



Creating Community, Organizing for the Common Good *Stories from Centralia, Chehalis and Woodland*

"The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity... This is the institutional path ... the political path of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly." Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas In Veritate* (7)

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) supports the Latina Women's Justice Circle—members of St. Mary, Centralia and St. Joseph, Chehalis—in building civic and church community.

Analorena says the Justice Circle organizing process "has empowered me to develop communication skills in order to address community issues." For her Lewis County community, access to affordable housing is an on-going concern. After Analorena, her husband Valdemar, and school age children finally found housing; they soon lost everything due to flooding.

Justice Circle members set out to address the issue of housing by developing an on-going relationship with Centralia's mayor, supporting civic activities, and working with the Affordable Housing Network of Lewis County. These partnerships are building awareness and creating potential projects.

Earlier this year Analorena and Justice Circle participants became housing advocates at the state-level when they participated in and presented at the Catholic Advocacy Day in Olympia.

While the women of the Justice Circle went public with their housing concerns they also took care to build their parish community by providing a BBQ for all the parishioners. For the women of these parishes building a faith community is the foundation for working together for social change.

When the immigrant women from the Woodland Justice Circle learned that their English as a Second Language Classes—which included on-site childcare—were cancelled due to budget cuts, they were disappointed. But with some creative thinking, collaboration and a little bit of luck, they formed a childcare co-op and established a computer lab for ESL at La Casa de San Juan Diego, a Catholic Housing Services site.

They began by looking for other ESL classes in Woodland. They soon discovered that the only other class was in the evening, which wasn't an option for women with young families and/or no transportation.

When they brainstormed ways to solve their child care dilemma they were inspired by a thirty-year-old English-language childcare co-op in Woodland. They collaborated with co-op leaders to establish guidelines and learn how to implement their own Spanish-language co-op. They had overcome their first challenge, childcare.

The women still had a strong desire to continue their English studies. "I would like to be able to help my daughter with her homework," said Circle member Blanca. "I would like to help her to read."

Guided by this desire, they were exploring other options for ESL when they made a fortuitous discovery. Claudia, a Justice Circle co-facilitator, reminded the group that there were computers for the community hidden away in storage within their complex. The group worked with the Resident Services Manager to set up a computer lab. After they learn basic computer skills—with the help of a community volunteer—they hope to use web-based ESL resources to continue studying English. The women plan to take turns studying English and caring for their children in their new combined child care co-op/ESL computer lab.

"I am pleased that we are going to study and that we are helping each other at the same time," said Antonia, one of the participants

More information about Women's Justice Circles can be found at www.ipjc.org/programs/justice_circles.htm. Women's Justice Circles partner low-income women with women collaborators from parishes, health care, educational settings and other community groups for the purpose of empowering low-income women to take action on an issue important to them and their families. Part of the Build Hope collection earlier this month supports CCHD grant projects (such as the above) and provides Catholic social teaching resources from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. For more info on CCHD: www.usccb.org/cchd and our office's website, below.

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