

Abriendo Caminos - Finding Our Path

Partnering with the local Latino community and other West Marin agencies, West Marin Community Services sponsors *Abriendo Caminos*. This program engages and empowers, while addressing the cultural divide and working toward the goal of being one community.

For over 35 years, dedicated agencies and individuals have accomplished much in bringing the local Latino population, often isolated on rural ranches, out of the shadows. The bridges built through these efforts, as well as the collaboration and respect on all sides, resulted in *Abriendo Caminos*, a model program which has expanded to include the West Marin areas of Point Reyes, Tomales, Bolinas, and the San Geronimo Valley.

An important first step, empowerment trainings, imbues the Latino participants with a strong sense of self-respect, a realization of the courage it takes to emigrate, and a deeper connection to each other's experiences.

The Anglo community prepared wonderful dinners for the workshops, showing support and establishing their stake in the process; the Latinos declared, "It feels special to have the Anglos cooking for us!"

Participants shared tears and laughter and a deep bond through the pain and celebration of their stories. All agreed that they want to move toward active community participation and are stepping up to engage more fully, including in local governance systems and non-profit agencies.

The groups identified key issues of labor rights, housing, education, cultural events, and immigration. Additional events and trainings have been held in these areas, with a particular focus on immigration since 2016. Working with the heartfelt support of our whole community including West Marin Standing Together, Canal Alliance, and others, we are sponsoring "Know Your Rights" events, developing a Rapid Response Team, offering meetings with immigration attorneys, and helping to cope with stress and fear.

While continuing these trainings, the next step for the program will create a space for community-wide conversations to identify what systems and cultural aspects we can shift together. With these shifts, we can change the perception of who we are and find pathways to promote equity and mutual respect.

"*Abriendo Caminos* me fortalece personalmente, me da armas para enfrentar los problemas en mi trabajo y en la comunidad".

"*Abriendo Caminos* gives me strength, and gives me the tools to solve problems at work and in my community." – Miguel Martinez, Sr.

"Hoy podré dormir en paz."

"Today I will sleep in peace." – Participant in *Families: Know Your Rights* workshop