

Building Community and Hope in South Texas

Victor Rodriguez and his wife Francisca lived in a small cinder-block house, sharing one tiny bedroom with their three young daughters. When Francisca gave birth to quadruplets in November 2000, the family's situation became desperate. Through a local home-building program, Proyecto Azteca, Rodriguez was able to build a new home for his family of nine.

"The house we used to live in was old, with holes in the walls. It had water leaks all over the roof except for the one room where we slept," Rodriguez says. "During winters, we sealed that room to protect ourselves from the cold and in the summer the house was extremely hot. Now, our house is a palace compared to the one we used to live in before. We don't suffer from the heat or cold. The experience of building my own house has drastically changed my life. I am very proud of giving my family a new home, and it is satisfying seeing the fruit of my own hands. My wife and children are happier, and they feel safer. I just see it in their eyes."

Proyecto Azteca, in San Juan, TX, helps families to build homes. But more importantly, it builds hope and community. It has enabled numerous families to overcome the despair of abject poverty and begin to build assets, a key step along the road to self-sufficiency and family economic success (FES).

Founded in 1991, Proyecto Azteca serves residents of the "colonias" – poor, isolated rural communities along the Texas-Mexico border – located east of McAllen, TX, approximately one hour inland from the Gulf of Mexico.

Residents are primarily migrant workers who are employed in seasonal jobs harvesting farm crops, traveling with construction crews, or laboring at meat-packing plants in the Midwest. Often forced to leave their families behind for months at a time, they work hard, in demanding jobs often shunned by others, yet make barely enough money to survive. Their low incomes don't allow them to qualify for most traditional housing programs. Consequently, many colonia families live in dilapidated structures made of materials salvaged from abandoned buildings, with no indoor plumbing or utility connections.

Through Proyecto Azteca, colonia residents can build and buy their own new homes. Working with a trainer who supervises the building process, families can construct a three-bedroom, one bath, approximately 1000 sq-ft. house. Homes are constructed in groups of 6–10, with families working cooperatively to build all the structures in their group at one time. Trainers are involved for the first 80 percent of the process, then families take complete responsibility for the finishing and "appearance" work. Classes teach them how to finish and paint walls, as well as to install cabinets, trim and linoleum. Children work alongside their parents in doing the painting and final touches.

After the house is completed and the utilities hooked up, the family begins to make regular house payments, which are not more than 10 percent of their monthly income. Insurance is part of their loan package.

A Proyecto Azteca home can be completed in about six weeks, although most families are finishing early. Almost 100 homes are built each year. Currently there is a waiting list of around 4000 families, with their level of priority determined by need.

Three years ago, the Alvarado family nearly lost their nine-year-old son, Elias, to foster care. Elias had been burned over 70 percent of his body in an accident, resulting in the amputation of both of his lower legs and requiring multiple surgeries. At the time, his migrant-worker family was living in a rented shack with no roof, no running water and no electricity. The Texas Department of Regulatory and Protective Services advised the Alvarados that unless their housing situation improved dramatically, Elias would have to be moved to a foster home. Proyecto Azteca recognized the desperate situation the Alvarados were in, granted them priority status, and the family was able to construct a wheelchair-accessible house that meets Elias' special needs. The new home has vastly improved life for Elias and his siblings and parents as well.

David Arizmendi, one of the founders of Proyecto Azteca, sees homeownership as the first step towards building family economic success and a better life. "We have learned that the ultimate benefit is a change of mindset. The process – how we get the house – is as important as actually getting the house. It's not enough to build assets, we must give people the opportunity to think and believe differently. Engagement and self-help are the keys."

Arizmendi says that a transformation from self-interest to community awareness can take place along the road to homeownership. "When people are in a survival mode, they can think only of themselves. That's natural. But when they make progress in their lives, through working with other families and building their own homes, they transition to a broader awareness. Participation, involvement, doing for themselves....this allows them to move to the next step. They begin to think collectively and become an advocate for community."

Victor Rodriguez understands that emotional connection and transformation process. "Being totally involved in the building of my own house was, and is, a very special feeling. It's special because I know that in every part of the house, in every piece of wood, every nail, every paint stroke, every floor tile – there is the sweat of my brow, the product of my hard work, and the fragrance of my hopes and dreams. A part of me will be there forever. I am very proud that I actually built my own house. It's a very special feeling, and it's a great sense of security. Now I spend more time with my family. We are closer, our lives have become enriched."

When families join the homebuilding program, they automatically become members of La Union de Pueblo Entero (LUPE). LUPE was established by the late Cesar Chavez in the 1970's to work alongside the other entities that make up the Farm Worker Movement.

As a Community Union, LUPE responds to the needs of the community by assembling a strong coalition of organizations focused on service to the low-income community. LUPE serves as the umbrella organization for Proyecto Azteca, the homebuilding program and Azteca Community Loan Fund, which provides home mortgages and home-based business loans as well as IDA programs and homeownership and financial literacy classes. LUPE operates four community centers in South Texas which offer a range of self-development classes in addition to many social and economic services. Annual dues are \$35 per person or \$50 per family. The membership fees help support the community centers, which are given two years to become self-sustaining. Each center's services are individualized to meet the needs of residents in its neighborhood.

In addition to membership fees, LUPE has two other sources of revenue: tax preparation programs, which charge \$30 for filing a return and claiming the EITC (earned income tax credit), and immigration services, which charge affordable fees for service.

Juanita Valdez-Cox, Texas Director of LUPE, describes the core values of their organizations as similar to those of the other components of the Farm Workers' Movement – innovation, *a sí se puede*, "can-do", attitude, and progress through membership. "Proyecto Azteca and the Loan Fund share an economic role for LUPE," says Valdez-Cox. "But Proyecto Azteca plays an even more important role as a catalyst for community building. When people work together to construct a group of homes, they develop strong ties to each of the other families and a common interest in strengthening their community."

Like Arizmendi, Valdez-Cox emphasizes the critical importance of self-development in creating lasting change. "We have adopted self-help as the only method by which we operate," she says. "While the outcome is frequently less predictable, we have learned that people learn more valuable and lasting lessons when they actually participate instead of merely observe.

"LUPE serves the colonias by responding to the need for social and economic services like immigration assistance and access to discounted professional and retail services; by investing in building critical skills through a program of literacy, ESL, GED and citizenship classes; and working to transform the communities from a position of subservience to one of power. New members often start with one aspect of what we offer, but they quickly learn about the full range of our programs and how they can help build better lives."

Traditions and rituals are important in the colonias, as they are all across Mexican culture. They create common touchstones for families that have often felt isolated and forgotten. Having their new house blessed is a powerful milestone in the life of a new homeowner. Five or six house blessings are held each month, along with group birthday celebrations.

Additionally, Arizmendi has created a new twist on an old tradition, to appeal to colonia children – the self-help superhero, "Super Colonia". Borrowing from the popular masked

Lucha Libre (free wrestling) characters, who are either good or evil, the masked Super Colonia character appears before groups of community children to share lessons on self-respect, the importance of school, the power of the individual, and social justice. He is the manifestation of the "yes we can" attitude that permeates everything Proyecto Azteca and LUPE do.

"Our home-building program must become self-sustaining," says Arizmendi. "We need to have a \$10 million portfolio in order to reach that point. We are already at \$7.5 million. We expect to reach the \$10 million goal in the next few years – it's critical that we do that.

"We began with an idea, then developed Proyecto Azteca to bring that idea to life -- through one house, then two houses, and now 100 houses each year. In the same way, we are developing community, by bringing people together, teaching them to collectively address their problems, and developing leaders. It's not about giving something to people, but encouraging them to take on the challenge and navigate the system. As I say, no one is coming to save you – you must take the responsibility to build your house and build your life."

Proyecto Azteca was recently selected as an honoree of the Casey Foundation's 2003 Families Count: The National Honors Program. The Families Count program honors outstanding initiatives across the country that connect families to the resources, supports and opportunities they need to thrive in tough neighborhoods. See [Families Count: The National Honors Program](http://128.242.238.174/familiescount/honorees.2003/) (Link to <http://128.242.238.174/familiescount/honorees.2003/>)