

Building La Plaza & Economic Mobility for **Latino Entrepreneurs** in **Southern Delaware**



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Mike DiPaolo, vice president for Southern Delaware at the Delaware Community Foundation, saw the possibilities the first time he stepped out the backdoor of the DCF building in Georgetown.

The sleepy business district reminded him of his more established Italian immigrant community in Cleveland. In this Delaware town, the immigrants hail from Mexico, Guatemala and other parts of Central America, and their stores and restaurants reflect a nostalgia for hometown food and easy-to-access services in a language they can understand.

So when a community visionary approached DiPaolo about revitalizing the business district, it was no surprise that he jumped at the opportunity, in part because the idea was also perfectly aligned with the DCF's goals and commitment to the Latino community.

In 2018, the DCF became part of Building Broader Communities in the Americas, and through this network received funding from CFLeads, an organization that helps community foundations build strong communities, to undergo a "mapping" project to better understand and support the growing Latino population. That initiative evolved to learning about and supporting Latino entrepreneurs as they build their local economy, develop their community and deepen their individual asset base.



"We already understood the strengths of the community. Then this idea allowed us to partner with others in providing more business education so they could build stronger businesses," DiPaolo said.



Mary Dupont, the visionary who approached DiPaolo, also saw that the small-business community could do so much more. Together, and with the support of other community leaders, they embarked on a project that grew and evolved in unexpected ways.

Today, La Plaza is a nonprofit organization that in its first year provided more than 260 small businesses with business plan training, personalized coaching and access to capital. One of its greatest accomplishments so far is the formation of a business group called the Delaware Alliance of Latino Entrepreneurs. The group recently organized a business expo that united more than 120 entrepreneurs and received more than 800 visitors.



"We're happy and proud. We've been waiting for years to show the community what we do and who we are," said Sergio Morales, a contractor and the president of DALE.

Learning moments

La Plaza always had it in its plan to provide financial empowerment services. Dupont had successfully run a statewide program that offered personal financial coaching to hundreds of thousands of Delawareans.

Initially, Dupont wanted to bring more cobblestone and Latin American architectural features, including an archway, to Georgetown. The idea was that La Plaza would acquire and renovate properties to have commercial space on the ground floor and apartments on the second floor.

"Imagine a cobblestone walking street lined with arches, fountains, outdoor dining and street art with a Latin American flavor," Dupont said. "Thousands of people will visit Georgetown, including those on the way to the beach, to enjoy Latino food and culture."

The idea was tabled by the town council and residents of the small town, which included many historical structures and Georgian-style homes of brick and symmetrical design.

DiPaolo said that in retrospect the La Plaza board had not taken the time to talk to local residents about what they wanted to see in the town.

"We were reminded that you must have boots on the ground. You can't just be making decisions in your office or with a committee that's removed from the issue at hand," he said.

Dupont explained that she went in on the assumption that the town would be interested in creating something beautiful in a space that appears economically depressed.

"Also, we were positioning it as a way to attract tourism. All these tourists and retirees are looking for something to do, and Georgetown is perfectly located to get that business from the beach traffic," she said. "But I didn't know the players, the history, the politics, the local town politics, and I was wrong."

DCF President and CEO Stuart Comstock-Gay said the change in plans for the project reflected the varied needs of any community.

"It's a lesson we often have to learn over and over again — you have to be close to the community, you have to be there for the long haul and you have to be humble," he noted. "You must be able to say, 'help me understand what your strengths are and what you need to be more successful.'"

True community building

La Plaza was highly successful at winning the trust of Latino business owners. That happened because Dupont appeared faithfully in the places where they gather and worship.

The initial board of La Plaza included several faith leaders in addition to business owners and economic development experts. With the revitalization project on hold, Dupont worked feverishly to make meaningful connections with individuals and organizations that would support the financial empowerment and economic mobility of Latino entrepreneurs.

She said the DCF played a pivotal role in helping her understand the players in this unique space. Among the first foundations to support La Plaza with a larger gift was

Arsht-Cannon Fund, an endowed fund at the DCF. The fund has provided more than \$9 million to Latino-serving nonprofit partners since 2004.

Dupont said DiPaolo also introduced her to the National Association for Latino Community Asset Builders, a network of more than 200 organizations working on economic development in predominantly Latino communities. La Plaza staff attended the event and benefited from meeting like-minded professionals.

"It's our responsibility as a community foundation to leverage relationships in the communities, connect Mary to the right people," DiPaolo said.

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Uniting voices

La Plaza launched its first 12-week free training in the fall of 2021 with 15 people. By spring 2022, the word had spread and more than 60 people showed up on the first day.

Morales was among those students. He and his brothers owned a residential construction company. They wanted to grow their business and had been considering a similar training that would have cost them \$5,000.

In addition to receiving guidance on developing a business plan, Morales found a support system that he'd never experienced before. In fact, DALE was born out of a class discussion about what helps English-speaking entrepreneurs.

"They have ways to support each other and help each other grow. We did not," said Morales. That day, the class committed to forming an alliance. In June 2022, the class

organized a daylong business conference with speakers that attracted more than 200 business owners. Its community and business expo in February filled a high school gymnasium with business owners ready to promote their goods and services.

"We've gone unnoticed in the past. Now, we're ready to show everyone what we can do and how we take pride in the quality of work we do in Sussex County," Morales said.

In less than two years, La Plaza went from a controversial concept to a fully formed nonprofit organization.

"A successful community is going to have a combination of getting support from others and taking control of its own future," Comstock-Gay said. "The combination of those two is powerful, and that's what we've seen with La Plaza."

In 2019, DCF released an important commissioned report, the first of its kind in Delaware for almost 20 years. *Perspectives on the Latino Population in Sussex County, Delaware* aimed to shine a light on the Latino communities in the state's southernmost county.

Over the past 30 years, Sussex County's Latino population has grown by more than 1,200%, encompassing nearly 10% of the population in the county. The report revealed that, besides enriching the overall culture with their traditional music and food, **Latino immigrants were running 800 small businesses and paying \$50 million in taxes each year.**



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A Special Thanks to Our Project Funders:

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