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OREGON'S MID-WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Professor hopes to link city with its Latino population

Written by

Beth Casper
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From Perry, Iowa, to MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, Gerardo Sandoval has documented how U.S. cities can thrive by fostering civic engagement within their immigrant communities.

As a professor at Iowa State University, Sandoval and his students helped to develop a plan to better integrate the immigrant population into the town's development. They recommended that Perry city officials establish a business incubator, redevelop a park and set up a community-based organization to serve as a liaison between the city and the Latino community.

In MacArthur Park, Sandoval wrote about how the troubled neighborhood's immigrant population was able to revitalize the area.

"It was the worst neighborhood in terms of crime in the 1980s, but it was transformed in 15 years," Sandoval said. "I documented how it was the immigrant population that transformed that neighborhood. They worked with city government to make that happen."

Sandoval wrote a book about the change: "Immigrants and the Revitalization of Los Angeles: Development and Change in MacArthur Park."

Now Sandoval is in Salem, helping city officials and Salem's Latino community members work together to better engage Spanish speakers in the business of city government.

Sandoval is an assistant professor in the department of planning, public policy and management at the University of Oregon. He is teaching "Public Engagement in Diverse Communities" this term. It is part of the Sustainable City Year program, which teamed up with the city of Salem to work on civic engagement strategies.

But Sandoval also has a personal interest in Salem — this is where he makes his home.

He moved to Salem in July and commutes to his job in Eugene. His wife, Franchesca, is a social worker for the state of Oregon. And his two children, Julio, 4, and Giovanni,

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2, are in school downtown.

Sandoval was born in Guatemala and grew up in Los Angeles. He received his undergraduate degree in community and regional development from the University of California at Davis and then his master's degree and doctorate in city and regional planning from the University of California at Berkeley.

Given his mere six months in Salem, he's hesitant to talk about his perceptions of the city and its relationship with the Latino community.

"I don't want to dictate the recommendations," he said. "I am leaving it open."

Like his students, who are "outsiders looking in," he is eager to learn about the city's relationship with the Latino community.

But in addition to simply documenting the relationship, Sandoval hopes the work done in this course makes a difference.

"I'm very interested in helping to contribute to a positive civic engagement environment now that I am a resident of Salem," he said. "I want my kids to grow up in a healthy multicultural environment."

His students are focusing on answering two main questions: How does the Latino community view the city of Salem, and what opportunities for public engagement with the Latino community can be developed?

The 10 graduate students also will try to build capacity within the city to do outreach and also within the Latino community.

"Students are going to engage the Latino community while they do this research," he said. "They'll have focus groups and one-on-one conversations. Sometime next term, we will get different stakeholders from the city and the Latino community together to have a conversation. So the work the students are doing is going to lay the foundation for that conversation."

As far as this course being a part of the Sustainable City Year program, Sandoval says equity — while not as obvious as environmental or economic considerations — is a major component of sustainability.

"The focus on equity is as important as anything else," he said.

Beth Casper can be reached at bethanncasper@hotmail.com

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