

COMMISSIONED

THE ART OF LIVING OUT THE
WORDS, WAYS, & MISSION OF JESUS

7.3 Partnering in the Mission of Jesus

Casa Chirilagua

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Natalia Guzman:

Hey National Community Church. This is Natalia Guzman, and I am here with Adriana Gomez Schellhaas, who's the executive director of Casa Chirilagua in Alexandria, Virginia, to talk about the mission of Jesus and what it looks like to be on missions every day in her context. Adriana, can you go ahead and introduce yourself? Tell us about what Casa Chirilagua is and how long have you been involved with it?

Adriana Gomez Schellhaas):

Yes, absolutely. So Casa Chirilagua is a faith based nonprofit in Alexandria, Virginia. We work alongside the Central American immigrant community, which is comprised mostly of families from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. And I've been involved with Casa Chirilagua, I started as a volunteer in 2011, and then joined staff in 2012. I've worn many hats at Casa.

Natalia Guzman:

That's awesome. We know that Casa Chirilagua serves the community in Arlandria and was a huge support to the families during COVID crisis. But it has been around for much longer than that. How did Casa start and for how long has it been serving the community?

Adriana Gomez Schellhaas):

Yeah, so Casa's story begins in 2007 with our founders. So, there was three young white women, Danielle, Emily, and Julia who met in DC at a very interesting time in their personal spiritual journeys. They were asking themselves a question of what it means to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And they really wanted to live out a holistic gospel, a holistic ministry. And they had no intention to start anything, it was never like, "Let's start a nonprofit." Their heart was for Latino communities. They talked, "Do we move to Central America?" And after they met and they started praying and reading books together and really studying the Bible, they started asking the Lord, "Where do you want us to go, Lord?" Like, "Here we are. We are passionate for our brothers and sisters in marginalized communities, particularly Latino families." And after they prayed, they started visiting literally different communities in the DMV area. And when they visited Chirilagua they really felt the Holy Spirit like, "This is where I want you to live."

Natalia Guzman:

This is a great story, Adriana, thank you for sharing that with us. Since you showed us how you operate contextually within Casa Chirilagua, would you tell us what it looks like in your community to bring the Good News or to share the Good News of the Gospel?

Adriana Gomez Schellhaas:

So our mission is to develop relationships with families, to see the Chirilagua neighborhood transformed by Christ. What we do is based out of relationship because we believe that God has called us to not just be reconciled with Himself, which is the Good News. Jesus came, He reconciled us with the Lord and has like beared our sin for us. He also calls us to reconcile with ourselves, loving our neighbor as ourselves and reconciling each other, me with my brother and sister. And so we do this through relationship. While we do have programs that start with elementary and go all the way through adults, the basis and the foundation by which we move forward in our mission is the relationship. So, we base everything out of that. That means that we don't do anything within our organization or programmatic wise, that doesn't come from conversations with the community. So, our community informs and is part of the mission itself. While I have a role and we have staff, we really don't do anything separate from our community because we believe that is foundational to transformation, it's relationship.

Natalia Guzman:

The next practice pursues Shalom. We believe that the restoration of the world is God's desire. God wants to bring peace, and we are called to partner with Him to bring wholeness to the relationships we have with God Himself, with ourselves and others, and as creation, as you just described. In what ways do you pursue Shalom in your work at Casa?

Adriana Gomez Schellhaas:

One practical way is that we have a culture of honor. So, our culture of honor consists of four commitments that all of us, not just staff, but students in our programs, families, our board, we all commit to these four commitments. So, first one being, "I choose to be courageous and

vulnerable." That means that I am not going to leave a mess with you. I'm going to face that mess and we're going to face it together and reconcile.

The second one is, "I choose to be trustworthy and trusting." The third one is, "I choose to be generally powerful," meaning that I'm in control of my decisions that you can't make me do something. And so that means manipulation is off the table, no gossip.

And the last one is, "We choose to believe there's enough in the world for all people to flourish." We celebrate one another. We don't tear each other down. So, that encompasses the way we want to show up when we are neighboring, where we are at Casa doing our work. We want to show up with these four commitments with this culture of honor because we believe that helps us bring in a state of Shalom with one another.

Natalia Guzman:

Perfect. The third practice is dreaming God size dreams. We know that if God gives the vision, He will provide to execute the mission. How are you guys dreaming big at Casa and encouraging the families and kids to do the same? How does it directly impact the community?

Adriana Gomez Schellhaas:

We have a very imaginative community, a very creative community. Together we've seen just the resiliency of our community. The dreaming big question is a complicated one for me because one, there are dreams of the community. There are stories that I can share, for example, there's one student that I've known since he was in fifth grade and he just graduated from Virginia Tech in their computer science program, a very prestigious and hard school to get into. And this boy's story is a difficult one. He came from a very difficult situation at home and yet has found a way through community, through individuals at Casa and outside of Casa that have helped him bring to life this big dream.

And so it's a complicated one because we also understand there's a lot of neighbors in our community who are undocumented. It's a huge wall when we're talking about immigration reform, when we're talking about someone who wants to own a home to have their family flourish, when you're talking about people who, one aren't legally able to buy a home. And so it's a complicated question because while we are dreaming big, we also understand there are huge barriers to that and we've seen God move mountains. We've seen God through connections that we've made.

One of my favorite stories is when Casa first started, there is a mom who owed so much money to like a Loanmax. She owed so much money. And because there was a connection with a lawyer that our founders had, that lawyer was able to essentially forgive that loan. And so this mountain of like, "Oh my gosh. How am I going to pay for this loan?" We were able to build bridges with individuals that had resources to be able to advocate on behalf of this mother. And this lawyer who was amazing saw that there is a hole in the contract. The fact that the mother only spoke Spanish and she signed a contract that was in English, that completely voided the contract, so that made it possible for her to like have that loan taken away. And so those are the type of things that we see.

Natalia Guzman:

Adriana, thank you so much for responding to that and telling us those stories. You actually just touched on the next principle, which is the Redemptive Age. In this one we talk about the place where light and darkness confront each other in Isaiah 1:17 we say that "We are instructed to confront darkness by learning to do right, seek justice, and defend the oppressed. And take up the causes of the fatherless and plea the case of the widow," which is exactly what you guys did in that story.

Lastly, we want to talk about how you guys are inviting into the story. Since we are invited to be partners of Jesus and have free access to His Kingdom because of the price that He already paid. How are you guys at Casa sharing this story and inviting others into it?

Adriana Gomez Schellhaas:

We'll like Casa we love to say, "Come and see." We love to invite anyone who has supported us on the financial side of things like our donors, our church partners, which National Community Church and 40 other churches support us in many ways. One way is inviting folks to come and see. We love to give tours of the neighborhood. We love to introduce folks to our parent leaders, our students. We also love when folks volunteer with us. Volunteers are like the backbone of our programs. We really can't do our programs without volunteers. And so we always need volunteers in after school programs, but more importantly, our mentoring program, which illustrates our mission, where two lives are transformed through one mentorship.

And I just believe that Chirilagua is a special place. Many communities similar and different from Casa Chirilagua or from Chirilagua, there is something special about being in a place that there are individuals who are seen as marginalized individuals. However, it's such a beautiful place where my faith has been inspired and that is where the invitation comes. We want people to come and see, to come experience what the Lord is doing and what He is, the story that He's writing in Chirilagua.

Natalia Guzman:

That was so beautiful, Adriana. Thank you so much for taking the time to share with us. I have loved learning about all the amazing work that is happening through Casa Chirilagua and through you. Is there anything else you would like to share with the NCCers walking through commission?

Adriana Gomez Schellhaas:

I'd like for people to ask the question, where is God calling you? Where has He placed you? Who are your neighbors? There is something that is awaiting when you step into relationship with people who particularly look different from you, who come from different backgrounds. There's something beautiful that happens in the Kingdom because that is what God's Kingdom is. That this tapestry that He's weaving together, that He's going to make all things new. So, ask yourself

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that question, where has God placed you and why? And who are the people around you? So, yeah.