

Voices

from 1A

At the same time, Liza Alvarez was also finding it difficult to connect with the Latino community. Alvarez, who works for the Siuslaw Public Library System, has been looking into ways to bring the community together through a variety of programs both through the library and with the Latino community as a whole.

After the documentary screening, Alvarez, along with her friend Rosy Dominguez Guillens, and Sanders, as well as her mother Rosa Hernandez and sister Andrea Sanchez, sat down to discuss the state of the Latino community in the region, why they believe it's so disjointed, why Latinos would benefit from a more cohesive community and how the entire population of Florence, Latino or not, could benefit from a broader understanding of the Latino culture.

As a high school senior who moved to America when she was 11 months old, Sanchez's entire life has been a bridge between two cultures and two generations.

A DACA recipient who will

soon be going off to college, she spoke about what it was like growing up in the region.

The following transcript is taken from a discussion with Sanchez and others within the Latino community.

(Editor's note: While the conversation has been edited for length and clarity, the conversation is presented in their own words.)

What is it like growing up as a second-generation Latino?

ANDREA: For me, it wasn't as bad as it was for my siblings because they were the first Latino family in Mapleton. So, you did get people feeling uncomfortable.

When I was growing up in elementary school, I would get pulled from class when another Latino came to school, because I was the first Latino girl who went to school here. They would have me translate for them — me, helping them, trying to communicate.

It's become a lot easier for sure, but you still get those moments when people give you a weird look because you're speaking Spanish. Or because you look different, or you act

different. It's just that we're more watchful of what we do.

For example, I know there are more students who, after I graduate, will be in the DACA program. And they don't have somebody that they feel comfortable telling so they can help find scholarships or schooling.

For me, it's my mom and my sister who have been helping me because they've gone through it already.

But for another student?

I got my DACA stuff thanks to (Karla) because she was the one who looked up the information. It's expensive for students who don't know or can't apply for DACA at the moment. It's tough because they put up such a barrier and it's so expensive to do those kinds of things.

I'm lucky that I am in the position I am. I can go to schooling. I have opportunities to get scholarships and all of these other things that some don't.

When I first started, there were some times I would get comments about the color of my skin in my freshman year of high school. I went home to my mom and said, "I'm so angry." But I don't want to say anything because I know that if I say something, and it comes out the wrong way, I'm going to be the one that gets in trouble.

People say, "Well times have changed, that it's not like that."

KARLA: I'm worried it's going backwards right now.

ANDREA: You just feel like you're being watched. It's easier than how it was for my siblings, but it's still always in the back of your mind.

KARLA: It just seems like the less you have in common, the more they put you away.

At some point, it just has to stop. We are not trying to be here to ruin people's lives. We're trying to be here to be part of a community and to be better and help our community grow and to help each other.

But right now, it just seems like it's going backwards to slavery times. If you're a certain color or you look different or you don't speak the right way, you are segregated and pushed away.

What are the differences between the cultures?

ROSA: We are so different. We have different genealogies, we have different customs.

When we come into this country, it's very hard to accept everything here. And we have to do that. Because kids grow up, and they want to be like Americans. And they are

Americans; they were born here.

But sometimes they don't listen when they grow up and it's hard to understand them. And it's hard for parents to accept. They don't teach you how to

What we miss is the chance to show the community our culture.

— Karla Sanders

respect others.

ROSA: One time I go to school, she was probably in middle school, and I see a daughter and mother talk and fight and the little one tells b***h to her mom. Would Andrea say that to me? No!

I am the mom. She needs to respect me. Because I respect her. It's so sad because the little ones learn everything. We lived before in a little community, with the gate and everything. When my daughter went to the swimming pool, the little ones said, "No, no, get out. My dad says you can't swim with brown people."

These are little ones. It's sad.

KARLA: The kids today don't just have the strong values of a family that I grew up with or my parents grew up with. I don't see that anymore.

We love that they're open and they're outspoken and they have freedom of speech. They have so much more opportunities. But they don't know when not to cross a line and be overbearing and rude. They need to be respectful with one another.

LIZA: Definitely. For example, I feel that just the way I speak to my Latin friends versus my more Anglo-American friends are very different. Just the way I speak is more reserved. When I'm speaking to someone from Latin culture then my voice gets louder, and I get more excited.

(The group laughs.)

LIZA: And I get more touchy feely. You know? You slide into it naturally.

I was speaking to my friend, and her boyfriend is Anglo-American, as well as mine is, and we were commiserating over the fact that sometimes we just say something and get really excited, and our boyfriends will be like, "Calm down." That's just the way it is. It's visceral. I am not upset, I'm not mad. I'm not getting all "huffy and puffy." That is just who I am.

So, when you are in a place that is more isolated from that culture, you don't express yourself fully. And you're more reserved. You just have this trepidation that you're going to offend somebody, or somebody is going to think bad of you.

One thing that I miss so much, and I think it's more common in Cuban culture, is that when you see family and friends and you're like, "besos" — kisses.

KARLA: Yes!

LIZA: That's how we greet each other!

ROSA: Or hugs! At a family party I invited some friends of friends; Americans. And us women are always talking and dancing, talking and laughing. The next day the gentleman asked, "Were the women drunk yesterday?" No, that's how we are!

KARLA: Very passionate. That's what my husband says, "You're very passionate." I'm like, hmm ...

LIZA: It's just a way of being. We don't see it as passionate. It's relevance. I met (an American) girl who went to Cuba with me, and she said, "I know that I am pretty, but it's just that all the Cuban men always want to kiss me when they meet me."

(Everyone laughs as Rosy sarcastically says, "OK.")

LIZA: No love, you are very pretty, but it's not because of that. It gets lost in translation.

ROSA: And here if a man does it, they think it's like sexual harassment. My husband is so friendly. When sees an older lady, he tries to give her his hand and help, but ...

KARLA: The ladies are like, "What are you doing? Don't touch me!" He's just trying to be polite and help.

LIZA: Yes, and Latino cultures tend to look each other in the eye when they talk. If you're not looking at someone in the eyes, it's like a lack of respect, and sometimes other cultures are not that way.

KARLA: Yes, and they take it in a different manner.

ROSA: It's culture shock.

LIZA: When I go visit family and decide it's time to say goodbye, let's say it's 8 p.m., I don't leave until 8:30 because I have to say goodbye to my godmother, my godfather, my cousins, the neighbors. It's the custom.

KARLA: When we say bye to someone at our house, my husband, says, "Okay, let me sit down somewhere."

(The group laughs.)

What do you miss when you don't have a full-fledged Latino community?

LIZA: I feel that coming from California and a Latino family, a community is something I'm missing since I moved here a year ago. I miss the culture, I miss my friends. I miss the humor.

KARLA: Warmth.

LIZA: The warmth, the food. And I just get very excited when I meet somebody from my culture. I've run into a lot of Latinos in this community, so I know that we exist, but we're scattered and we don't have a central meeting point to just talk and share resources and stories.

KARLA: I think time is especially hard, since almost everyone in town works either

in logging companies or the restaurants. Their time is either really early in the morning, or really late after they close the restaurants. I think that's a big problem. We don't even have time.

What we miss is the chance to show the community our culture.

Not to bring politics into the discussion, but it's not just us being drug lords or cartels or rapists or whatever. We have a whole background, a whole culture that once they know it, they fall in love with it. I think that's what's missing here.

ROSA: But there are people. I met Nora Kent when I started here in 2001, she was very friendly and helped a lot of people. I think she's the first person I knew here in Florence and she tried to help all our people. Especially all the Mexican people. It's necessary when you know nothing.

ANDREA: We just want to have people know who we are, who we really are, and just learn how to accept and be educated about our culture and the things that we enjoy. And just show them the traditions that we have.

People here do celebrate Day of the Dead, and they want to be able to celebrate more. My mom always wants to throw a party where there's dancing and music. That would be a cool thing to see happen here because there are a lot of Hispanics and Latinos, but we don't usually all mingle together.

It would be nice where the Latinos and the public can come in and see and enjoy things that we like to enjoy and just get to know us a little more, and we get to know them a little more.

ROSY: There are a lot of Latinos here, but it's like they're hiding in the bushes. (Laughs) We need to somehow let people know that we can meet somewhere.

ROSA: I think it's important to meet with other Hispanic and Latino people, to help each other. I don't know if people coming from California or Mexico did it legally, but it's hard when you start to live in one place.

I hardly get out because of work. If I need to learn something I get on the computer, and I study and study, but when I go to the store I see that there are new people that I don't know. I want to say, say, "Hey do you know who might know this person?" That's what I would like to do. I would like that all of us knew each other.

In part two of "In Their Own Words," to be published Wednesday, March 7, the group discusses why it is important to have a vibrant Latino community in the Siuslaw region, why there is not one currently and how helping one community can strengthen all communities in the region.

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