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Mi escuela es su escuela (My school is your school);

Nowhere is the changing face of New Orleans public schools more apparent than at Esperanza, the Hispanic charter school whose motto is 'La educación de nuestros hijos es nuestra mejor esperanza' ('The education of our children is our best hope').

BYLINE: By Maria Montoya, Staff writer

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"Good morning, buenas dias," said the teacher, alternating English and Spanish as she greeted a family of four walking through the side gates of Esperanza Charter School. "We're happy you are here, estamos felices que estan aqui."

Jose Miguel Herrera, his wife Odegaria Alejandro Herrera and sons Miguel and Jose Miguel -- natives of Veracruz, Mexico, who until a few months after Hurricane Katrina lived in Texas -- smiled at the schoolteacher dressed in a navy blue vest and skirt. With a New Orleans brass band playing behind them, the teacher handed the family purple and yellow beads bearing the school's logo. Not knowing what to do with the beads, the Herrera boys stuffed them in their pockets.

Beyond the school's gates, rows of plastic chairs draped in yellow and purple balloons filled the yard. A crowd of largely African-American and Latino families filled the seats. The chairs faced a small platform stage adorned with a podium and a balloon archway. In the rear of the school yard, two men prepared fresh tacos inside a small truck. To the left of the truck, the family band Ovi-G and The Froggies (Las Ranas) set up instruments and tinkered with a play list that included Spanish songs they'd do following the morning assembly.

The Herreras found their seats and took it all in.

"On the radio they said there was going to be a school for Spanish-speaking children, so we came," Odegaria Alejandro said. "We've been (in New Orleans) working since the hurricane. We'll stay until there's no more work."

"Or until la migra (immigration department) tells us we must go, then we'll leave," Jose Miguel Herrera said. "Until then, we like it here. There's good people, much work and now this school."

Two years ago, this school would have seemed nearly unimaginable -- an Orleans Parish public school dedicated almost entirely to the unique educational needs of the city's burgeoning Hispanic population. Hurricane Katrina didn't just change the face of the New Orleans school

system, it changed the faces of its students, many of whom are new not just to the city, but to this country as well.

For families looking to put down roots, Esperanza is an important learning ground; for those already established, it is an opportunity to foster an even more culturally diverse New Orleans.

"It's important to have school," Odegaria Alejandro said. "(My sons) are very happy. They can have friends now."

Esperanza, which means hope in Spanish, is in the former site of A.D. Crossman Elementary School at 4407 S. Carrollton Ave. The three-story building is among a few Recovery School District schools that have undergone complete multimillion-dollar renovations since the storm.

"Here we are comfortable," Jose Miguel Herrera said. "Our children will learn English all day, and we will work knowing they're OK."

Windy City to Big Easy

Esperanza is operated by the **United Neighborhood Organization**, a Chicago-based nonprofit established in 1984 by a group of community leaders and priests seeking to empower residents to address social ills in Chicago's Hispanic neighborhoods. In 2004, the group formed a charter school association that operates six schools with K-8 programs, with plans to develop four more sites, including a high school in the next year.

The summer after Hurricane Katrina, the organization's staff began to hear reports that New Orleans' new Latino workers were having a hard time registering their children for school. Stories of parents being turned away because they lacked the proper documentation or because the schools lacked interpreters were common.

United Neighborhood decided to step in. It applied for and received a charter to operate a kindergarten-through-eighth grade school targeting but not limited to Hispanic children. Juan Rangel and Philip J. Mullins, the group's board president and chief operating officer, respectively, made their first trek to New Orleans last February, enlisting as their tour guide Martin Gutierrez, director of the Hispanic Apostolate of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

For hours, the men grilled Gutierrez on New Orleans' recovery, politics and educational atmosphere.

"When they said they were from UNO, I thought, like many of you might have, University of New Orleans," Gutierrez said as he addressed the 200-plus students, family members and Esperanza staff assembled for the school's opening-day celebration. "When they explained to me who they were and what they wanted to do, I said to them, 'Are you nuts? . . . Does your board know you want to do this?' "

Rangel and Jacob Perez, the group's associate director for economic development, who stood behind Gutierrez as he spoke, laughed at their new friend's recollection.

"Thankfully, their board and their staff were behind them entirely," Gutierrez continued. "So, I joined on board with them and I came here every day watching the progress of this building. I tell you, even up to a few days ago, I called Juan worried. I said to them, 'You really think you can pull this off?' "

In the course of getting their charter to operate a New Orleans campus, Rangel and Perez persuaded some big names to join the Esperanza Charter School Association. Gutierrez became the group's vice president. Jewel Stafford, the director of Audubon Primary Academy, became president. Salvador Longoria, a local lawyer and Hispanic Apostolate board member, is the association's secretary/treasurer. James Grey, a

lawyer and assistant to the CEO of the Shaw Group, volunteered to serve on the school's board.

From Chicago, the United Neighborhood board and staff tried to help with the day-to-day details of getting the school ready. But it wasn't easy.

"Everything can be so complicated here," Rangel said. "We didn't understand why everyone thought we were so crazy to do this until we began to deal with the all red tape that can be involved."

Help from an old friend

Rangel found an important ally in Recovery School District Superintendent Paul Vallas, who had worked with United Neighborhood when he was public school superintendent in Chicago. Vallas became a strong supporter/fan of the group's philosophy of running public schools "where academic success was the norm and not the exception."

Still, even with Vallas behind them, New Orleans is New Orleans, Rangel said, and that means overcoming cultural misperceptions as well as bureaucratic hurdles.

Among their difficulties was trying to persuade New Orleanians that the school isn't limited to Latino students or fluent Spanish speakers. Throughout the summer, Esperanza's staff canvassed neighborhoods and visited local media and churches to spread the word that the new school was open to everyone.

Esperanza Principal Lawrence Perkins, who moved here from Chicago but whose family is originally from New Orleans, said it was important that the student body reflect the diversity of the city.

"We've managed to achieve a good mix," Perkins said. "We're at 60/40 right now, with most of our students being Latino and the remainder being largely African-American."

Perkins said his staff is also a diverse mix, with teachers and teacher's aides varying in their levels of experience and Spanish fluency.

"I don't speak Spanish myself," Perkins said, "but I am always ready for a challenge. Bring it on, I like to say."

Within a month of beginning registration last spring, the school reached the 261-student capacity allowed by the charter, and the staff began compiling a waiting list. Last week, as word spread that Esperanza was open, parents and students trickled in daily to check if any slots had somehow opened up.

New Orleans newcomer Casey Prestenbach was ecstatic to learn that all three of her children were able to enroll in the new school before classes filled up. She said she wasn't familiar with United Neighborhood's history, but loved the idea that her children wouldn't have to be split up to attend different schools.

"We moved here after Katrina and I was shocked at how difficult and overwhelming it was to find a school," said Prestenbach, who has sons in the third and fifth grades and a daughter in the eighth grade. "I really liked the idea that they would be exposed to Spanish and I'm really impressed by all that they've been able to accomplish so far."

Prestenbach was further reassured by Vallas' address to the crowd.

"People here may not be familiar with (**United Neighborhood Organization**), but I know their track record and these guys don't do anything that isn't a success," said Vallas, who worked with the school's administrators to increase capacity as more students continued to arrive late last week. "I expect Esperanza will do exceedingly well,

and want parents, teachers and students to look at it as a model of what can be done in our schools.

"This a completely remodeled building where a child can take pride in their work," said Vallas, who has plans to overhaul all of the Recovery School District campuses similarly. "Esperanza is a school where the teachers and students reflect this diverse community, and more important, this is a place where students can get a fresh start."

To emphasize that concept, as the board members and politicians wrapped up their speeches and wished the students luck, a jazz funeral, complete with mourners dressed in black, pallbearers, a preacher and musicians, entered the rear of school.

With wide eyes, the students watched them carry a coffin to the stage, where it was covered with a black sheet.

"Today, we are here to put to rest the past," Rangel told the students. "No more can we let the past weigh us down. We must bury low expectations, low standards, bad schools and start fresh.

"Esperanza is your school, Esperanza es tu casa -- your place and your chance to bury the past."

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ESPERANZA CHARTER SCHOOL

What: A Recovery School District school for students in grades K through 8. Catering to but not limited to the city's growing Latino population, all classes are full English immersion.

When: Classes began Aug. 20. The school is at full enrollment; a waiting list has formed for available slots that may open up during the school year.

Where: 4407 S. Carrollton Ave., the site of the former A.D. Crossman Elementary School in Mid-City.

For more information: www.unocharterschools.org, or call (504) 258-1320.

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