

Mexican government honors Casa ALBA director



Adam Rodewald, Press-Gazette Media 9:12 a.m. CDT September 22, 2015



(Photo: Evan Siegle/Press-Gazette Media)

The head of Green Bay's Hispanic resource center has been honored by the Mexican government for her work helping immigrants integrate into American society.

Sister Melanie Maczka, who helped found Casa ALBA Melanie in 2012, received the prestigious Ohtli award during a ceremony in Chicago last week.

The annual award, which translates to "pathway", recognizes individuals who have contributed significantly to the prosperity and empowerment of Mexicans abroad. Recipients have included celebrities, such as actress Eva Longoria, city council members and teachers.

The award confirms how important Casa ALBA has become for the nearly 21,000 Hispanics living in Brown County, said Maria Berouin, a member of the organization's board of directors.



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"Casa Alba is hope for the Hispanic community," she said. "It's a place where they feel trusted and can come for anything they need."

Between 300 and 350 people come to Casa ALBA for services every month.

The center partners with other agencies and businesses in the area to provide a wide range of services, including legal consultations, General Education Degree programs, youth sports activities, crime victim services and social groups for all ages.

Maczka is regarded as the heart of the organization.

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Sister Melanie Maczka, executive director of Casa Alba Melanie, is shown inside the resource center in Green Bay on Monday, Sept. 21, 2015. Maczka received an Ohtli award from the Mexican government for her work with the Hispanic community. (Photo: Evan Siegle/Press-Gazette Media)

"Sometimes she advocates (for Hispanics) stronger than I do," said Casa ALBA board president Elvita Erdmann. "It's wonderful to find such a nice human being to work with. She always puts other people in front of her own needs."

Maczka first began working with Hispanics in the greater Green Bay-area 25 years ago at St. Willebrord Catholic Parish. The church at that time, under the leadership of Father Ken DeGroot, invited a group of Hispanic Catholics to worship there because they had nowhere else to meet. They couldn't speak a word of Spanish but felt compelled to serve the Hispanic community.

Maczka and DeGroot co-founded Casa ALBA after they retired from the parish in order to help people with their non-spiritual needs. The nonprofit organization is not affiliated with the church.

"We focus on people. I think a lot of times, politically, immigration is looked at as an issue or problem to solve. I think it should be looked at as people... They're individuals who are here because they want to contribute to society," Maczka said.

Demand for Casa ALBA's services is growing. Brown County has one of the fastest rising Hispanic populations in Wisconsin.

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Casa ALBA Melanie director Sister Melanie Maczka. (Photo: File/Press-Gazette Media)

The number of Hispanics living in the county is projected to quadruple over the next half century, growing at a rate of about 32 percent every 10 years, according to a Press-Gazette Media analysis of projections by ProximityOne, an Alexandria, Va., demographic data firm.

Hispanics currently make up about 8 percent of the county's total population, according to estimates from the state Department of Health Services.

By 2060, about 20 percent of the county's population is expected to be Hispanic.

Maczka said she considers the Ohtli award a recognition of the local Hispanic community's successes.

"It's a way of putting into symbolism what's been happening all along. It's gifting the people, in a sense, who have been a gift to me while I've been trying to serve them," she said.

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