

# POSITIVE EXPOSURE

## Immersion in Latino culture brings positive changes

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The 2000 Census confirmed what many Iowa community leaders already knew. The state's Hispanic/Latino population grew by 153 percent making them the largest minority in the state. This demographic change was particularly dramatic in small towns like Postville and Marshalltown. In 1990, Postville had only one resident of Latin origin. Now, there are 469, and they make up 20 percent of the town's total population of 2,273. In Marshalltown, the Latino population grew from 248 to 3,265.

The newcomers' arrival presented many challenges to elected and non-elected community leaders throughout Iowa. Encouraging a relationship of trust between established residents and newcomers and accommodating immigrants in light of their growing importance to local economies were of utmost importance and would take time, patience and a willingness to try new approaches.

One innovative approach to this problem was used by leaders of Marshalltown and Postville. The University of Northern Iowa New Iowans Program invited five key leaders from Postville and Marshalltown to immerse themselves in the culture, economy and history of central Mexico. The mayors of both communities, the Marshalltown police chief, and a city council person and chamber of commerce leader from Postville were invited.

Most of the immigrants in Marshalltown came from the same village —

Villachuato, a small village with a population of about 6,000 in the Michoacan province of Mexico. Much of the surrounding terrain is made of lava beds, and the climate is semi-arid and hot. Many migrants from this community live in Postville as well. By visiting Villachuato, the group hoped to break down barriers and establish trust between the non-Spanish speaking leaders and the Latino community members.

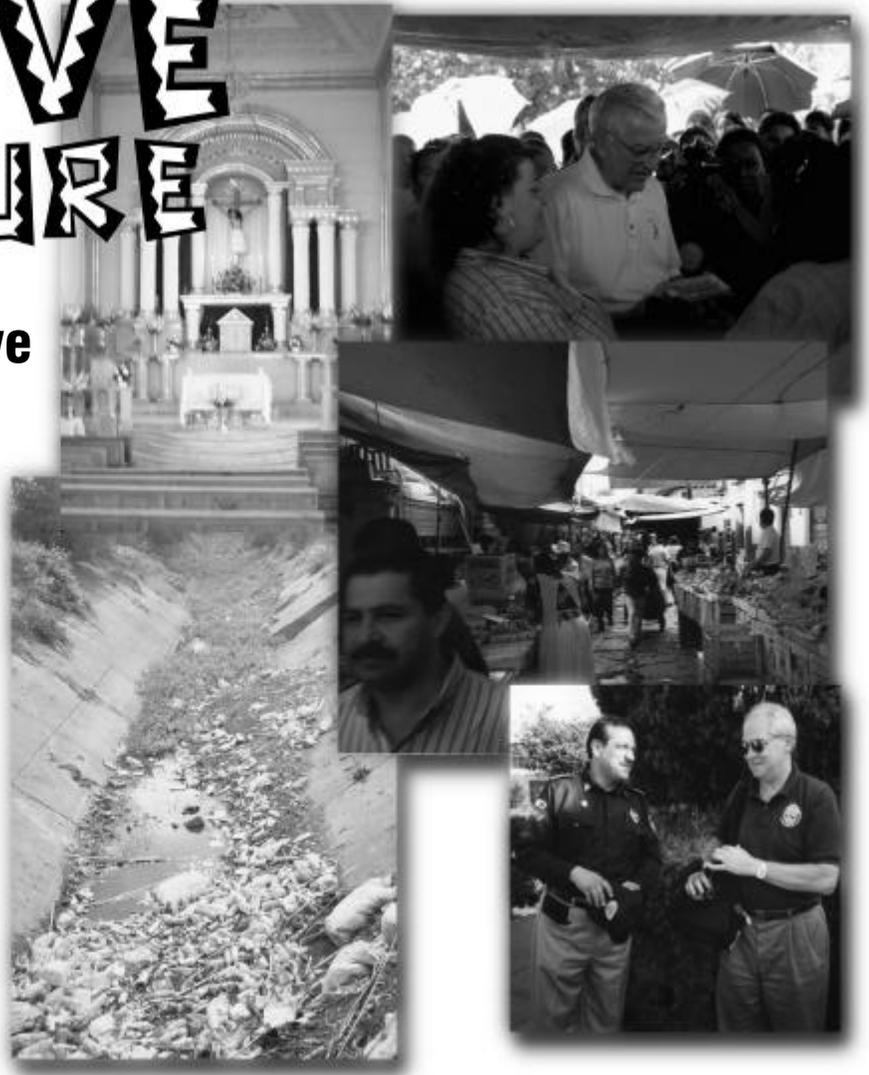
### Community leaders' experiences in Mexico

The experience in Mexico opened the participants' eyes and subsequently changed their perspectives on newcomers in their communities. The journey to Villachuato helped the community leaders develop a full understanding of why Latino immi-

grants came to Iowa communities.

The majority of Villachuato's population — 4,000 people — live in Marshalltown and Postville. In many respects, Marshalltown and Villachuato are unofficial "sister cities," with a growing dependence on each other. Villachuato needs Marshalltown for jobs, incomes and opportunities for children. Marshalltown and Postville need Villachuato for its labor in local plants and to invigorate the local economy and population. In a newspaper essay, the Marshalltown police chief recognized this connection.

"A visit to a village [Villachuato] where there is no agriculture since there is no water for irrigation and no industry revealed that Marshalltown is the primary source of income for the entire village... That tells me that



both Marshalltown and this village are somewhat dependent on each other... Both towns would suffer without the support of the other.”

Further evidence of the village’s connection with Iowa was the observation that one-third to one-half of the cars and pickup trucks had Iowa license plates from Marshall and Allamakee Counties. The group met several people who lived in Iowa most of the year and several children who were born in Marshalltown or other Iowa communities.

The money migrants sent home is another important connection between Iowa and Villachuato. These remittances go to family members for basic needs and to improve houses or build new ones. A good portion of the money also finances community projects. Recently, electricity and running water became available to every household in the village. This infrastructure was funded by jobs from Iowa and elsewhere. In addition, pooled remittances restored the community’s church and town square. The Iowa city leaders saw for themselves the public projects funded by jobs in Iowa. These improvements — including the installation of basic utilities taken for granted in Iowa — would not have been possible without the jobs available in towns like Marshalltown and

Postville.

Latinos go to Marshalltown and Postville to work in local meatpacking plants. These jobs pull Latino immigrants from Villachuato and other places. However, participants visiting Villachuato witnessed the conditions that pushed migrants out of the village and encouraged them to migrate to Iowa. As one of the mayors later explained — life in Villachuato does not so much push people away, but provides few reasons to stay.

Without the availability of jobs in Iowa, participants realized Villachuato would cease to exist. The group saw how jobs from their cities not only provided opportunities for migrants in Iowa, but also for the village in Mexico. The attraction of jobs in Iowa, alone, did not encourage people to leave Villachuato. People simply could not stay in Villachuato.

### Community leaders bring Mexico back home

There was no doubt that the experience left deep impressions. “It’s so hard to put the experience into words because it becomes part of your heart and part of your mind,” said one participant. Another stated, “I think the trip has sensitized me a little bit more to the real plight. When you see the poverty level and the fact that there is nothing for those people to do, no place for them to go, no way for their life to get any better unless the river would magically fill with water again so they could irrigate or develop some type of industry...there is noth-

ing for that town to do. They are living on Marshalltown money.” These fundamentally profound experiences in Mexico became the basis upon which community leaders made changes when they returned to Iowa.

The community leaders taught fellow leaders and residents about the realities of Latino migration and worked to improve relations with Latino residents. The personal contacts made in Villachuato helped begin long-term relations of trust between established residents and newcomers in Marshalltown and Postville. Likewise, institutional changes took place. For example, the Marshalltown police chief began producing a Spanish-language video to welcome Latino newcomers to the community, explain their fundamental rights and responsibilities, make them aware of basic services such as the driver’s license bureau, and to assure all Latinos that they can trust the local police and approach them without fear of deportation. In addition, the Marshalltown police department made plans to hire a Spanish-speaking community liaison officer to work with the Latino community. The New Iowans Program and Postville began developing a multilingual radio station to provide public safety information and news to the community’s diverse ethnic population.

Each of these changes was a direct result of the leaders’ immersion in Mexican culture, economy and history. Leaders now speak with knowledge and experience about the presence and importance of Latinos in their communities and economies. Future study tours with other Iowa leaders are planned. ▲

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*(Opposite page) Clockwise: Marshalltown Mayor Floyd Harthun presents a key to the city of Marshalltown to its unofficial sister city, Villachuato; the market in Patzcuaro, Michoacan; Marshalltown Police Chief Lon Walker shares a moment with a Mexican counterpart; The hacienda irrigation ditch that once provided plentiful water for local crops is now dry; The church restored with money from Iowa migrant workers from Villachuato. Photos provided by the University of Northern Iowa New Iowans Program.*

*Left: Mayor Harthun listens to an elderly Villachuato resident whose son lives and works in Marshalltown. Right: Villachuato residents welcome University of Northern Iowa professor Anne Woodrick. Photos provided by the University of Northern Iowa New Iowans Program.*