

Latina student helps plan clinic to inform South LA about rights

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School of Social Work graduate student Vanessa Castellanos is planning the fourth annual “No Más Clinic” to provide free legal consultations and other services to local residents. (Sinead Chang | Daily Trojan)

As a long-time South L.A. resident, Vanessa Castellanos always wanted to give back to her community.

A graduate student in her final year at the Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and the co-community representative for the Latinx Student Caucus, Castellanos serves as the main planner for the fourth annual “No Más Clinic,” an event that provides free legal consultations and other resources to local residents each spring.

In previous years, the event was held at USC in a conference format in which community members rotated classrooms to learn about topics within Latinx communities. However, Castellanos said the conference schedule didn’t work well for residents who had to work or take care of children.

This year, she aims to make the event a drop-in style clinic with legal consultations and nonprofits available all day to talk with community members about their rights and various resources available to them.



Castellanos and her team are currently working to find an off-campus space to host the event, which she believes will be more inviting to the community.

“We feel like, as social workers, we want to meet clients or meet community members where they are, and I think sometimes making it too academic-focused we may lose the community in that,” Castellanos said. “We want to make it more practical, easier to understand, easier to navigate.”

USC alumna Mirian Juarez helped organize the “No Más” event last spring. She worked closely with Castellanos last year and continues to consult with her today.

Even though Castellanos was not yet a board member in the caucus, Juarez said she got involved in planning the event early on and wanted to learn from the current leaders. Juarez said Castellanos also showed a passion for the community and strong networking skills with students, community organizers and politicians.

“It was very clear to everyone on the board that she was the perfect person for [community representative] not only because she put in the time for the whole previous year, but she also demonstrated a lot of the skills you need for this,” Juarez said.

As an undergraduate student at UCLA, Castellanos said she often felt a sense of imposter syndrome because she didn’t see many students who looked like her. But Castellanos said joining the Lambda Theta Alpha Latin sorority helped her find other Latina students and reconnect with her desire to help her community.

Castellanos is currently applying to doctoral programs in urban planning, and said she hopes to use her knowledge of Latinx communities to shape policy in areas like South L.A. Castellanos said she also wants to be a role model for Latinos to push past challenges and pursue careers in academia. During the 2011-2012 academic year, 5 percent of doctoral degree earners were Latinx, according to A National Education Blueprint.

“In academia, [Latinos] are very underrepresented ... I want to be a part in encouraging those numbers to go up and show that we are here, we are present in academia,” Castellanos said.

Eliane Fersan, director of the Initiative on Immigrants and Global Migration, has met with Castellanos and other students to talk about ways to further improve “No Más” and facilitate contact with outside resources and leaders.

Fersan thinks Castellanos will create change for Latinx communities through policy and education because of her persistence and drive.

“She knows how to get into the system and break it from the inside,” Fersan said. “She’s a woman with a plan. She knows what she’s doing. She knows what it takes. She knows it’s hard and tough, and it’s going to take time and sweat and she’s doing it.”

Castellanos said her family and community have inspired her to continue pursuing her goals. After earning her doctorate, she plans to give back by doing more research on Latinx communities, advocating for new policies and educating the next generation of students to continue this work.

“This is for my family, my parents specifically, who have endured so many challenges on giving us a better future,” Castellanos said. “I really want to make sure that I take advantage of everything that they did not have and be that role model. So, that is important to me because it’s not only something for myself, it’s something for my family and for ultimately my people and my community.”

This story is part of a mini-series highlighting Latinos at USC. It will run every Monday during Hispanic Heritage Month, which ends Oct. 15.

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