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Sunday, July 9, 2006

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Hospice worker's job: Reaching local Latinos

Salem woman works to bridge the language gap

CAPI LYNN
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The word hospice can be difficult to translate into Spanish.

"It has a lot of meanings, and most are not positive," said Wenonaa Spivak, who is new to the staff at Willamette Valley Hospice. "One could mean where the disabled, elderly and mentally ill go to die, like an asylum."

It is Spivak's job to change the connotation in the local **Hispanic** community.

She joined Willamette Valley Hospice in November as the nonprofit organization's first Latino outreach coordinator.

The position is a luxury for the Salem-based organization.

Spivak, 32, said she knows of only a handful of hospices nationwide that have similar positions, and none in Oregon.

"It's kind of groundbreaking," she said.

She has spent her first two months on the job meeting with local Hispanic leaders and speaking to Hispanic groups and organizations.

"With any innovation, especially in the Latino culture, first of all you have to build relationships," Spivak said. "You have to build trust and you have to become known to the community."

Wenonaa Spivak

Age: 32.

Residence: Salem.

Position: Latino outreach coordinator at Willamette Valley Hospice. Also, adjunct faculty member at Chemeketa Community College, where she teaches Spanish.

Education: Bachelor of Science degree in community-health education from Western Washington University in Bellingham; master's in education from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

Family: Husband, Eric, who works in management consulting.

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She made a presentation last week to **Somos Hispanas Unidas**, a Hispanic women's group in Silverton, and said the reception was encouraging.

"The services are new for us, for our community," group leader Susana Ghio said. "But the ladies are very open to getting the word out on the street."

Taking it even a step further, Ghio said that **the seven members who attended the meeting all signed up with Spivak to undergo training to be a hospice volunteer.**

Willamette Valley Hospice offers care to terminally ill people and their families in Salem and the surrounding areas. It provides emotional, spiritual and practical support based on the patient's wishes and the family's needs.

The organization serves communities within a 35-mile radius of Salem. In 2005, it served about 1,000 patients. Only 28, or 2.2 percent, were Latino.

The numbers nationwide are a bit higher. According to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, 6.3 percent of patients served by hospices nationwide in 2004 were of Hispanic origin.

Officials at Willamette Valley Hospice are eager to expand their services.

"The Hispanic population in Oregon has been growing so dramatically, we want to make sure we are not underserving that group of people in this community," human-resource manager Michelle Cattanach said.

Spivak turned out to be the perfect candidate, Cattanach said.

"Like probably most businesses in this area, we wanted somebody who had a background and lots of experience, so we could learn about how to serve that community," she said.

Spivak served in the Peace Corps from 1996 to 1998 in Honduras. She later worked at women's agencies in Texas and Arizona, providing counseling to domestic-violence and sexual-abuse victims who were predominantly Hispanic. In Arizona, she helped with a new Spanish-language hotline.

Since she has been in Oregon, she has worked in child-protective services and taught Spanish at Chemeketa Community College.

"I've always had a heart for social services," said Spivak, an adjunct faculty member at Chemeketa.

She said that she has been drawn to the Spanish language since high school, and her interest in the Latino culture grew during her experience in Honduras.

"It's such a rich, vibrant culture," Spivak said. "It has a lot of creativity and a lot of traditions in the culture that really speak to me."

She has had two personal experiences with hospice care -- one as a child and the other as an adult. Both were with grandparents.

"Our family has been very thankful for hospice," she said.

In addition to spreading the word in the local Hispanic community, her job also will involve recruiting multicultural, bilingual staff members and Spanish-speaking volunteers. Willamette Valley Hospice has about 100 volunteers, and none is Latino.

Spivak already has translated one of the organization's fact sheets into Spanish and plans to translate other printed materials.

The workload has been and will continue to be heavy, despite the position being only half time.

"I'm glad she's so energetic," said Linda Hays, the community-development manager at Willamette Valley



Hospice.

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