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Latina culture is becoming a staple of some Girl Scout troops

By Taryn Luna, The Oregonian

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Teresa Puga shows her troop of Girl Scouts a Mexican style of cross-stitching called punto de cruz. The Hillsboro troop leader incorporate Latina culture into most of her lessons as part of a national effort to recruit more Latina scouts.

HILLSBORO -- Within the brightly colored orange-and-burgundy Montebello Apartments complex, Teresa Puga gathers her troop of Girl Scouts.

Just like other young girls, an overwhelming majority wear Hannah Montana T-shirts, which transforms the complex's community room into a sea of pink and purple.

But instead of planning a bake sale or a trip to the local roller skating rink, Puga, 55, teaches the girls how to punto de cruz, or cross-stitch. Most of her lessons incorporate aspects of Mexican culture, and everyone speaks Spanish.

And, this is not unusual as the **Girl Scouts, USA** are recruiting more Latinas by allowing them to include aspects of their culture. In Florida's Miami-Dade and Monroe counties last winter, Girl Scout troops sold Dulce de leche, or "milk candy," cookies. Through a "**uniquely ME!**" program in councils all over the country, low-income scouts who complete workshops and community service projects can participate in a quinceñera celebration hosted by their council.

"We're seeing growth in places we wouldn't expect," said Gladys Padro-Soler, Girl Scouts national director of membership strategies.

Between 2000 and 2007, the number of Latina Girl Scouts increased by 63 percent. Today, there are 270,000 Latina Scouts in the program and 40,000 Latina volunteers.

In the Southwest Washington and Oregon Council, there were 1,950 Latina Girl Scouts -- 723 in Washington

County -- during the 2008-09 school year, said Bernice Rivera, Latina outreach specialist.

In 2003, the **Paul G. Allen Family Foundations** donated \$10,000 toward Latina outreach in Washington and Multnomah counties. Rivera uses the donation to target schools in the districts with large populations of Latinas. She educates parents about the program at school events in Hillsboro, Forest Grove and now Beaverton schools.

Today, there's a troop at an alternative high school for young Latina mothers from Hillsboro and Forest Grove. To teach teenagers to become leaders, Rivera trains high schoolers in Cornelius to lead troops for kindergartners through third-graders.

Those efforts coincide with the organization's mission to provide a nurturing environment to girls, thereby building character and developing qualities of leadership, values, social conscience and confidence, said Amelia Bebios, Girl Scouts spokeswoman.

A majority of young Latinas surveyed nationally want to be leaders who stand up for their beliefs and values to change the world for the better. But Latina girls were not confident in their ability to affect change at home, in school, or in their neighborhood.

"The sad part of that was when we asked the girls what the biggest barrier to becoming a leader was, it was a lack of self-esteem," Bebios said.

Girl Scouts launch Hispanic Initiative

When Puga immigrated to the United States from Michoacan 29 years ago, she dreamed of becoming a teacher. Eight children later and her husband working long hours as a tree harvester, those chances became slim.

But her troop of young Latinas gives Puga the leadership opportunity she craved. And she wants the girls to shape a world different from the one in which they live.

The four-square-block area around the Montebello Apartments has the second-highest crime rate in the city. Hillsboro Police said crimes range from car break-ins, minor assaults and graffiti to low-level drug dealing, but a growing number of documented gang members live in the vicinity.

When Puga asks her scouts to draw how they want the world to be, they each draw something different: smiling butterflies, V's meant to depict birds, a sun beaming with rays of light, colorful flowers, bunnies, green grass, a waterfall, clean rivers and blue skies.

In the 1970s, the Girl Scouts began several initiatives to recruit more minorities, said Padro-Soler, the national director of membership strategies.

As the number of Hispanic children in the United States jumped from 9 percent of all children under the age of 18 in 1980 to 22 percent in 2007, the Hispanic Initiative also grew.

Between that same time period, Hispanic children shifted from being predominantly third-generation citizens, which means both of their parents were born on American soil, to second-generation with only one parent born here.

Those integrating into American society for the first time weren't quick to sign their daughters up to sell cookies door-to-door or send them off with strangers to rough it in the woods. For many Latinos, those Girl Scouts staples were strangely foreign to their culture, said Padro-Soler.

At the national level, Girl Scout representatives talked with Latina mothers and girls to determine how the program could meet their needs. Many of the mothers were uncertain about how their girls would juggle the two cultures, Bebios said. While mothers wanted their children to gain as much as possible from American culture, they feared it would be at the expense of losing their own heritage, she said.



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This all-Latina Girl Scout troop in Hillsboro is a part of a growing phenomenon across the country. Between 2000 and 2007, the number of Latina Girl Scouts increased by 63 percent to 270,000 scouts. In the Southwest Washington and Oregon Council, there are 1,950 Latina Girl Scouts.

Puga has seen this same phenomenon in Hillsboro. In 2003, she joined **Adelante Mujeres**, a community based organization in Forest Grove established by a few local low-income Latina immigrants. Members of Adelante Mujeres donate 20 hours of service every trimester in an effort to better themselves and their immigrant community.

Puga has observed the shortcomings of her culture on American soil and isn't one to deny the Latino tradition of hard work and long hours has its pitfalls. When she was recruited by Rivera at an Adelante Mujeres meeting to be a troop leader, she was attracted to the idea of working with young Latinas who might not get enough attention at home.

"I think Girl Scouts has a good effect because Latinos have a primary focus to work and work, but don't have much time to spend with their kids," she said. Girl Scouts helps to reinforce family values for children, she added.

"This gives girls an outlet to positively blossom, to develop skills, and get the attention they need to grow," she said. Puga has seen her own daughters and scouts progress from being timid and shy to outgoing and confident the longer they are Girl Scouts, she said.

To close each meeting the troop stands in a circle, crosses their arms and holds hands with the girls next to them. One starts by making a silent wish and then squeezes the hand of the next person. Once everyone has made a wish, they throw their hands up in unison.

Puga's talkative daughter, Karen, 8, said she wished for a pool. But her friend, Marithza, 10, wishes "to always stay in Girl Scouts."

-- **Taryn Luna**

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