

A Place to Belong

Sacred Heart Center's new executive director hopes to expand the sense of community for a growing Latino population

by Tina Eshleman

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Tanya Gonzalez (center) teaches weekly Latin American dance classes at Sacred Heart Center, and she hopes to expand arts programs, especially for youth. (Photo by Jay Paul)

When Tanya Gonzalez moved to Richmond from McAllen, Texas, as a 14-year-old in 1990, she was one of only two students at Midlothian High School who identified as Hispanic or Latino. (Today there are 67.) As executive director of Sacred Heart Center since July, she oversees programs serving a Hispanic population that has grown to almost 10 percent in Chesterfield County, with the regional total estimated at around 50,000.

The center offers classes in GED test preparation, English as a second language, Spanish literacy, citizenship and leadership. More than that, Sacred Heart Center is where Latinos can find a sense of belonging. With an incoming U.S. president who made immigration policy a key part of his campaign platform, promising to build walls and accelerate deportations, that may be more important than ever.

Immigration enforcement is not a new worry. Gonzalez saw the impact on families of workplace raids under former President George W. Bush. “Obama has continued with a lot of the enforcement and deportation, maybe just not with the large-scale raids that were being done,” she says. “It affects every aspect of life, even just leaving in the morning to go to work, whether it’s the adult or the child, to be worried if someone might come home or not, or end up being detained.”

Gonzalez previously served 12 years with Richmond’s Office of Multicultural Affairs. In the time that she’s been working with the Latino population, she’s seen tremendous growth in both the numbers and diversity of countries of origin. “We’ve also seen an increase in business growth and people purchasing homes and really creating community here,” she says. “When you look at, say Jefferson Davis Highway or Broad Rock [Boulevard] or Hull Street, back in 2000, it looked very different than it does today.”