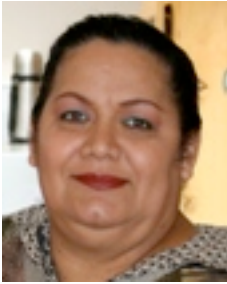


Siler City woman volunteers to give back



[Todd Cohen](#) | September 9, 2009

Elena C. Gonzalez

SILER CITY, N.C. - During a recent field trip to Winston-Salem with the youth group she collaborates with for Hispanic Liaison of Chatham County, the kids in the group gave Elena C. Gonzalez a home-made diploma they had designed that described her as "the best cook and everybody's mother."

Gonzalez, who also serves as president of Women Improving the Future, an all-volunteer group that works to help Latinas develop skills and leadership, also was one of 11 individuals recognized in August as volunteer of the year by United Way of Chatham County.

And United Way has included Gonzalez among five individuals it has nominated to the N.C. Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service for recognition as a statewide volunteer of the year.

United Way also has nominated her to be one of only 20 people who receive the Medallion Award, the highest volunteer award given by the commission. Gonzalez, a native of Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, in Mexico, who was raised there and in Guatemala, says her work volunteering to help others in her community represents no more than a partial payment on what she has received.

"My life is very long and this is just one of the ways I can give thanks to God for being so good to me," she says, speaking by phone through an interpreter, Zulayka Santiago, a co-manager of the NC People's Coalition for Giving, a multi-racial statewide network that works to increase giving in communities of color.

Gonzalez also says the award really belongs to her husband, Juan Carlos Gonzalez. "If I am sincere, the recognition shouldn't go to me but to my husband because he is so patient and supportive," she says. "Whenever there is an emergency, he says, 'Go,' and he is left home alone while I am

out in the community helping others. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be able to do it."

After living for 10 years in California, where she moved from Guatemala in her 20s, Gonzalez and her husband moved to Siler City in 1999, hoping to find the cost of living less expensive.

In 2004, with her husband working and their two grown daughters having moved to Mexico, Gonzalez found herself feeling isolated.

So she joined the Coalition for Family Peace, a local group that works with women experiencing issues like depression, stress and domestic violence.

The founder of the group asked Gonzalez to head what became Women Improving the Future, a support program it was starting for Latina women.

The all-volunteer program, which has more than two dozen women as members, and also includes some of their husbands and children, provides a range of services.

When a member has a baby or loses a job, the other members prepare food and provide comfort.

Or if a member loses a loved one, the other members work with officials to get the paperwork needed to transport the body to their native country. Because she has a car, Gonzalez often provides transportation.

And she spends a lot of time in the kitchen.

On the Friday before Labor Day, she spent most of the day at home, preparing food for the weekly classes in English and citizenship the group offer Friday's from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

And at The Hispanic Liaison, where she also serves as a board member, Gonzalez works with teens in the group's youth program, mentoring several kids who want to learn how to cook, while her husband mentors several others who want to learn about cars.

When the program takes the kids on a field trip, she says, she serves as cook, chauffer and counselor.

Women Improving the Future typically pays for food and transportation by asking members to donate \$2 at their Friday classes, and through bake sales and garage sales.

The Hispanic Liaison also works on policy issues that affect the Latino community.

After a survey it conducted several years ago found a top priority was for transportation, for example, the group has been working with Chatham Transit Network, a county agency, to develop bus stops.

Progress has been slow, Gonzalez says, but she still hopes the bus stops will be created to give Latinos better access to transportation.

She says she also hopes a community gathering space can be developed where she will "be able to share all of the good things I know."

And she hopes that "all of my people could be documented, and I'll continue praying for that."

Latinos need to "learn the system and learn how to function within the system," she says. "It's important that we learn our rights, and we must also learn our obligations and our responsibilities in living in this country."

Gonzalez says volunteering is its own reward, a way of giving back for what she has received.

"I could never imagine receiving payment for this type of work," she says, "because God has been so good to me and so abundant that this is just one of the little ways that I can give back and give thanks."