

Health initiative inspires residents to get well and give back



BACKGROUND

This case study explores how the Healthy Ontario Initiative (HOI) has motivated residents to adopt healthy lifestyle habits and become more involved in their community. Specifically, the case study spotlights the stories of Carlos Dorantes and Rosario Santillán, the latter of whom plays a critical role in Ontario's Community Engagement Plan (see page 46). While funded by leveraged sources, HOI is an integral element of Ontario Together because it provides an engagement channel for connecting residents with TCC investments. For more on HOI, see page 70.

Interviews for this story were conducted in November 2019.

Carlos Dorantes and Plate Nutrition Health Coach, Rosalba Martínez, in 2019. Photo credit: The Social Impact Artists

CARLOS DORANTES has learned firsthand the role that food can play in one's physical and mental health. Dorantes is a father of two children and has lived in Ontario for over 10 years. His younger son struggles with mental illness, which has motivated Dorantes to explore different avenues for improving his son's quality of life and overall well-being.

Dorantes first learned about the Healthy Ontario Initiative (HOI), a leveraged project of the Ontario Together initiative, after encountering one of the city's outreach workers stationed at a table in a park. After chatting with the representative about the various health-related programs offered in the community, Dorantes attended the free 10-week Healthy Ontario Plate Nutrition and Wellness class at the Veterans Memorial Community Center, one of the health hubs located in the project area. There he learned about how to prepare low-cost, healthy meals at home.

“The nutrition classes have changed the way I eat. I’m cooking more meals at home, eating out less, and buying more fruits and vegetables. My kids especially like the chia seed pudding that we learned to make in class together.”

CARLOS DORANTES

In addition to inspiring new food choices, the nutrition and wellness class has also led to larger behavioral changes in the Dorantes' home. Dorantes recalls his younger son being shy and unwilling to spend time with the family. Now cooking has become one of the activities they do as a family. The Dorantes family has also started to exercise together on a daily basis.

“Our doctor commented on how surprised he was by the dramatic improvement in my youngest son’s health. Eating healthier and exercising more has had such a positive impact on his life.

CARLOS DORANTES

Now that Dorantes is connected to Ontario's health hubs, he has also become more involved in the community and participates in the monthly engagement forums. At these forums, residents provide input about the design and implementation of HOI, to ensure that it continues to address the community's health concerns. The experience has inspired Dorantes to start recruiting other residents in his network to join the engagement forum and to access the free programming offered through HOI.



“I teach Zumba, not because it’s my job, but because I love it. I am convinced that it works. I’ve seen it transform my life and now I want to spread the word.”

ROSARIO SANTILLÁN

Rosario Santillán in November 2019 at the Dorothy A. Quesada Community Center where she teaches a Zūm Up! class.

Photo credit: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

ROSARIO SANTILLÁN is another Ontario resident who has made dramatic changes in her life as a result of HOI. Santillán has been a resident of Ontario for nearly 30 years and has raised her two sons in the community. About eight years ago, her life took an unexpected and unwelcome turn when she suffered an injury that made physical movement challenging. The immobility began to wear on her physical and mental health, causing her to gain weight and become depressed. To compound her problems, Santillán’s blood pressure began to climb and she was eventually diagnosed with prediabetes.

Santillán was eager to take charge of her health and began taking free Zūm Up! classes (fitness classes with leadership skill development) at the Dorothy A. Quesada Community Center. The center is one of five health hubs created in Ontario as part of a Kaiser Permanente initiative designed to make healthy choices more accessible to individuals and families in areas of need. The center also provides a free gym and nutrition classes, which Santillán learned about from her Zūm Up! classmates and incorporated into her recovery plan.

Santillán’s experience has inspired her to become more involved in transforming public health outcomes in her community. She’s now on the other side of the stage,

working as a part-time Zūm Up! instructor at the Dorothy A. Quesada Community Center. Additionally, Santillán serves as a paid resident leader, engaging others in the community around health and wellness, as well as opportunities to benefit from TCC. To serve as a resident leader, one must graduate from the HOI leadership academy, a two-month program that teaches advocacy and civic engagement skills alongside health systems literacy.

“I feel so much better — I’ve lost over 67 pounds, have normal blood pressure without medication, wonderful new friends, and I’m not prediabetic or depressed anymore.”

ROSARIO SANTILLÁN

Santillán also serves as the ex officio delegate within Ontario’s TCC Trustees, the governance body for local implementation of Ontario’s TCC award. She was nominated to this position by the Healthy Ontario Neighborhood Council, a separate oversight body that focuses on the implementation of HOI. At TCC Trustee meetings, Santillán serves as a resident representative, reporting on questions and comments she’s encountered from other residents through her work in community engagement.