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He's the Latino Diabetes Assn.'s keeper of the flame

Randy Muñoz takes the issue of diabetes in the Latino community personally. His passion has been a positive thing for the Montebello nonprofit.



Randy Muñoz, vice chairman of the Latino Diabetes Assn., hugs participant Teresa Garcia after a free yoga class at the Maywood Community Center offered by his organization.

(Katie Falkenberg, for The Times)

By John Hoeffel, Los Angeles Times

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Randy Muñoz glided among the guests, greeting and hugging them. They were in a posh club 54 floors above Los Angeles, and the windows looked out to a shimmering vista of lighted streets. They swirled cocktails, dined on shrimp and gyoza, soaked up a Latin trio and traded pleasantries.

Then Muñoz, called on to speak, riled the serenity with a jolt of emotion.

"How many of you guys have diabetes in your families? OK. Keep those hands up and look around. Look around. That's disgusting. Seriously. That's sad," Muñoz said.

"It's no wonder our kids are 5 feet tall and 6 feet wide now because, you know, they have carte blanche, the McDonald's and the Carl's Jr.'s that just come into our low-income communities and set up shop and nobody's watching them."

Muñoz was angry. He is often incensed. One out of eight Latino adults in Los Angeles County has been diagnosed with diabetes, a rate more than two times higher than for white adults, according to a 2007 survey taken for the Department of Public Health. Poor, Spanish-speaking Latinos are particularly vulnerable because they are much less likely to have access to information about the disease, decent medical care and healthy foods.

"We need your help, guys. So dig in those deep pockets that I know you've got and that your friends have and help us out, help us help the community," said Muñoz, vice chairman of the nonprofit Latino Diabetes Assn.

For the last seven years, typically volunteering more than 20 hours a week, Muñoz has struggled to put the Latino Diabetes Assn. on a solid financial footing. He had a receptive audience at the February fundraiser at the City Club, but the evening drew only about three dozen people. Muñoz initially imagined he would raise \$50,000, then trimmed his hopes to \$25,000. The final tally was \$9,000.

Though often disheartened, Muñoz keeps plugging. "I'm the kind of guy that, till the credits are going up, thinks the movie is going to get better," he said. "This is my calling."

Muñoz, 46, grew up in Estrada Courts, a public housing development in Boyle Heights, and dropped out of high school. "The dean told me 'I can hardly wait for you to turn 18 so you can go to the joint,' " he recalled.

He eventually earned a high school diploma and an associate's degree. He worked in the garment industry for 14 years before landing a job with the county's Community and Senior Services Department.

In 1994, Muñoz's 10-year-old niece, Amber Arevalo, who was overweight, found out she was diabetic. "We had no idea of how serious it was," he said. "It's really a misunderstood disease."

Diabetes is caused when the body fails to make enough insulin or respond to it and is then unable to absorb sugar from the bloodstream, which can lead to severe complications. The most common form can often be controlled by proper diet and exercise.

As Arevalo grew up, she suffered heart attacks and strokes. She had part of a finger amputated. She wore a colostomy bag and went to dialysis three times a week. She lost her sight and was eventually bedridden. And she became Muñoz's inspiration to fight diabetes.

"I was extremely, extremely close to my niece," he said. "I wanted to prevent more Ambers."

His mother, a brother and a nephew also have diabetes. "It's ridiculous," he said. "They just announced officially that it is an epidemic. Ta-da! We knew that."

Last year, Muñoz found out he was at risk of developing diabetes. He received a blood report with an elevated sugar level. Although he had insisted on being tested every year, he said, the office found no record that he had been. The experience underscored the disregard Muñoz believes Latinos often face.

"I was really angry when I found out," he said. "Here I am, I'm a big advocate on it. What about people who don't speak English or are seniors? I'm thinking: No wonder we have a diabetes epidemic."

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When Muñoz began working with the Latino Diabetes Assn., it was an idea on paper. The plan was to go into some of the county's poorest communities and provide free classes in Spanish on yoga, healthy cooking, preventing diabetes and how to live with it.

"This is one of the seeds you need. You need a lot of seeds to make it better. But you've got to start with something," said Dr. Michael Marcus, a podiatrist who estimates that three-quarters of his patients are diabetics who have foot problems caused by nerve damage or poor blood flow.

Muñoz persuaded the city of Montebello to give the organization a rent-free office in Reggie Rodriguez Park. He sought donations and reached out to Latino leaders.



Fighting diabetes with yoga

(Katie Falkenberg, For The Times / June 18, 2012)

Randy Munoz, left rear, vice chairman of the Latino Diabetes Assn., and Yolie Acosta, executive director, right rear, participate in a free yoga class at the Maywood Community Center, offered by their group.

L.A. Councilman Ed Reyes, whose son has diabetes and who has become a supporter, recalled his first meeting with Muñoz: "He was raising his voice. He was pounding on the desk. He was saying, 'Man, all these politicians, they come around, and they want to get on TV and make all these claims, but when you need them, where are they?'"

Muñoz worried that Montebello would take back the office if not enough was happening. He asked a new acquaintance, Yolie Acosta, to show up occasionally and make some noise. She showed up a lot. Acosta, 39, who grew up in Cypress Park, had a grandmother and an uncle with diabetes.

Eventually, she left a job that paid about \$60,000 a year. She is now the Latino Diabetes Assn.'s executive director, sometimes paid and oftentimes not.

After working together for a year or two, Muñoz and Acosta fell in love. "When we talk about LDA, it's pretty much 24-7. It's like our baby now," she said.

They are well-matched. While Muñoz is often impolitic, Acosta is diplomatic but persistent. Muñoz spins ideas; Acosta deals in the details.

As a compliance auditor, Muñoz monitors how nonprofit agencies spend the county's money. His inside view has made him cynical about misspent funds, and it galls him because the Latino Diabetes Assn. scrapes for every dollar.

In its best year, 2008, the association raised \$142,000. Muñoz recalls having classes in six communities at once. "It was like a circus," he said. He dreams of raising a million dollars a year and hiring full-time staff.

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Last September, the Latino Diabetes Assn. discovered that it was out of money.

Kinde Durkee, a Burbank treasurer employed by many politicians, had kept the association's books. Before she was arrested and accused of embezzling, she had informed the association that it had \$29,351.19. But the bank could find only \$2,153.18 — and now that was frozen.

In those first dazed weeks, Muñoz was dismayed. "I've been, like, on the top of a mountain with a bullhorn, saying: 'Over here!'" he said, slumped at a table in the association office. "Not one person has called us and said, 'Hey, man, I feel bad for you guys. Let me give you a dollar.' Nothing."

Muñoz, dressed in cargo shorts and a Hawaiian shirt that belied his sour mood, was surrounded by shelves crammed with brochures, a cabinet filled with files on diabetics who needed help and walls hung with framed commendations from politicians, most of whom have never donated a cent.

The unexpected insolvency came at a vulnerable time for Muñoz. A month earlier, his niece had died at the age of 27.

Heartsick from Arevalo's death, distressed by the association's money woes, upset by the mute reaction and weary of wheedling for donations and volunteers, Muñoz thought about giving up. "I could walk away," he said.

He didn't. He didn't think he had a choice.

"It is an absolute crisis and everybody's sitting on their thumbs," he said.

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By November, he had raised little money, but found an inexpensive way to promote his cause. Muñoz organized a candlelight vigil to remember diabetes victims at La Placita church in downtown Los Angeles. About 150 people showed up, forming a circle around Muñoz.

"All we're doing is trying to prevent this from happening to you guys because, I'm sorry, but some of you guys are going to die one day or have really bad complications, and it's so unnecessary," said Muñoz, striding about and clutching a framed photo of his niece to his chest.

Muñoz and Acosta then renewed their pursuit of donations, collecting enough to hold classes in yoga and healthy cooking in Maywood, South Gate, Commerce and Cudahy.

They brought in more than \$50,000 altogether from the City Club fundraising dinner, the S. Mark Taper Foundation, Smart & Final, Wal-Mart Foundation, the Union Pacific Foundation, Hispanics in Philanthropy and the Vons Foundation.

"Yolie stalked me," said Gilbert Gonzales, chairman of the Vons Foundation at that time. Guessing that she'd called 15 times, he said her passion was persuasive.

Finally confident that the Latino Diabetes Assn. would survive, Muñoz and Acosta decided to celebrate a bit. In the Los Angeles City Council chamber last month, Reyes offered an emotional tribute and handed Acosta a certificate "for never giving up." Gonzales presented Acosta an oversized check for \$15,000.

Muñoz, who's not much for ceremony and certificates, stood to the side. Paying no attention to a police officer who pestered him to move, he shot photo after photo that he could use to raise more money.

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