

May 21, 2024

When One Door Closes, Empathy Opens Another

By Janay S. Riley

The Wellness Center and Clínica Romero have each been community pillars in East Los Angeles (LA) for over a decade. Separately, they provide compassionate health care and wellness activities. Over the years, they have collaborated on projects to increase their collective impact. Now, they're joining forces again for the Community Public Health Team (CPHT) project under a shared name, "Alcanza las Alturas (Reaching for the Heights)," to provide health education, clinical care, and resources in their community. I recently spoke with a seasoned promotora, Maria Ponce DeLeon, to learn more about her experiences and hopes for this project. Maria Monroy, a student intern at the Wellness Center, joined my conversation with Maria Ponce DeLeon to provide translation.

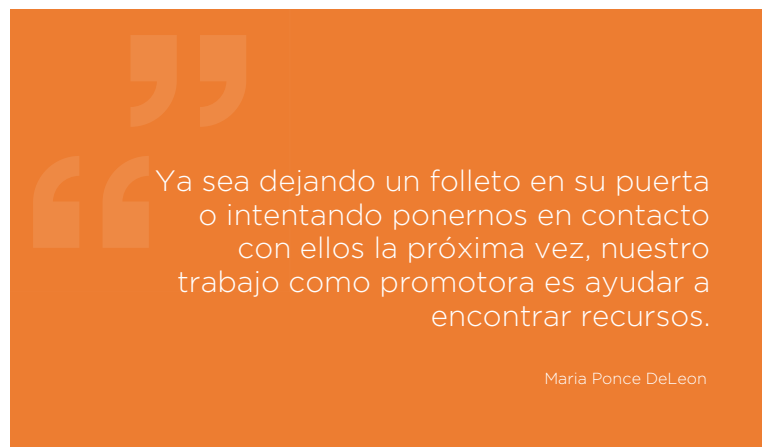


Maria Ponce DeLeon (left) shares experiences working as a promotora with Janay S. Riley (center) and Maria Monroy (right).

Maria has lived in East LA for over 30 years and first encountered Clínica Romero as a patient. She had a positive experience with clinical staff and when she learned of their community engagement work, she was inspired to get involved. Previously a community organizer for an elementary school, Maria was comfortable with community engagement work. She saw an opportunity to build on conversations she had as a community organizer and learn about additional resources for health. When she joined Clínica Romero she was able to do just that, provide more in-depth health education and connect patients to needed resources. In the 10 years that she's been working with Clínica Romero, she's seen the impact of her role. Patients have expressed gratitude to Maria for linking them to resources that they didn't know of but that saved their life. One reason she is so excited about CPHT is the chance to connect more community members to lifesaving support.

The work of a promotora is challenging. People often decline services, especially if they don't believe it will benefit them. But Maria steps into this role with grace and empathy. She believes in meeting people where they are most comfortable, whether that is in their home, a local school, a park, or a laundromat. As someone living in East LA herself, Maria recognizes some needs, but she's ready to learn from the new people she meets and concerns they raise. She's prepared to handle hesitation with empathy. Maria said through her interpreter, "We are unaware of the personal challenges the people we interact with are facing and we must still do our best to share information.

Whether it's leaving a flyer on their door or attempting to reach out the next time, our job as a promotora is to help them find resources." She knows a closed door today doesn't mean it will always be closed and no two community members are alike. By starting each interaction with empathy and a positive mindset, she hopes to build trust and eventually provide the needed services. This work is too important to give up and a closed door isn't going to discourage her from continuing to try.



Maria Ponce DeLeon