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Cinco de Mayo event highlights nonprofits serving Latinx community through pandemic

by Kate Bradshaw / Almanac



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Latino and Latina community leaders talk about the battles and victories they've seen in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in San Mateo County.

Leaders from three nonprofits and educational institutions gathered virtually last Wednesday to celebrate Cinco de Mayo by highlighting the batallas, or battles, and victories, or victories, the Latinx community in San Mateo County has faced and won during the pandemic so far.

Lorena Domínguez, news anchor at Telemundo 48, moderated the online conversation. Panelists Linda Prieto, executive director of Upward Scholars, Rita Mancera, executive director of Puente de la Costa Sur, and Manuel Alejandro Pérez, vice president of student services at Cañada College, discussed the challenges their clients and communities have faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

At Upward Scholars, Prieto explained that many of the immigrant students in the program have experienced significant pandemic-related obstacles in their studies this year. Upward Scholars is a nonprofit that supports adult immigrants from low-income backgrounds attending local community colleges.

Pérez noted that Cañada College is federally recognized as a **minority-serving institution**, given that about 45% of students identify as Latinx and just under 20% identify as Asian or Pacific Islander.

"We take seriously our commitment to racial justice," he added.

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At Puente de la Costa Sur, which serves farm workers, seniors, students and others in unincorporated areas of San Mateo County near the coastside, Mancera explained that the organization listened to its clients to learn about what community members were facing.

They started providing food to community members, spending ten times the amount on food they had the previous year. They also launched a program to offer financial support to undocumented households that didn't receive federal stimulus checks earlier in the pandemic. They partnered to distribute internet hotspots to support students working remotely and advocating for the needs of their community.

One significant win for the organization, Mancera said, was the push in San Mateo County to vaccinate farmworkers.

These farmworkers, some of whom at times have never felt like they've been at the front of the line for much when it's come to the government — particularly around issues of immigration — were able to be at the front of the line to get their vaccines, she said.

The nonprofit is now focusing on a program to support youth, she added. "The parents I know are almost like geniuses at doing a lot with very little. While that is very honorable, it is not equitable," she said.

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At Upward Scholars, the adult students the organization works with were seriously impacted by the pandemic, Prieto said. At least 28 scholars in the program tested positive for COVID-19, she added, and a significant majority reported a loss of employment, housing or food insecurity, increased domestic violence, challenges with overall physical, mental and emotional health or escalated discrimination, Prieto said.

The organization stepped up to help by providing students with laptops and internet access through the Redwood City and San Mateo County libraries and community college networks. Upward Scholars also provided students with food and grocery vouchers, support groups with a bilingual chaplain, and transportation vouchers. It also launched a student safety net fund to raise about \$150,000 to provide students with financial assistance to encourage them to persist in college, according to Prieto.

Pérez said that the number of students enrolling at institutions like Cañada College isn't necessarily down, but there has been a "considerable decline in how many units students are enrolling in during any given semester" during the pandemic.

In addition, enrollment in the college's English as a Second Language program declined significantly before and during the pandemic, falling to 499 students in the 2020-21 school year from 750 in the 2019-20 year.

Two Upward Scholars students shared their experiences during the pandemic.

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Marta Dugarte, an English major, said that the pandemic has been difficult for her because she lost two relatives, and her best friend died recently.

"It's so difficult and sad to face the death, without having the opportunity to feel or give support and hugs," she said. The organization gave her moral support and helped her pay for rent, food and car insurance, she said.

Josue Arevalo, a student at Cañada College, said that he lost his job during the pandemic, but that Upward Scholars provided him with gift cards, food boxes, tutoring support and access to a WhatsApp group in which members share their experiences in an ongoing conversation.

"Information is power and we know that resources are available to help us overcome some of the batallas we're facing during this pandemic," Domínguez said.

Watch the full discussion [here](#).

Kate Bradshaw reports food news and feature stories all over the Peninsula, from south of San Francisco to north of San José. Since she began working with Embarcadero Media in 2015, she's reported on everything from Menlo Park's City Hall politics to Mountain View's education system. She has won awards from the California News Publishers Association for her coverage of local government, elections and land use reporting. [Read more >>](#)

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