News
Ministry

Sr. Veronica Fajardo, who provides counseling services at no cost to clients of Holy Cross Ministries, speaks with a client. (Courtesy of Lauren Fields/Holy Cross Ministries)

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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's new series, "Welcoming the Stranger," takes a closer look at women religious working with immigrants and migrants. While we cover this topic often, this series will feature sisters and organizations networking to better serve those crossing borders, global migration trends and the topic of immigration in the upcoming U.S. presidential election.*

Many would dub Park City, Utah, a resort-town paradise. With two top ski resorts, chic restaurants and a celebrated arts scene as the host of the Sundance Film Festival, this popular mountain town attracts 4 million tourists a year.

But for many members of the town's hospitality industry and their families, daily life isn't a vacation, it's a struggle.

With Hispanics or Latinos composing roughly one-fifth of the city's population of 8,457, the majority work in the tourism and service sectors. Predominantly immigrants, they grapple with a litany of hardships, including abusive situations, immigration issues, wide-ranging health concerns and more.

"That's what we call the 'invisible part of the community,' " said Sr. Veronica Fajardo, a Park City resident. "They're providing services for the community, and they have a lot of needs."

This harsh reality extends outside Park City, too, with many immigrants facing similar challenges in Utah's rural areas.

Fortunately, many receive support from Fajardo and Sr. Mary Ann Pajakowski of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Working with Holy Cross Ministries — a Salt Lake City-based nonprofit created by the Sisters of the Holy Cross to aid Utah's marginalized community members — both dedicate their very full days to helping this underserved population.

"For the Sisters of the Holy Cross, that's the reason we came to Utah in 1875 in the first place, was to meet the needs of immigrants," said Fajardo, 48. "I always feel really pleased that I'm standing on the shoulders of other women."

Sr. Mary Ann Pajakowski, recently retired as education director for Holy Cross Ministries, gives a presentation about the nonprofit's efforts. (Courtesy of Holy Cross Ministries)

With degrees in social work, public administration and teaching, Fajardo wields a broad skillset to assist clients of her nonprofit work.

Holy Cross Ministries has brokered memorandums of understanding with numerous organizations, allowing Fajardo to provide counseling, supportive programs and additional assistance in many settings.

These include the Peace House women's shelter in Park City, as well as a high school and a health clinic in the more rural Heber City — all of which Fajardo visits every week.

Her full-time efforts, supported by her "bilingual, bicultural" approach, allows Holy Cross Ministries to serve a wide range of community members, said Holy Cross Ministries' CEO, Emmie Gardner.

"Whether it be construction, hospitality or food services, we saw clearly through COVID that many essential workers in Park City were our clients," Gardner said. "Heber has also become a new location for our clients, as Park City became unaffordable post-COVID, even for families sharing rent for an apartment."

Fajardo notes that 90% of clients she serves are immigrants.

"It's never a dull moment," she said. "When you start responding, you start realizing there are so many needs, and so many different kinds of needs."

Sr. Veronica Fajardo works with a child at Holy Cross Ministries' School Readiness Program in Park City, Utah. (Courtesy of Holy Cross Ministries)

Providing vital resources

Many immigrants in Utah face daunting obstacles, which Fajardo feels strong compassion for, after immigrating to the U.S. from Nicaragua when she was 8.

"Many are fleeing from serious abuse or crime," she said. "Many brought their families from Mexico because they don't want them to be recruited by the drug cartels."

Fajardo helps connect clients with every available resource to forge a better life, including basic essentials from numerous nonprofits. She also advocates for those facing exploitative working conditions in Park City, with the help of Holy Cross Ministries' legal and immigration departments.

"Many times, if their immigration status is not finalized, they just [accept poor working conditions]. They're just afraid of not having a job, and need to support their families," she said.

As many immigrant youths have experienced "a lot of traumatic issues," Fajardo said, she provides counseling for numerous junior and high school students. She also guides them on navigating their lives in a new country, including help with pursuing citizenship for themselves and their families.

"It's a combination of helping them heal, and talking about the process of assimilation," Fajardo said.

Sr. Mary Ann Pajakowski romps in the snow with students of the School Readiness Program created by Holy Cross Ministries to support Latino families in Park City, Utah. (Courtesy of Miriam Garcia/Holy Cross Ministries)

Hailing from over 20 years of teaching, Pajakowski has dedicated herself to improving education for Latinos in Park City since the late '90s, when the town first began seeing an influx of immigrants.

"A lot of these children whose parents came in the '90s were coming into kindergarten and first grade not speaking English, and the schools just weren't prepared," said Pajakowski, 77, who remains active with Holy Cross Ministries after recently retiring as education director.

Many Latino students in Park City at the time struggled academically, Pajakowski added, yet their families couldn't afford the district's after-school program.

To "shore up the gap," she worked with Holy Cross Ministries to create an after-school program at no cost for the Latino community.

"[Our goal was] creating access for families and helping parents to advocate for their families," she said, adding that the nonprofit also guided Latino families on improving their children's academic performance.

Pajakowski further spearheaded the nonprofit's summer program for Latino students, garnering over 90 participants, with Park City School District eventually inviting the program to operate at two schools.

"They worked with us and we worked with them, and that community partnership was just key," she said.

Pajakowski also delved into Holy Cross Ministries' grassroots efforts to create a preschool program targeting Latino families.

Sr. Mary Ann Pajakowski teaches preschool children at the School Readiness Program operated by Holy Cross Ministries in Park City, Utah. (Courtesy of Holy Cross Ministries)

"We started to do classes in apartment buildings," she said of the School Readiness Program, which has evolved to now operate out of donated space at a local church. "A family would volunteer their apartment, and teachers would come in with a folding table and supplies."

As many Latino parents couldn't afford child care, Pajakowski also helped Holy Cross Ministries partner with other nonprofits to create a daycare center with a sliding-fee scale. Operated today by a separate nonprofit — and with three sites — the center provides "a huge relief" for parents working long hours, she said.

Before the center's creation, Pajakowski noted, many Latino families relied on a few mothers to babysit, with one even watching 16 children a day.

"We really just tried to get to know the world they lived in, and meet them where they were," she said.

Addressing abuse

Many clients Fajardo serves today, predominantly women, experience violence at home or at work.

She provides counseling for many such women at Peace House in Park City and the health clinic in Heber City. She further helps these clients coordinate with various organizations to obtain rental assistance, health care support, legal aid for restraining orders and more.

"Teaming up with other agencies has been really helpful," she said.

Fajardo focuses on nurturing women's confidence after escaping abusive relationships, she added, encouraging them to take small steps like learning to drive and creating their own bank accounts.

"When I begin to notice that they discover the resilience that's been there the whole time but has been dormant," she said, "for me to see that is so life-changing and transforming."

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One client, a 45-year-old woman originally from Mexico, said she struggled with stress, depression and panic attacks as a result of domestic abuse.

After going through counseling with Fajardo, she said, she now feels more mentally and emotionally stable.

"I feel that I am no longer living the nightmare I once lived," said the client, who was brought to the U.S. by the father of her children and whose identity is being withheld for safety. "I now recognize I always had great potential as a person, but I was lost. I love myself more than I did before."

She wouldn't have made this progress without Fajardo, she added.

"[Fajardo] has shared her time, her dedication, her support," the client said. "She is also very empathic, and I believe that it is a gift she has."

Fajardo strives to prevent future generations from reproducing such violence.

Her weekly Building Peace with Children program in Park City teaches peacebuilding skills to 3- and 4-year-olds in a manner they can understand.

"We teach that we listen to each other, and that in building a community we support one another, instead of fighting," she said.

Fajardo also hosts peace-focused parent support groups on Zoom, with attendees hailing from Park City, Heber City and other Utah communities.

With many immigrants afraid of speaking to the police, she invites a police officer to address these groups, so clients can feel comfortable approaching law enforcement in times of need.

"Clients often come from countries where you never trust law enforcement," Fajardo said. "[This police officer explains] that 'these are the services the police can provide. You don't have to be fearful.' "

Sr. Mary Ann Pajakowski enjoys a silly moment with preschool children at the School Readiness Program operated by Holy Cross Ministries in Park City, Utah. (Courtesy of Miriam Garcia/Holy Cross Ministries)

To promote health and wellness among Latino families, Pajakowski also helped develop a Parents as Teachers program in Park City.

Currently serving 60 families with young children, this initiative works with families to establish and meet goals for their children's growth and health care.

"This is to ensure a child has a good start in life," Pajakowski said.

Fajardo also seeks to raise awareness of mental health issues among Latinos.

"In the Latino community, mental health is not something people are excited about. People are used to it being a taboo," she said.

She works with a coalition of nonprofits to put on events in Park City that educate the Latino community about identifying and treating numerous mental health issues.

"The big piece we continue to discover is how connected mental health is to our physical health," she said, noting that many clients describe symptoms they don't realize stem from depression and panic attacks.

Fajardo and Pajakowski's efforts embody the indelible impact the Sisters of the Holy Cross have had in Utah throughout the past 150 years, Gardner said.

"I cannot even begin to tell you the impact that Sisters Mary Ann and Veronica have had in our Utah communities," she said. "I truly believe Utah would not be what it is today without the ministries of the sisters."

This story appears in the **Welcoming the Stranger** feature series. View the full series.