

HISPANIC IMPACT

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Nurturing and Building Resilience

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Faith leaders are a pillar in most communities; they provide support, information, access, guidance and that much needed sense of belonging. For the Hispanic/Latino community in Ohio, these leaders play a crucial role; often they interpret mainstream society and they help people learn how to adjust and make Ohio their home. This month we talked to Pastor Rolando Rojas of the Spanish Evangelical Church in Youngstown, OH to share about his work, hope for the future, and how he and other faith leaders are working towards strong Hispanic/Latino communities.



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Could you tell us a bit about yourself, and your background?

I am a Pastor at Spanish Evangelical Church in Youngstown, OH. I arrived in Youngstown in 2000 having left The Bronx, New York. I was born in Ellsworth, Kansas, and I am of Mexican decent. My parents lived in Michigan but came from Mexico, so that makes me a third generation Hispanic in the United States.



Who motivates you?

One of the people that has motivated me to go further in my career is a person that I met in 1986 and is currently the person I am married to, my wife Ruth Rojas. She is a go-getter, loves life and to help others, and she has been a tremendous motivator for me over the years that we have shared together. She encourages me, gives me advice and ideas, and corrects me when needed. She is the one person that has encouraged me to do all that I can and sometimes to stretch myself as much as I can.

What lead you to become a faith leader in your community?

I come from a broken home, my parents separated and divorced when I was around nine to ten years old. Then, we left my hometown and moved to another city where we stayed until I was 16 years old. I left Kansas for Ohio where my mother was living. I was living a rough life style of drugs, alcohol – that whole ‘rock-n-roll’ scene. When I arrived in Ohio, I saw that my mother had started to attend church and become more involved. Her change and involvement drove me to change, and I became a born again Christian. Because of this influence and impact, I made changes in my life. I left the drugs, alcohol and that entire scene behind. There was a tremendous turn around in my life and I wanted to share that with others, which became a calling to preach the word of God. That is what lead me to become a pastor almost 30 years ago.

As a faith leader, what do you find most challenging right now?

One of the greatest challenges I have seen in 30 years as a pastor and 45 years as a Christian has been the deterioration of morals in our society. I have seen a decrease in people’s standards and greater attacks to others because of the faith they chose to follow. It has become much more difficult to share the gospel, but not impossible, just more challenging. As a minister or a church group, we are required to reflect on our values and the strategies to convey those values to society today. The biggest challenge and question is, How can the church engage the young people that are exposed in society to different value systems, spiritual challenges and choices that pulls them in different directions? The answer to this question is something we are always seeking.

How have your goals evolved as a faith leader?

I remember as a young person when I first started to attend church about all the positive ideas and the lives that were being changed. My calling is to spread the gospel. Faith provides an avenue to center your life, to have guidance and direction. I am thankful for what God has done with my life and I want to share the comfort that a spiritual based life brings with others.

For someone who might be embarking on a similar journey, what lessons do you have to share in preparing future faith leaders and what advice would you like to give them?

My advice would be to find a mentor. Find someone that will be able to help you in your faith walk. It is very difficult to do it alone, especially when you have a lot of questions, concerns and doubts. There are going to be many challenges coming that would possibly make you wonder about your faith. The best thing in faith and outside of faith that anyone can do is to find a mentor, someone who can help you in times of doubt and crises. These persons will help you not only on spiritual matters, but they can also assist in your career path, relationships and other areas of your life.



Traci L. Cain Photography



As a faith Leader, what concerns you about the future?

Faith leaders need to continue to work to engage society, or the world at large, to avoid young generations suffering from lack of spiritual guidance. We need to share our faith and make an impact in our communities. It is not enough just to have faith and not to share it with others. We are body, mind and spirit. As such, we are called to help, cherish and support each other, and this is something that is missing in our divided society.

What gives you hope for the community?

Here in Youngstown we are seeing a tremendous effort to build support systems and fellowship. We have pastors of every denomination that are coming together and are praying, holding dialogues together, and brainstorming about how we can be of greater impact in our community and city. We are more in touch, engaged, and are using the resources necessary to support the spiritual and material needs of our communities. Therefore, I am encouraged to see all the different churches working together.

Could you tell me about a project or accomplishment that you consider the most significant in your career as a faith leader?

I have been able to work with other pastors here in Youngstown for the past six years from two different denominations and cultures; an Anglo/Caucasian pastor with Pentecostal church, and a Hispanic pastor with a Baptist church. We have been able to come together in the past six years to establish an organization called NOW Youngstown, a non-profit organization that has allowed us to work with the local police department and other city officials through a program called Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (C.I.R.V). Together, we were able hold 20 outreach events throughout 2018, partially funded

through C.I.R.V., with the message to stop violence. We take the message to the streets while offering free food, entertainment, and resources. We are bringing the message that as faith leaders, we want to help the entire individual and we have been able to do this for six years.

What is next for you and your faith group?

I see the Spanish Evangelical Church and myself moving up to a new level of leadership in the city. With several other pastors, we made history in Youngstown by forming its first Hispanic Pastors Fellowship Association, which started in 2018. We have united based on common goals while putting aside our differences. We are creating a voice in the city of Youngstown where one did not exist before. We hope that the Hispanic Pastor Fellowship will become that voice for the Hispanic community in Youngstown on every level. The Spanish Evangelical Church has given me the opportunity to be a major part of this group, which will allow us a bigger voice in advocacy, activism, leadership, service and engagement. Indeed, this type of engagement is something the Hispanic community in Youngstown has not experienced before.



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