

TEACHING ADULT WOMEN FROM PUERTO RICAN FAMILIES IN N.Y.C. HOW TO USE THEIR RESOURCES MORE EFFECTIVELY

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It is exciting being on here out on the West Coast, especially when it is the first time you've been out from the East. It is also rather exciting to be at a meeting with so many of you who are doing things and participating in exciting projects.

I have investigated whether Puerto Rican women from low income families in New York City can be taught to use their financial resources more effectively.

What was the project? It is a 36-page report sponsored by the United States Office of Education. It has assorted detailed materials, cards, all directed to low income Spanish-speaking people.

This research project is more than a written report, a set of slides, a story in pictures and a group of new and useful teaching materials. It is more than all of that. What is it? What did we try to do? We wanted to develop teaching materials for those people who need them most. No longer the middle income consumer or the suburban home with the station wagon and two children.

These are urban people, these are people with not too much money, these are people with limited education, with limited experience. What can you do for them? What are their problems? How do you meet them? We worked with 75 women in a westside community of New York City for about seven months.

CHALLENGING, UNIQUE DYNAMIC EXPERIENCE

Our goal was teaching adult women from Puerto Rican families in New York City to use their financial resources more effectively. It was a project that made people think and act and work. It made people change their minds about things. It was a challenging, unique and dynamic experience for all involved. These Puerto Rican homemakers did learn how to select meats more carefully, and they learned how to shop for glasses, and they learned what the credit union is all about. And this project really brought this community together.

These were people who did not talk together very much; they knew the people in their own building and some on their own block. The project brought these people together, attracted by their common problems.

Some of the problems revolved around consumer information. Where could they get it? What were the sources? Who were the people they could trust?

Today there's a growing organization in that same community. It's called The Self Help Program of Puerto Rican Women in Chelsea.

What do they do? They work with other Puerto Rican women, some who are just moving into the area. They help them get started. They are beginning to share their knowledge. Really, we gave them very little, but they absorbed all of it. It is one of the most active women's organizations in the community and you must realize that an organization among low income families is a unique idea. They work on their own with their own leaders and we are happy to say this research project had something to do with bringing them together. They have a purpose. They are still operating on some of the ideas we taught.

TAUGHT TO SHOP IN SUPERMARKETS

Let me give you a bit of background in our research project. We concentrated on only four areas. We taught women to operate in the supermarkets, what supermarkets tended to be less expensive, which is the neighborhood Spanish grocery store. We told women about buying simple cotton blouses and the principles to be used in buying other women's and children's clothing.

A third area was selection of meats, for we realized there were nutritional problems in selecting meats. This was an area of great interest. Teenage children, for instance, wanted to have hamburgers like their friends in school and the parents wanted rice and beans like the other older people in the neighborhood.

The last area was the use of credit. We learned a lot while working in the community. There were also a lot of things that we thought we knew before we started and discovered we often had to change our minds.

I was having coffee with a Puerto Rican woman and milk was delivered and I noticed she had lots of bottles. I asked: "Carmen, why do you have milk delivered? You know it's cheaper if you buy it every day at the corner grocery store or the supermarket."

She did not want to talk about it. I said, "Do you buy milk at the supermarket?" She said, "No."

Inquiring further, I discovered these women knew a lot more than I gave them credit for. Some of them had unstable incomes, or were on welfare. Checks came every two weeks and they spent them as they came. It was much easier to be sure you would have milk for the

children by having it delivered, rather than not knowing whether you would have enough money at the end of the two-week period to buy at the store.

So, here the homemaker made a choice, knowing the alternative, and we must give her credit for discovering a solution to a problem.

HAD MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SHOPPING

As the seven months went on we learned the women did have quite a few misconceptions about shopping, and there were other areas where they needed protection. Credit was one of the large areas where they did not have much information. To the home economics students who worked on this project, it was an experience in family living in a culture they knew little about.

The girl students started giving up their spare time and what was a small project with only two people on the staff soon grew to almost an entire department project. The girls became enthusiastic, gave us more and more of their time.

I can't tell you how pleased we all were and I'm sure the school was, too, to see the enthusiasm of these girls as they went out in this community using the knowledge they had acquired in the classroom. The project's over but what was left for those students? First, an experience in being involved in something that's really important, and students like this. Second, a chance to know as friends people they'd only heard about, people who were only statistics, but now they know them as friends.

Perhaps more important though, as these girls go on to participate in educational research projects, is the knowledge that these girls are the professional leaders of the 70's. It was through this project that they gained a much better understanding of how important educational research is and why it needs to be done so carefully.

Women, I find, enjoy participating in a research project. They really liked being asked their opinion and getting action on some of their suggestions. They would hand me a picture of changes. Five weeks, five days or a week later I'd come back and ask if they would like to see those same pictures again and observe the changes made.

SHOWS PICTURES ON SLIDE PROJECTOR

And now if you'll turn on the slide projector, I have some photographs and some slides to show you.

Keep your eye on clothing, the urban environment, the food patterns and the idea of many people living together. You don't just go into a community and start a research project. You have to establish rapport and those words are very easy to say but it takes a great deal of time and effort and patience to establish rapport.

This is a community meeting and I wanted you to see that here we have social workers, faculty members, students, homemakers and their children at community planning meetings.

Here we have a social worker who is interpreting the kind of things we were trying to get across. While we were absent the social workers in the community helped re-establish our purpose. This is again a planning meeting.

Now, when I talked about changing pictures, this is an example of what I meant. We drew up these cards, the first set, the second set and so on until they all met with approval. Here are some women going over them to be sure they really are like what we want them to be.

Now here's a picture of an example of what we mean. One of the things that I found in most apartments were deluxe television sets. And this was noted by other students, too. We were visiting homemakers at 8 o'clock in the morning when the children were off to school. A television set seemed to be a very important thing in these homes.

This set of teaching materials was about credit, and this was the most difficult for them to understand, but I think we made some sense with it. And here we used the item that was valued so highly — the television set, and the concept we wanted to teach: buying things on credit.

THE DOOR-TO-DOOR SALESMAN . . .

The door to door salesman. Women were eager to talk about him. It usually wasn't difficult to get the homemakers to tell us their experiences with door to door salesmen. And what usually happened after they bought materials from these salesmen.

There were many television sets, three-speed phonographs with two speakers, and other machines that weren't working, and they didn't know how they could get them fixed.

When we started actually getting the program moving, we spent much time organizing community leaders. This picture shows the language master. The girl is running the language master. These are the actual size cards we used in the project. You can imagine a floor tape recorder, the line along the bottom is actually a tape recording and we transfer this floor machine and as it went by it would give one phrase in English.

We played it again and the second time it went through the same words, the same message, given in Spanish, so that for each set of materials — meat, shopping and credit — the Puerto Rican homemakers were given the same information in two different ways on this language master and these are the language master cards. First in English and then in Spanish.

Learning wasn't easy. It took a great deal of concentration to pay attention to these cards as they were going through. The women really made an effort and you can see that some of the children weren't too eager to learn.

While the mothers were trying to concentrate on getting a little bit more information, some of the girls from the Home Economics Department were taking care of children in the next room — and there were many, many children.

This is one of our favorite pictures of children working with the college girls. There were refreshments for

everyone and after the learning process was over we had a kind of a party for all the people in the community.

The outcome of this research project was much more than having complete statistical results on which was the better way to teach. We now have a set of teaching materials that will work, and we know that Puerto Rican women can learn, and learn well.

Now that we have some idea of the kind of materials needed we have a head start and are ready to begin our next project.