

Westside CAN Center serves as anchor for Latino community in Kansas City, Missouri



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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — A Kansas City, Missouri, community center that started as a way to address crime has become a staple of the city’s Westside and an avenue to bring people together.

“Having access to the culture,” Officer Chato Villalobos said of the Westside CAN Center. “The Latino community got here in the early 1900s, Mexican immigrants. And to this day, you still have fiestas, you still have restaurants with food, culture, music, and we’ve been able to hang on to it and preserve it.”



Villalobos now serves the neighborhood he grew up in through his work as an officer with the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department, operating out of a satellite office at the Westside CAN Center.

The center started as a community policing strategy in the '90s to address crime and neglect.

“When I came back down here to work, I got to be a part of that,” said Villalobos, one of two officers stationed at the center. “Instead of being an occupying force as a police officer, we became partners with the people who were already here.”

From its beginnings as a resource for the Latino community, the Westside CAN Center grew into a movement — empowering neighbors to take control of their block, welcome and help new immigrants settle, and open a day-laborer program.

Lynda Callon, the center’s director at the time, said crime decreased more than 50% in the area due to the center.

Current director Jorge Coromac a volunteer at the center for 11 years and was named director seven years ago when Callon died.



“We are able to embrace the neighbors, embrace the old generation with the newcomers to be part of this proactive community,” Coromac said.

The center also has a satellite codes-enforcement office. The codes officer takes the same approach as Villalobos – instead of tickets being the first resort, talk with neighbors as a partner.

Food distribution events and neighborhood cleanups are also organized through the center, along with playing host to fall festivals, spring flings and Toys for Tots drives.

Additionally, a back-to-school pep rally has been held for 20 years and offers backpacks and resources to families.

“Showing them that there's hope and education is the way to get where you want to go and being very enthusiastic about it,” said Barbara Bailey, a longtime advocate and worker at the center.



The goal early on, according to Bailey, was to provide programs for children so they would be “busy and pooped-out and not going to be running the streets at 3 in the morning.”

Villalobos said when he was growing up, it was easy for children to get involved in criminal activities.

“It went from having someone who was engaged in criminal activity on every block to having somebody who's going to college on every block,” Villalobos said.

The center partners with other powerhouses in the Westside, including the Guadalupe Centers, Mattie Rhodes, the Tony Aguirre Community Center, the Irene H. Ruiz Library and Primitivo Garcia Elementary School.

“The thing that’s made a real difference in our neighborhood is the community center, the library, the school, that kids could walk to that and be involved in programs, and positive things to do with positive mentors,” Bailey said.

Coromac said they’re proud of their vaccination efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, getting 95% of the senior center vaccinated.

The neighborhood looks a little different than in the ’90s with new development, but Coromac said there will always be a concern with gentrification. Regardless, he said, the CAN Center will remain.

“That’s the beauty of the Westside,” Coromac said, “That we welcome everyone while we educate them to engage with everyone.”

Villalobos gets emotional when he thinks about how much the neighborhood supports him.

“Being close to my heritage, being able to bring my kids down here to see where I grew up and see all the advocacy in the community, what we’ve been able to do with our community,” Villalobos said.

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KSHB 41 News is celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month from Sept 15. to Oct. 15, by highlighting the Hispanic community in the Kansas City area. As part of our

efforts, KSHB 41 News has partnered with the University of Missouri - Kansas City's Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, to translate many of our online stories from English into Spanish. In addition, many of our on air stories will also include Spanish subtitles.