

Building Bridges of Hospitality: Addressing Communication Barriers among Non-English Speakers in Walker County

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According to the United States Census Bureau, 2.6%-3.2% of Walker County residents are Hispanic. But in a mobile home park just outside Jasper city limits, the story is radically different. At least two-thirds of the residents in this park are Hispanic. This community has a reputation of being crime-ridden, dirty, and almost uninhabitable. The mobile homes are falling apart, along with the roads. Yet, when you look closely, you see families who are grateful to have a place to live, hopeful to achieve their American dream.

Most of these Hispanic residents are immigrants, which means English is not their first language, but sometimes Spanish is not their first language either. Walking through the neighborhood, I met several residents who spoke only K'iche', an indigenous language of Guatemala. One man I met was speaking Achi, another indigenous language from Guatemala. In Central Alabama, it can be difficult enough for English speakers to communicate with their Spanish speaking neighbors. The challenges posed by indigenous tongues like Achi and K'iche' present an even greater communication barrier.

The enormity of that obstacle cannot be overstated. After all, communication is vital to life. It is essential to grocery shopping, healthcare, education, housing, employment, and even friendship. When considering those in need in any community, it is crucial that they have a way

to express what they need or how they can be helped. Without these means, the needs of underserved residents go unmet; consequently, they must scramble to make it work on their own.

Being able to communicate in your native language is a right, but often it is a privilege that few can experience. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act addresses adopting strategies to make services and programs accessible for those with limited English proficiency. The Alabama Language Access Coalition (ALAC) works to strengthen awareness and implementation of this policy in Alabama's public and private sectors. Strides are being made to facilitate critical avenues for communication, but there is still much work to be done. Angelica Melendez, from the Hispanic Coalition of Alabama, emphasized that everyone deserves to be able to communicate in the language that they prefer to use.

Some charitable or governmental organizations in Walker County have access to Spanish-English translation services. Others rely on smartphone translators to make it through simple phone calls. But neither of these approaches works for those who speak only indigenous languages that Google Translate doesn't support. These residents are left struggling to communicate. But the demand for human translators of languages like Achi and K'iche' is much greater than Walker County community assets can meet. A few years ago, Lucia Kilpatrick, who was working as a translator in a clinic, delayed leaving her job for nursing school because it was such a struggle for her employer to find a replacement. Now that she has graduated, Kilpatrick

acknowledges that the clinic is more equipped with translators and technology, even if only slightly.

Similarly, the education system in Walker County is overwhelmed by Hispanic children, who rely on English-Learning (EL) teachers to make it through the day. As a JOIP Intern, I got to participate in Jasper City school registration for EL families and was impressed by how well-prepared instructors are to serve these students and their families. On the flip side, there is a significant need for additional EL teachers, and no one available to fill these positions in the area. Often, to fulfill the pressing need to help students, EL teachers are hired who speak only English, which does little to address the gap between students and teachers. Even with the best of intentions, these EL teachers cannot help Spanish or indigenous language speakers.

Many families rely on their older children who have grown up speaking English as their translators. But this poses problems in some settings. For example, Kilpatrick mentioned that in the context of healthcare, it can be awkward when children must ask their parents personal questions and then answer on their behalf. Yet these adults do not feel that they have a better, or another, option.

The students from immigrant communities in Walker County who succeed are driven and determined to learn English. One young girl, named Melissa, shared her story with me over a Chick-fil-a breakfast. She came to the US from Guatemala in the middle of fifth grade, and she

did not know any English. Her first few months of school were discouraging, both academically and socially. When reflecting on her transition to the US, Melissa said “it’s hard, it’s really hard.”

That first summer, living in the mobile home park, Melissa watched endless YouTube videos on her dad’s phone and played with toys meant for babies to help her learn English. She was determined, and she knew, “If I don’t do it, no one is going to do it for me.” She entered sixth grade a few months later, confident in her ability to speak and understand English. But Melissa’s experience is not the case for many students in her community. Some of her peers have been going to school for years and still barely know English.

Melissa’s persistence in learning English has made her an irreplaceable asset in the Jasper and mobile home park community. Melissa can efficiently translate between English and Spanish and K’iche’, and she can stumble through conversations in a few other indigenous dialects. Not only can she help her family during medical and legal appointments, but Melissa has also worked with the county sheriff, hospitals, courts, teachers, and more. Melissa is a vital resource to community members and local agencies—even though she is only sixteen years old. She credits her accomplishments to how her parents empowered her, saying, “I’m really glad to them, that I’m at this age and doing a lot of things.”

All the work that Melissa does means that a lot of eyes are on her. She has been featured in the local news for her excellent work and dedication to translating. Countless people rely on Melissa as their translator because businesses in the area are not equipped to do it themselves.

Countless others look up to her as a role model and the epitome of the 'American dream.' But others are watching for her to make a mistake so they can prey on it. At the mobile home park, residents see Melissa as the only person who can help or teach them. Because of the confidence these people have, they constantly ask more and more of her. As a consequence of all this attention, Melissa feels substantial pressure from friends, family, and strangers alike. It is a lot for a high-school student to deal with, but she walks through life with poise, grace, and humility.

The good news is that Melissa is not the only one who can help the community in this way. Jasper Area Family Services Center and the Literacy Council of Walker County have literacy and English-learning programs for people of all ages. Beville State Community College has also started offering English-learning classes. Although progress has not been quick, Walker County and the City of Jasper are starting to recognize how to best serve non-English speakers in their communities.

Another resource now attuned to the needs of Walker County's Hispanic population is the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama, an organization that seeks to support Hispanic individuals and communities throughout the state. Many communities are not fortunate enough to have someone like Melissa. Even so, Melissa is just one person, and a teenager at that, and she must see to her family's needs as well as her own. It is encouraging to see an organization focus its efforts on the Hispanic population, as these communities are so often overlooked and underserved.

The reality is everyone can do their part to support the Hispanic residents in their area. First, show compassion to those learning English rather than getting frustrated or impatient. Learning English is challenging, and it is easy to take for granted that English is your first language. For English learners, they are learning a second (or maybe even third or fourth) language. Recognize that learning English demonstrates that someone is intelligent, not the opposite.

Being spoken to and understood in your “heart” language is more meaningful than you might realize. Take some time to learn simple phrases in Spanish (or whatever is the most common second language in your community). Devoting a few minutes to learning “good morning,” “thank you,” or “how are you?” is as much about hospitality as it is language acquisition: a little bit of effort goes a long way.

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