



All Things Ignatian



Working with the Maya Community: Health Assessment Study

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The Maya developed a flourishing civilization between 250 and 900 A.D. Their traditional homelands are in Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and parts of Mexico and El Salvador. In Guatemala alone, the 21 linguistically different Maya groups – such as Quiché, K'aqchikel, Q'anjob'al, Qetchí, Chuj, and Mam – represent about 60% of the total population.

Mayas in Omaha

Among the different Maya groups that have been settling in the US Midwest, the Q'anjob'al group seems to be the largest in Omaha. Most come from the community of Jolom Conob, which is on top of a mountain where in the pre-colonial era Maya Priests gathered to pray. Jolom Conob is now known as Santa Eulalia, in the Department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Q'anjob'al speakers, as did other migrant Mayas, started coming to the United States in larger numbers during the 1980s, largely because of the civil war in their country. The first families arrived in Omaha, Nebraska probably in the mid 1990s. Omaha was attractive because of reasonable living costs and available jobs. Many Mayas in Omaha work in construction, meat-packing plants, restaurants, hotels, and health care and educational institutions. According to unofficial sources, Omaha has the 4th largest concentration of Mayas in the USA.

When Mayas arrived in Omaha, they established a Catholic prayer group that met in the homes of its members every Saturday to pray and reflect over the readings used in the Catholic mass. In 2007, this faith-based group established an organization to address cultural, educational, economic, spiritual, health, and other concerns of the local Maya.



Mayan research team members and youth

The Comunidad Maya Pixan Ixim was formed. The name “Pixan Ixim,” translated as the spirit or the soul of corn, was chosen because of its central place in the Maya cosmology and worldview.

Participatory Action Research

Comunidad Maya Pixan Ixim approached faculty at Creighton and the College of Saint Mary to assist them with designing a health assessment study. Following the Participatory Action Research model, in which all stakeholders collaborate on equal terms, we jointly designed with the Maya community a study exploring the health needs of the community.

The ongoing health assessment study would have never come to fruition if both the Maya community and the academic community had not already been mutually involved, trusted each other, and had the opportunity to discuss together issues of common interest. We argue that the existence of “communicative spaces” is crucial for the development of community-based participatory studies.

We hope that this study will not only document health concerns and issues of the Mayas living in Omaha but also help make the Maya community voice heard in the city of Omaha and inform programs intended to alleviate the community's health needs. This collaborative study of Maya and university researchers should be a solid step toward meeting the community's health needs and building its capacity to address health issues faced by members of the community.



Maya research team members during training at Creighton University

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