

Article for LA Monitor
Los Alamos and Española Teens Are One of the Same

Juntos. In Spanish, the word translates as together, a union, relationship, or association between two or more people. As an acronym, the word stands for Joining and Understanding Now, Teens Overcome Separation. But who are these teens, and just exactly what separation are they fighting to overcome? For years the communities of Los Alamos and Española Valley have been locked in what some deem a struggle against one another. Some of the struggle has originated naturally from the inherent competition present in athletic events between the two towns. While it is true that there is nothing wrong with healthy competition, the rivalry has been taken to radical levels. From harassment during and after sporting events to assumptions about drug problems, the list of stereotypes continually expands. But what has yet to be realized by either community is that all of these stereotypes were created from the unknown. Somewhere in history, our communities decided to separate from each other. Isolating themselves and refusing to embrace each others cultures, we have spawned the rivalry, but with enlightenment and dedication the separation can be overcome.

JUNTOS originated as a group of students from Española and Los Alamos that were ready to see a change. With strong support from a group of adult leaders dedicated to raising money to fund youth ideas and provide leadership, the group continues to grow with new faces at every meeting. As a member of Los Alamos Youth Leadership program, I first became interested in the idea of JUNTOS. The head facilitator of our program, Sean Hall, always spoke of the importance of building strong relationships at the personal level. The more friendships you are able to build with the people around you increases your social network, giving more contacts that you can rely on if you are in need of help. Thinking about this, I was puzzled as to why this hasn't translated to the community level. If we as a community can build stronger relationships with Española Valley, it will be nothing but beneficial to everyone. It may come as a surprise to some people, but Los Alamos and Española teens are one in the same. After spending time with teens from Española in our meetings, I have realized that we share the same desires and interests. If a group of teens can work together effectively, why can't our communities do the same?

But exactly what do we plan to do? Our very first meeting consisted of identifying exactly what has created the divide, and one of the largest contributors has been the influence of negative media. The power of the media over public opinion is constantly underestimated. For this reason, it is important that the media no longer contributes in creating negative stereotypes. By exerting a positive influence, the media will be the first step in making a change, and that in it self is something to be proud of.

JUNTOS will continue to do their part as well. Short term activities include a mural project, where members of both communities would collaborate to create murals with a common theme in both towns. The murals would embrace our differences and show that working together, our communities can create beautiful things. Film festivals and historical workshops will be held in both communities to help educate on how the divide was created and also how it can be ended. Concerts and youth dances will be held in both communities. Teens will be able to get together and build friendships while discovering at the same time that there really is nothing to be afraid of in either community. In addition, a dance would be scheduled following a

sporting event in to ease the tensions created in athletic competition. Our largest project is a youth summit composed of workshops, guest speakers, and entertainment which will bring students from both communities together in a neutral location to build healthy relationships and provide skills for combating the problem.

The possibilities are endless, but the only way to achieve anything is to get involved. JUNTOS is open to any youth member or adult who is willing to help create this change. The next adult meeting will be at UNM-LA July 10th from 8:30 – 10:30 a.m. while the next youth meeting will take place July 31st in Española at Northern New Mexico College from 10:00 – 1:00 p.m., pizza and drinks provided.

Adult and youth leaders interested in attending should contact Lori Heimdahl Gibson at 662-3159 or 660-7810 and Email: lorihg@swcp.com. For further information on JUNTOS, log onto the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board website at www.losalamosjjab.com.

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