off and would pick her up later. She knew the staff would question why a 10-year-old was navigating the library alone, and she didn’t want to get her parents in trouble. They never went to the library.

“They didn’t see it as a place to connect with,” Melendez said, explaining that her parents, both factory workers from rural Mexico, have elementary school educations. “They weren’t informed of what a library is for.”

But Melendez, who used her school library, knew she couldn’t get her assignments done without her public library. She insisted on being taken there to do research, print papers, and get books. And her parents, adamant their five children graduate from high school, made sure their youngest daughter got what she needed.



SARAI, WITH DAUGHTER GENESIS RODRIGUEZ, AT CINCO DE MAYO

And she went on, taking eight years to earn an associate’s degree from Greenville Technical College and a bachelor’s degree in human service, with a concentration in behavioral health, from Anderson University.

“College was the only way I could get the opportunities I needed,” Melendez said. “I was motivated by my parents’ sacrifice. They came to this country for us.”

“I feel people long for a sense of belonging, and a library can be the place to provide that.”



STATE SENATOR THOMAS ALEXANDER SARAI, DAUGHTER GENESIS, AND BLAIR HINSON

Today Sarai Melendez is upstate bilingual family engagement manager with Family Connection of South Carolina, a nonprofit that helps people with disabilities and chronic health conditions connect with services. Her clients are English and Spanish-speaking families in Anderson, Greenville, Oconee and Spartanburg counties. Frequently Melendez meets them in public places, and often that's the local library. There she helps them access documents they need, including applications for Medicaid, U.S. citizenship, and Supplemental Security Income.

"So many of my clients don't have printers, much less computers," she said. "When I identify those needs, it makes sense to meet at the library where you can get all of that for free."

Like those she serves now, Melendez didn't have a computer or printer growing up. She and her siblings had their grandparents, who cared for them after school. When their parents picked them up at night, their father would have just ended his shift before their mother started hers. Melendez saw her mom most regularly when she drove them to school.

"My sister and I are two years apart and we would help each other go to sleep and go to school," Melendez remembers. "Mom was doing the best she could."

With its textile companies, Oconee County attracted people mainly from Mexico in the 1990s, who'd heard the area offered plenty of work in a safe environment. Many of those textile companies have closed, and Latinos now work in construction, landscaping, food services and housekeeping. Walhalla has several Mexican restaurants, grocery stores, and other small businesses; Latinos account for roughly 10 percent of the county.

Melendez wants to see more immigrants using their library. That will happen only with immigrant families collaborating with library staff and leadership, and dialog with nonprofit leaders, she believes.

“I feel people long for a sense of belonging, and a library can be the place to provide that,” she said. “But it can also provide information, knowledge, resources and helpful hands through the people who work there.”

She considers herself a library advocate and user too: During the early days of the pandemic, she parked outside the library to connect to the internet. And she takes her seven-year-old daughter there regularly.

“I wouldn’t be where I am now without libraries,” Melendez said. “The library was my way out, because I knew that’s where knowledge was. It was like treasure.”






IMELDA AND SARAI

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