

**Molly Haak**  
**Family Living Educator**  
**Green Lake County**

As the Family Living Educator in Green Lake County, I applied to participate in the Puentes Mexico Cultural Immersion program because I identified a great need to understand the challenges facing the Spanish-speaking community and create viable solutions to help this population. I have witnessed an increase in the Spanish-speaking population in Berlin, at the northern end of the county, and Markesan, at the southern end. School districts in Berlin and Markesan are facing challenges of educating English Language Learners (ELL) for only a brief portion of the school year (two or three months at a time). Employers, including agricultural producers, struggle to communicate with and provide health care and services to their immigrant workforce. The local food pantries, churches, and childcare centers are experiencing an increase in use by Latino families, but have limited ability to communicate effectively with these families. Underlying this lack of communication is also a lack of understanding and acceptance of the cultural differences of the Latino families. Clearly, there is an opportunity for me to provide education, awareness, and promote tolerance among all residents of Green Lake County.

While I experienced many “aha” moments while participating in the Puentes trip, the most striking realization came when we visited the community of Tlaquilpa, Veracruz. In speaking with the young mothers, we learned that nearly 80% of the men in the region had left to find work in the United States, Canada, Spain, or the larger cities in Mexico. Imagine the effects on family, economy, and community structure when more than two-thirds of the males are gone. I realize now that the Latino immigrants in Green Lake County are struggling with the tremendous emotional pressure of being separated from many family members, friends, and other support systems. Sadly, they face an additional strain by not being fully accepted into the community here in Green Lake County.

Upon returning from the Puentes trip, I have a renewed motivation to foster awareness, understanding, and acceptance of cultural diversity in Green Lake County. Working with other Extension colleagues, my local office, and community partners who also share an interest in diversity promotion, I believe progress can be made.