

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE and COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING

The Mixtec Migrants of Santa Maria, California

By

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Juanita is alone, sitting on the bathroom floor, holding her stomach and wondering why this has happened to her. The men in the house are still sleeping; should she wake one of them? Even though she works alongside them, her Mixteco culture requires deference to the males. “No”, she says, “they need to rest, and I need to be ready to work in the morning.” Suddenly, the pain becomes intense and the contractions begin to push her son from the womb. Giving birth on the bathroom floor, she wraps a towel around her son and quietly walks out of the house to the garbage pail in the side yard. As she opens the lid she thinks to herself “the truck comes today” as she deposits her son in the trash. Juanita showers and prepares for another day in the fields of Santa Maria.

Juanita is one of the 18,000 to 25,000 Mixtec (pronounced Meesh-ztek) Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico who live in the Santa Maria Valley.¹ Some Mixteco’s call Santa Maria home, while others travel back and forth between Oaxaca (pronounced Wh-haca) and the United States.² Although the Mixtec have become vigorous and reliable members of the agribusiness workforce in Santa Maria, their customs have created conflict within their families and with efforts to balance their traditional values with enforcement of the law. Juanita’s neighborhood is but one of many stories that can be told. The outcomes of her tragedy, though, are quite different than one might imagine due to the work of the City and its police force.

West Newlove Neighborhood of Santa Maria

The West Newlove neighborhood is a three block area comprised of 88 four-plex buildings totaling 325 apartments. The four-plex units are individually-owned, with fifty owners holding deed to the eighty-eight properties. The apartments have two small bedrooms, a bathroom, small living area and kitchen. Designed for a maximum of four occupants (which could house little more than 1400 persons), the actual population of the neighborhood hovers around 3,000.³ Ninety percent of the residents are Mixtec, who prefer to live within extended family households.⁴ Unfortunately, that has resulted in a density of just under nine persons per apartment in an area with little or no capacity to deal with this intensity of usage.

Prior to intervention by the City and its partners, the area was littered with trash, abandoned vehicles and furniture left abandoned in carports and alleyways. Dumpsters overflowed and empty beer cans could be found in nearly every carport. Historically, the calls-for-service volume for the police department was high, as was self-initiated activity by officers dealing with recurring problems of narcotics activity, domestic violence, drunkenness, fights and stabbings. Property crimes, if they occurred, were rarely reported, and domestic violence was usually discovered by an officer handling an unrelated incident. Tragically, the cultural acceptance of marrying young also lead to incidents of sexual misconduct with minor girls by adult Mixtec men. Traditional law enforcement activities of response, report and arrest did not resolve the problems of the neighborhood. Non-traditional approaches needed to be evaluated and implemented.

The West Newlove Weed and Seed Project- An Introduction

In 2001 the Santa Maria Police Department, working with the City Special Projects Office and the nonprofit agency Community, Action, Resource, Educational Services (CARES), authored a Weed and Seed grant with the Office of Justice Programs at the U.S. Department of Justice. Weed and Seed is a comprehensive multiagency approach involving law enforcement, crime prevention and community based agencies for community revitalization. The overall strategy of the grant was to provide the neighborhood residents with a sense of security, safety and the knowledge that professional staff was concerned for their well being.”⁵ The goals of this grant were:

- To gain the trust of the Mixtec community
- To provide programs and services to meet the needs of area residents
- To develop a Safe Haven Resource Center
- To initiate and sustain meetings with property owners to alleviate issues in the area

In any worthwhile effort, there are always obstacles to overcome and opportunities to seize. In the case of the West Newlove Project, the seeming obstacle was the language and cultural barrier that stood between the Mixtec residents and those in the City dedicated to enhancing their quality of life. In fact, that potential obstacle was, instead, a foundation from which both cultures came to new understandings about the other. Before discussing the specifics of the Weed and Seed Project, it is important to understand the nuances of the Mixtec culture, reasons for their migration to the Central Coast, and the clash in cultures that has emerged as a result.

A Glimpse of the Mixtec Culture

The Mixtec are the largest ethnic group in the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico and speak a distinct language called Mixteco. Mixteco is the language of daily life, and although many Mixtec are able to speak Spanish, none speak it well.⁶ Linguistic differences (92 dialects) underscore differences between villages in Oaxaca, and at times can render communication unintelligible.⁷ While language is an indicator of village identity, costuming by women also underscores village identity.⁸ Marriage is for life, and must take place between village residents. Marrying outside one's village is frowned upon and generally not acceptable⁹. The division of labor within the village is determined by age and sex, and civil authority is staffed only by men. The role of women, while respected, is decidedly that of housewives. During village religious festivals, women prepare and serve the food, arrange the flowers for the altar, all the while still fulfilling their domestic functions within the home.¹⁰

The culture and traditions of the Mixtec are maintained, as best as possible, while engaged in employment in the United States. The Mixtec are committed to the financial success of their villages and much of their work is to that end.¹¹ Husbands, wives and children work side-by-side to make enough money at first to survive, then to send any remaining funds back to relatives in their home villages. In Oaxaca, the money would be used to upgrade individual dwellings and to improve the infrastructure of the village.¹² Even while living in America, however, the traditions of the male dominated culture remain. Women, after toiling for 10 to 12 hours in the fields, still have the responsibility of housewife - cooking, cleaning and caring for the children without the help of the husband.¹³

The Mixtec Migration to the Central Coast

The Mixtecs are the largest of 17 Indian groups in the state of Oaxaca, and have been farmers for thousands of years.¹⁴ The people of the various villages made their living growing several varieties of corn (yellow, white and blue), but now find they must go north or go hungry. NAFTA, slash-and-burn farming, bad weather and ecological disasters have brought ruin to a once fertile land¹⁵.

It is estimated that 300,000 residents of Oaxaca, the vast majority Mixtecs, leave every year for northern Mexico or the United States¹⁶. This exodus, along with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), has contributed to dramatic reductions in corn production in the state of Oaxaca. Prior to NAFTA, the Mexican Government guaranteed the purchase price of corn, but now their government stores bags of corn for sale throughout rural Mexico at prices below what the Mixtec can produce¹⁷. With limited opportunities in their homeland, the Mixtec find they must move north to seek employment in the agricultural fields of northern Mexico and the United States. California, with its substantial farming industry has become a primary receiving point for Mixtec migration. Cities such as San Diego, Madera, Fresno and Santa Maria have become major receiving sites¹⁸.

The growth of the Mixtec population in Santa Maria correlates with the exponential increase in farming acreage, especially in the area of strawberries, broccoli, grapes and lettuce.¹⁹ These four crops yield 79 percent of the county's fruit and vegetable value and 54 percent of the county's cropland, while employing 80 percent of all the farm labor in the county.²⁰ The value of agricultural production in Santa Barbara County is approaching \$900 million, and is a major part of the economy for Santa Maria

Valley.²¹ Agriculturalists in the Valley and the Mixtec are joined together by the industry's need for labor and the Mixtec's need for sustainable employment.

Population Characteristics of Santa Maria

Santa Maria, California, with a 2005 population of nearly 90,000, is located in Santa Barbara County, roughly 250 miles south of San Francisco and 170 miles north of Los Angeles in the heart of Central California's burgeoning wine region. The city is nestled in the Santa Maria River Valley in a fertile plain, surrounded by rolling hills on three sides and the Pacific Ocean on the west. Agriculture has always played an important role in the City's economy, which also includes aerospace, communications, energy production and military operations. Santa Maria is also the midpoint between two very desirable central coast communities, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo, which have some of the least affordable housing in California.²² According to UCSB's North Santa Barbara County Economic Outlook, "Santa Maria is undergoing rapid growth, and pressures for continued growth are strong."²³ This pressure is driven by the availability of developable land, affordable housing and the prospects for significant job growth.²⁴

Latinos represent the largest ethnic group in Santa Maria, with just over 60 percent of the population.²⁵ It is also a young community, with more than 28 percent of births countywide born into local families.²⁶ The term Latino tends to be all inclusive, yet while the Mixteco are categorized as Latino, they are considered in many circles to be of a lower class than their Mexican kin²⁷. In 1915, Martin Guzman a Mexican novelist wrote, "Since the Conquest, or even from pre-Hispanic times, the Indian has been prostrate, submissive, indifferent to good or ill, without conscience, his soul reduced to a rudimentary grain, incapable of even hope. To judge by what we see now, the Indian has

not taken a step forward in centuries. Without idealism, hope, or aspiration, feeling no pride in its race, overcome by some mortal and irritating docility, the Indian mass is for Mexico a weight and a burden.”²⁸ Interestingly, the majority ethnicity in Santa Maria is Latino, an economically prosperous community with strong home ownership and business interests. This is not true of Mixteco; however, who are the poorest of the poor with few housing options beyond forced communal living.

The Clash of Cultures – Olga’s Story

The Santa Maria Valley has a deeply rooted culture of farming and ranching enterprises. Within this community, there is a deeply held respect for migrant workers and the binational role they play in bringing vegetable, fruit and meat products to the marketplace. This mutual respect, however, does not transcend the clash that occurs when the Mixtec are confronted with the mores of American Culture. Olga’s story exemplifies the challenges faced by the Mixtec in coping with their adopted home as well as the need for government to respond in a more effective and humane way.

Olga Santos is 18 years old and an American-born Mixtec. Her parents were born and raised in the village of San Juan Mixtepe, Oaxaca, Mexico. They have been married for 25 years and have three daughters, ages 23, 19 and 18; Olga is the youngest. Her mother is 39 years old and her father is forty-one. As is the custom in Mixtec culture, they were 14 and 15 years old when their parents arranged their marriage. Olga’s parents, who have worked in Santa Maria, Madera and Fresno for the last 25 years, decided about five years ago to live permanently in Santa Maria. Even so, her father still dreams of the day he can return to his village to live out the remainder of his life.

During her childhood, Olga, her sisters and parents traveled back and forth between Oaxaca and Santa Maria. All of them worked in the fields and then pooled their money together to send most of it to her grandmother back in the village. Enough money was retained to provide food, some clothing and pay rent. Often, the family would not have a place to stay, so they would park at night next to a public park, which would provide bathrooms. When living in quarters (usually an apartment rented by a member of the village or relative), it was usually shared with anywhere from 10 to 17 other people. At times, there would be five to a bedroom, with others sleeping on the living room floor. While not ideal, it provided the family shelter and a reasonable rate of \$100 dollars per month for the family's share of the rent.

With the implementation of new laws regulating the treatment and employment of farm workers, children were no longer allowed to work in the fields. Her parents did not understand why, and believed then, as they do today, that children should work to support their families.

Compulsory education does not exist in her parent's village, so neither of her parents has any formal education. Olga attended public schools in Santa Maria, but only because her parents could no longer have her work in the fields. They also were worried the police would confront them if she and her sisters were not attending school. When the picking season was over, however, her parents pulled their children out of school and would return to their village to await the next season. While in the village, neither Olga nor her sisters attended school, and were always behind their classmates when returning to Santa Maria for the next season. While Olga was in the 8th grade, her parents decided to remain in Santa Maria year round.

Olga and her sisters have all graduated from high school, but her parents still do not see the value of her education. While in her senior year (and 17 years old), her father told her it was time for her to get married. He had arranged for her to marry the boy of a village friend who also lived in Santa Maria. Olga resisted, and told her family she would not marry until she was 18 and finished with high school. This was a delaying tactic, as she does not share the same cultural traditions of her parents.

Olga wants to be a police officer, and has been accepted as a police explorer with the Santa Maria Police Department. Concerned she would be ostracized by her family, she finally relented and married according to her parent's wishes. Unfortunately, she also had to resign her position because you cannot be an explorer and be married. Her parents, husband and in-laws do not support her career goal of becoming a police officer. She is receiving pressure to provide her husband with a child, and to become a loyal housewife in the Mixtec tradition. Olga told me she does not share these views, does not communicate well with her husband and feels trapped in a cultural abyss.

Olga does not share the ideals of the subservient Mixtec woman. She told me her father has been a violent man who beat her mother routinely. This is acceptable in her culture, but unacceptable in the eyes of the American society she wishes to engage. Her mother never called the police for help, but Olga did, and said she would again. This call to the authorities provoked a backlash from her parents. Her father would be arrested, her mother would always be worried about money and his violent response upon his release would mark his reunification with the family. Her mother, while not wanting to be struck, accepted her role without question and all that came with it.

While repelled by Juanita's story, Olga understands why and how this tragedy happened. Olga pointed out that Juanita is an unmarried woman in her mid-twenties. Not being married at this age is a social stigma, and being unmarried and pregnant is unconscionable. Juanita never attended school in her native village, was required to be subservient to men, cleaned and cooked for the male household she shared and could not bring forward her dilemma. No, Olga was not surprised, and feels this kind of tragedy, if not addressed in a collaborative way, could easily repeat itself. Fortunately, Olga's issues, and those of many like her, now have somewhere to go; the West Newlove Weed and Seed Project is one of those efforts.

The West Newlove Project- Outcomes

As previously noted, the Project's goals were to gain the trust of the Mixtec community, to provide programs and services for them, to staff a Safe Haven Resource Center and to hold meetings with property owners to mitigate issues in the area. Since 2001, there has been considerable progress with each of these goals. Even so, there is much still to do. An assessment of the specifics reveals the status of the goals established more than four years ago:

1. Gain the trust of the Mixtec community

A major hurdle to gaining the trust of the Mixtec is proving to them that the police are not going to take their money or beat them. When new Mixtec's arrive in Santa Maria, one of the first questions asked is how much do they pay the police when stopped.²⁹ The Police Department initiated foot patrols within the neighborhood and began the process of dialogue with the residents. Most residents spoke enough Spanish to allow officers to communicate their message;

however, mere speech proved inadequate to quickly address the cultural divide. Frequent reiteration and reinforcement of domestic violence laws, compulsory education for children and health and safety laws were necessary actions to implement to begin integrating the Mixtec into mainstream American way of life.

Results

The Police Department has been very successful in gaining the trust, and more importantly, a sense of mutual respect between the Mixtec and police. Most residents are now unconcerned with the presence of an officer, and while not necessarily speaking to them, will offer a friendly wave. In cases where there is a need to speak with the officer, there is no longer any shyness. Parents frequently utilize their children as translators, and are not hesitant to report crime or even ask immigration related questions. While many Mixtec's still fear Immigration Officer's, the community is confident in their relationship with local officials. Husbands are now aware of the domestic violence laws in California. While many have changed their behavior, still others strike out at their wives, so work is left to be done in this problem area.

2. Program Development

Working with CARES and the staff of the Safe Haven, (neighborhood based facility for providing educational programs) several new programs were developed which included civic education classes, Spanish classes, a Citizen's Police Academy, and the implementation of a Neighborhood Watch Program.

Results

The civic education classes are offered in the evening. The classes are well attended by Mixtec women, but not by the men. The class offers information on citizenship, from the perspective of both immigration and community responsibility. Discussions are also presented on a number of topics relating to domestic violence, alcohol laws, vehicle code, and farm labor regulations. The Citizen's Police Academy is very popular and is generally well attended. The Academy has been instrumental in breaking down barriers and opening up dialogue.

3. Develop a Safe Haven Resource Center

An existing 2000 square foot single-family home was purchased in West Newlove by the City and was converted into a Safe Haven Resource Center. CARES provides the West Newlove neighborhood with landlord/tenant meetings and information fairs. CARES is also offering courses on English as a Second Language (ESL), homemaking, parenting skills, and financial literacy.

Results

The programs offered by CARES is so popular, the Safe Haven could not accommodate everyone who sought their services. As a result, CARES had to find a new larger facility from which to operate this very successful program.

4. Initiate Property Owner Meetings

The vast majority of the 88 properties in the west Newlove area had some type of building code violation. These violations ranged from not having window screens to dangerous electrical violations. These glaring housing violations resulted in

monthly property owner meetings, in which they were “motivated” to bring their buildings into compliance to provide a safer, higher standard of living environment for the tenants.

Results

Code compliance is managed by the Office of the City Attorney. The City Attorney provided a part-time code compliance officer to the west Newlove neighborhood. Working with the code compliance office, all code violations were corrected on all 88 properties. Further, many of the landlords saw the value in improving their properties. Most of the carports were converted into garages, which eliminated much of the abandoned vehicle problems. Also, the carports were gathering points for after hours drinking. By enclosing them, the drinking was at least out of public view. With the high density living conditions, the City started twice weekly trash service and doubled the number of trash receptacles.

The West Newlove Final Report

The final report on the west Newlove Weed and Seed Project is not due for another year, but it will certainly be a positive reflection of our collaborations with the Mixtec community. Crimes of auto theft and narcotics have been dramatically reduced. While reported domestic violence cases are down, it is still a problem. That being said, it is a problem city-wide.

Domestic Violence Solutions, a nonprofit agency offering advocacy and shelter to battered women has recruited and trained a number of Mixtec women to be advocates. These women respond to calls with the officers and offer translation services as well as advocacy for the victim.

The West Newlove neighborhood has gone through a positive transformation. While still crowded, the residents have developed an ownership interest. They keep the area relatively free of rubbish, spend time watering their lawns, and have even planted flower gardens. Their homes now provide them with a positive respite from a long and tedious day in the fields.

Juanita- The Conclusion

Our first introduction to the Mixtec was through the eyes of Juanita, a woman living in a country she did not understand, and a culture within which she felt trapped. Juanita was arrested and charged with attempted murder; her child was rescued from the trash and placed with a Santa Maria family. During her trial, the jury learned that Juanita was Mixtec, and had been sexually molested by several relatives while still a young girl. Her father, who traveled from Oaxaca to testify, admitted he routinely beat her as a child, explaining she was “disobedient”. He admitted to striking her with a board, and also confessed he hanged her by her feet on one occasion to reinforce his “lesson” of obedience. She left home to join her brother and cousins in the fields of Santa Maria, but was raped in Tijuana and became pregnant. Juanita was illiterate, and was confused about her pregnancy. She believed that because she was not married, her family would disown her and put her out on the street. Ashamed, she hid the pregnancy until the moment of birth on the bathroom floor. Although not excusing her actions with her newborn child, Juanita’s experience can be seen in a different light once one learns of the plight of her existence.

The jury of Anglo men and women received a lesson in Mixtec culture, and the clash it can have with U.S. society and its laws. The judge and jury showed compassion;

however, subsequently convicting Juanita only of child endangerment. Her son has since been adopted by a Santa Maria family and Juanita has returned to her village in Oaxaca.

Conclusion

The compelling story of Juanita and the cultural conflicts with the Mixtec should compel agricultural communities undergoing rapid population and demographic change to face these challenges with a sense of urgency, and with a spirit of enthusiasm and collaboration. Getting people involved within and outside the Mixtec community can be complicated. To experience success as seen in Santa Maria will require strategic leadership on the part of government, law enforcement and community organizations. Our overarching goal was to empower the Mixtec's to ensure their own success, sustainability and continued progress towards a fruitful and fulfilling life. We believe we have come a long way to achieve this goal, and are committed to working directly with them to achieve even greater successes by adapting to any new challenges and ultimately offering services that enhances the quality of life for them and the community.

The motto of the Santa Maria Police Department is "Our Community, Your Police." The City of Santa Maria and its Police Department is committed to never again having someone like Juanita feel she has no options, and will continue to provide leadership and understanding to "OUR" Mixtec community.

End Notes

¹ Coalition for Sustainable Transportation. 2004. “Unmet Transit Needs in North Santa Barbara County.” Report presented to the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments.

² Palerm, Juan Vicente. 1994. “Immigrant and Migrant Farm Workers in the Santa Maria Valley, California.”

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⁴ Interview with Ginnie Sterling, Special Projects Coordinator, city of Santa Maria

⁵ City of Santa Maria, Weed and Seed Site Development Benchmarks Report.

⁶ Nagengast, Carole and Kearney, Michael. 1989. “Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism”

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Mixtecan family, accessed online at www.sil.org/americas/mexico/mixteca.htm

⁹ Nagengast, Carole and Kearney, Michael. 1989. “Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism”

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Interview with Olga Santos an 18 year old Mixtec woman

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Burns, Melinda. 2004 “Mixtecs & Maize: An American Odyssey.” Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara News Press

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Nagengast, Carole and Kearney, Michael. 1989. “Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism”

¹⁹ Santa Barbara County Farm Bureau: accessed online at www.cfbf.com/counties/co-42.efm

²⁰ Palerm, Juan Vicente. n.d. “Farm Worker Enumeration, Santa Barbara County: A Preliminary Report.” Santa Barbara, California: Resource Management Department.

²¹ Ibid

²² California Building Industry Association. 2005. “California Homes Out of Reach.”

²³ UCSB Economic Forecast Project. “2005 Economic Outlook for North Santa Barbara County”

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. “American FactFinder”.

²⁶ Santa Barbara County Public Health Department.

²⁷ Nagengast, Carole and Kearney, Michael. 1989. “Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism”

²⁸ Binford, Leigh and Campbell, Howard. 1993. “Zapotec Struggles: Histories, Politics , and Representations from Juchitan, Oaxaca.” Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

²⁹ Interview with Olga Santos an 18 year old Mixtec woman