

Community Connections: Keeping Culture Alive

Utah State University professor, Dr. Crescencio López González, has always had a love for libraries and a passion for helping his community. So, in 2012, when the North Logan Library needed someone to translate forms into Spanish, Dr. López quickly offered his help. “I decided to take on the opportunity to get involved with the community. I knew that I didn’t want to be spending all my energy on campus, I wanted to go out into the community and use my knowledge and go and do an outreach. So, when [I received] the email that the library needed translations, I immediately responded and contacted them and said, ‘I’ll do the translations.’” Dr. López took the various forms from the library to his Advanced Spanish Composition class and had the students help with the project. “We sat down one day, and each group did one form, and we had it done in one day. And that’s how my connection with the library started.”

Dr. López continued to make connections at the Logan Public Library by having students participate in internships to learn the library’s needs. When Dr. López realized that the library didn’t have a Spanish books section, he had the students create a list of new books that could be purchased. “It was a slow process. It wasn’t just [an] immediate connection. It was something that began slowly.” However, Dr. López was patient and determined to build up a presence in the Logan library. “I have a huge connection with libraries. When I first came to the United States, my first legal job was at a library. It wasn’t a very big library, but [it was a] big enough library for me, and it had a significance in my life.” Dr. López worked at the Soledad Public library in California organizing books and returning them to the shelves. In his academic life, Dr. López relied on libraries for his class books. When he attended graduate school, he partnered with the University of Arizona’s bookstore and began doing cultural projects such as Día de los Muertos and other celebrations. “So when I came here to Logan and connected with the Logan library, it was common sense to me. Libraries made a lot of sense.”

Dr. López reached out to the Logan library director and together they created the Latino Advisory Council. Hoping to have other members of the community connected to the library, they invited parents and teachers to join the Advisory Council and, together they were able to create multiple projects. The library invested more than \$3500 into Spanish language books and created an entire Spanish section. According to Dr. López, “When you enter the Logan library, you know that it’s there, because it’s painted differently. It’s decorated with cultural artifacts and there’s a presence there.”

The Logan Library is also in its third year celebrating Hispanic Heritage month in September with the most recent celebration drawing in about 500 people. “Informational booths were included. About 18 or 20 booths from all over the county or from different organizations came to provide information to the Latino community. We [had] a highly successful event, and I’m sure we’re going to have it next year. We’re already planning what to improve from the last one,” said Dr. López.

In addition to Hispanic Heritage month, Dr. López also helped the Friends of the North Logan Library create an event called Culture Fest. The event included a mariachi band, folkloric dancers, and a lot of different foods. Nearly 700 people attended the event on a Friday afternoon. Dr. López also created an event this past July titled, ‘Portable Identities.’ “We brought in the refugee community, and we invited them to present their cultural artifacts at the library together with the Latinos. So we had different tables, similar to a museum, where they set out their cultural artifacts for other people to observe and learn.” Using his connections, Dr. López hopes to turn libraries into centers of culture rather than simply centers of information. Dr. López explains, “libraries harbor information, but now we are moving towards [libraries as] centers of culture where we invite people with their different cultural experiences to come to the library and share them with everyone.” Dr. López hoped that through ‘Portable Identities’ people could come to share their different backgrounds and experiences with others. “When you come from a different country, you bring with you some of the objects, and you carry them with you wherever you go, and that’s part of who you are. And when you put them in public, you empower yourself by teaching others of who you are and what they mean to you. So that was the main purpose of ‘Portable Identities’; to encourage the refugee community and the Latino community,” explained Dr. López.

Since its slow start, Dr. López’s projects have grown immensely and he has continually encouraged the library to offer new opportunities to the community. Thanks to another one of his projects, the Logan Library now offers Spanish story-time for children every Wednesday at 10:30 AM and 6:30 PM. “So we [now] have two opportunities for parents to show up with their children and they’ll have stories being read in Spanish.” Dr. López offers the opportunity to students in his Advanced Spanish classes to go and volunteer to read. The more than 15 students involved are required to observe for a day and then are allowed to read and do other activities with the children for the rest of the semester or however long they wish to volunteer.

One such student, Landon Watts, has been participating in the program since mid-January, 2016. Watts explained, “I’d already known Professor López through different interactions in the Spanish major, and it just so happened that I came to talk to him in his office, and he mentioned the Spanish story-time program at the Logan Public Library. I thought it was kind of interesting, and I wanted more hours volunteering in the community, and, also, I look for opportunities to practice speaking Spanish. So, I began to go on Wednesdays in the evening. I’ve really, really enjoyed getting to interact with kids, just because in a university setting you don’t really get to do that. So, for me it’s been a really fun experience.”

Through the experience, students are given an opportunity to practice their Spanish as well as connect with members of the community. Another student, Aubrey Tanner, shared her experience with Spanish story-time and its ability to bring people together. “So I think my favorite [moment] was when we were doing a song about controlling your hands, and there was a little kid standing next to me. She was probably like 6 years old, and the whole time she’s just staring at me doing the hand motions. And I remember I was talking to her afterwards, and her mom came up and we were able to talk about her, and her kids, and life and it was just like the little kid helped make the bridge between the cultures. So, I think that’s just so fun for me to really be there with the kids and experience that, and remember how kids are so innocent and they don’t have those biases and those culture differences. It was a really cool experience.”

Dr. López’s projects have not only helped to bring the community together, but have also helped inspire others to get involved and preserve culture. “The thing that I’ve really learned from this experience, and the thing that I appreciate about Professor López, is the fact that he recognizes a need that we have in our community to be promoting these minority groups, particularly Latin Americans, and Hispanics; with regards to preserving their culture. And so for me, when I go, it’s not just an opportunity to play with kids and to practice Spanish, but it’s also a lot about culture preservation which is something that Professor López really understands,” said Watts.

Even after all of this, Dr. López isn’t finished trying to provide better opportunities for students, and members of the Latino and Hispanic communities. Now he is working with the library to provide driving lessons and test preparation for refugees and Latinos who need help passing the drivers exam, which can only be taken in English. Dr. López’s hard work and love of others has inspired his students. As Tanner explains, “I just think that he goes above and beyond

what he is required and just does more; and I think that is so impressive. The way that he cares about his students is so important. I'm going to be a teacher and I'm so grateful because I've just learned what I want to do and what kind of teacher I want to be from him.”

The students hope that the programs Dr. López has helped to create will continue to gain awareness throughout the community to help keep them alive and to help people share their culture. As Watts puts it, “I think Professor López has always been a leader, and a particular demonstration of his leadership is the fact that he has really spearheaded the beginning of programs like [Spanish story-time] and the preservation and maintenance of those kinds of programs. I think that he really is a leader and he comes up with really good ideas of how to direct community affairs, but I think at the same time, we have to help him. He can't just do it all on his own, so we need to be there supporting him and helping propagate awareness of the things that he's trying to do, because they are really good things.”

By Sarina Hicken