

## **CASA ALBA MELANIE** **A FORWARD-LOOKING HISPANIC RESOURCE CENTER**

*Written by Fr. Paul Demuth for Horizons newsletter, May 2021*

When Sister Melanie Maczka and Father Ken DeGroot, O. Praem., decided to “retire” from their pastoral duties at St. Willebrord Catholic Church, the first local Catholic parish to welcome Hispanics as integral members, they realized that not all Hispanic people felt comfortable in a church setting. The needs and talents of the Hispanic community were vast and vital to the future of the greater Green Bay community. While Father Ken sought the funds for Casa ALBA Melanie, Sr. Melanie became the first Executive Director, working with a bicultural board in imaginative and ever-developing vision.

Along with members from the Hispanic Community, they invited other families of multiple Latino origins to join with them to connect families with multiple resources (issues of immigration, health, education, the need for interconnections among the youngest and Hispanic Seniors). Casa ALBA Melanie, at 314 S. Madison Street, would be a resource center rather than duplicate already available services. Since 2012 it has grown into a well-respected center for healthy dialogue with police, educators and others, as well as a connecting point for other ethnic and racial groups. “Hello” and “Hola” are interchangeable as people walk through its doors, and if you stay there for even a short time, Maria, a staff member, will soon offer you a taco or other native dish.

Since the pandemic has especially devastated the Hispanic community, Casa ALBA has re-imagined and expanded its services to provide direct financial assistance to Hispanic families. Funds received from the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation, The Green Bay Packer Foundation, United Way, and personal donations have been a source of help for many. Multiple families who have received aid from Casa ALBA greatly appreciate a community that has embraced them as their own.

The resulting communication that takes place at Casa ALBA Melanie highlights our rich, multilayered Latino community. Some members have lived and contributed here for more than 30 years. They represent all Spanish-speaking countries — as diverse as the immigrants of the nineteenth century.

Gratzia Villarroel, a St. Norbert College professor, is the current president of the Board made up of a majority of Hispanics. She has been part of the Foresight Training program offered by ENVISION Greater Green Bay and is eager to lead the board in long-term planning.

In collaboration with the Aging and Disability Resource Center and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, and on behalf of Casa ALBA Melanie, Sr. Melanie is submitting a grant proposal to create a Spanish health navigator program. Such navigators would be responsible and accountable for direct and indirect patient care for designated patient populations — the first of its kind in our community. This forward-thinking proposal is in partnership with all local healthcare systems. Project coordinator Dr. Lora Warner of University of Wisconsin-Green Bay has surveyed the Hispanic community and health care system to identify the future needs of this population. While the outcome of the grant application is unknown, the exploration and planning has revealed multiple levels of need in the Hispanic community and will improve future health care.