

Speaking Your Language

Members of the Rural Women's Health Project have spent more than 20 years fighting HIV/AIDS in their community by educating, informing and helping Latinos make better health choices—and they've done it all while staying true to their culture.

February 3, 2011 By Cristina Gonzalez

These aren't your abuelita's novelas: Two women sit, sipping their cafes and talking about their husbands, exchanging stories. "I'll tell you what you can do. Come with me," one says to another. "Te puedes proteger usando este condon. Te enseñaré a usarlo."

This isn't the typical idle gossip—*this* novela is about how married women can protect themselves against HIV.

These full-color, full-page graphic spreads are the work of the Rural Women's Health Project (RWHP), and they are only one of the many tools RWHP uses to promote healthy behaviors in the Latino community.

Since the RWHP was founded in Gainesville, Florida in 1991, originally as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it has worked to break down barriers to health and to educate Latino immigrants in rural and farm worker communities. For the past 20 years, the organization has focused on the goals of increasing health literacy, modeling preventive behaviors in a variety of health categories from HIV to domestic violence to diet, and expanding access to health care services for all.

"The RWHP's approach is to provide realistic options to health problems and emphasize the importance of 'each one, teach one,'" said Robin Lewy, RWHP's director of education. "Health education should be about empowerment and behavior change for individuals and the community's well-being."

To reach the community and help them make better, more informed choices, RWHP relies on a few major programs: the Florida Promotor Initiative (FPI), Participatory Action Research (PAR), fotonovelas and radionovelas, and the Voices in Action blog and site.

The FPI is RWHP's main effort in the battle to increase the flow of health information and break down the barriers to care that Latinos face. Through the program, RWHP develops "promotores" or lay-health workers who can serve as the bridge between health and social services and the

community, Lewy said.

“Through FPI, we’ve carried out HIV awareness and mobilization programs in rural Tennessee and Florida, an HIV/AIDS prevention initiative for married women, and an early breast cancer detection program,” Lewy said.

With its Participatory Action Research program, the RWHP uses surveys, health assessments and forums to develop education tools and health campaigns. These, in turn, can mobilize the community and direct its energy to larger policies of interest to Latinos, such as immigration laws and the DREAM Act.

But one of the most successful tools developed and used by RWHP are novelas—visual and audio aids used to depict or tell a story. These lower literacy materials take into account the community’s culture and religious beliefs, using traditional music and themes to relay health information on topics that include sex education, domestic violence, drug abuse and HIV/AIDS.

“The community loves stories, and they are motivated by stories where people like themselves take actions to overcome obstacles that they also encounter,” Lewy said.

According to Maria Granado, one of the RWHP’s program coordinators for a North Florida lay-health worker program, “the fotonovelas are well received by the community, because it shows how the community is focusing on the challenges of making health changes and also presents models of people who are successful in making healthy choices.”

The latest addition to RWHP is the Voces de Inmigrantes en Accion (Voices of Immigrants in Action, VIA) blog and web site.

“It is an initiative to mobilize the immigrant community and to educate policy makers and health providers about strategies that will curb the spread of HIV/AIDS,” Lewy said. “It brings together the grassroots voices into a communal force and serves as a forum.”

VIA has developed fact sheets, flexible HIV/AIDS curriculums and bilingual testimonial videos. And the response has to VIA’s work educating the community been overwhelming. As one Tennessee promoter relayed to Lewy: “He aprendido que todavía hay gente que piensa que el VIH es algo que ya no sucede en la actualidad.”

As RWHP works to expand VIA and their services, they’re vowing to stay true to their community and themselves.

“Everything we do is a collaborative enterprise, and we try to tell a story while also empowering the storyteller,” Lewy said. “The insight, labor and love from our promoters and sister partners are what keep the Rural Women’s Health Project capable of responding to the needs of the motivated and driven Latino community.”

For more information on the Rural Women's Health Project, click [here](#).

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