



# Changing the Lives of Latino Youth

An excerpt from *Abriendo Puertas*, Casa de Esperanza's newsletter, Fall 2006

A Latina teen mother was shopping in a neighborhood grocery store with her baby, when an older woman approached her and said, "Your life is over!"

Girls, such as this young mother, are learning that they don't have to listen to society's perception of them. Casa de Esperanza's Peer Education for youth is touching their lives and assisting them to build leadership skills and recognize new options for their future. Casa de Esperanza will soon make the same learning opportunities available to organizations around the country that are working with Latino youth.

The Peer Education initiative for youth is the byproduct of our film, ¡Ubícate!™, which was created in 2003. Unable to locate Spanish language resources for youth, our staff and Latino teens wrote and produced the one-of-its-kind film. Today Casa de Esperanza is continuing to fill that resource gap by creating a curriculum to educate young Latina leaders and their peers.

Casa de Esperanza has been testing the Peer Education curriculum with a group of Latina students from Harding High School, St. Paul. Covering topics that they could use in their own presentations for other youth, they explored themes from ¡Ubícate!, such as teen dating violence, gender roles, healthy relationships, and self-esteem. The girls also developed and practiced their presentation skills.

The Harding students chose to become Peer Educators because they were excited about talking to other teens about the real issues of their lives. Following their training, they began to offer workshops at schools and community organizations. The Peer Educators develop their own presentation modules—doing the research and creating interactive activities—on topics they know are important to Latino youth.

The positive response to their presentations has amazed the girls and heightened their motivation to continue in the fall. One Peer Educator wrote:

*The most exciting part about being a Peer Educator has been the feeling of satisfaction after we present each workshop to the youth. Just knowing that at least we got through to one person in the room and that person can share it with someone else is a great feeling—you know you did your part in your community.*

Latino youth rarely have the opportunity to benefit from such programs. Lumarie Orozco, Casa de Esperanza's Peer Education Coordinator/Trainer, explains that the Peer Educators developed leadership skills, became aware of their abilities and strengths, identified positively with their Latino culture, and recognized more options for their future. "For the first time in their lives, some of the girls are thinking about the possibility of college!" says Lumarie.

A high point for the Peer Educators was the opportunity to present the program to the local Peacejam Conference in March. They spoke to an audience of more than two hundred people, including the guest of honor, Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Maathai of Kenya.

The Peer Education initiative is making a difference in the lives of Latino youth here in the Twin Cities. Lumarie explains that the Peer Educators have had the opportunity to do something "completely out of their scope." The skills, self-confidence, and knowledge that they have gained are changing their lives and the lives of the youth in their workshops. We are eager to offer the same opportunity to Latino youth throughout the country. Copyright © Casa de Esperanza 2006. All Rights Reserved.