

Camera

Diez años por Intercambio

Group instructs 1,000s in English

By Erica Meltzer
Camera Staff Writer

Intercambio de Comunidades started about as humbly as an organization can.

Shawn Camden, then a University of Colorado student majoring in Spanish, was just back from a year as an exchange student in Monterrey, Mexico, and he wanted to meet Latinos living in Boulder. He made a point of being friendly to people he met at work and on the street, and soon he was tutoring several families in English at their homes.

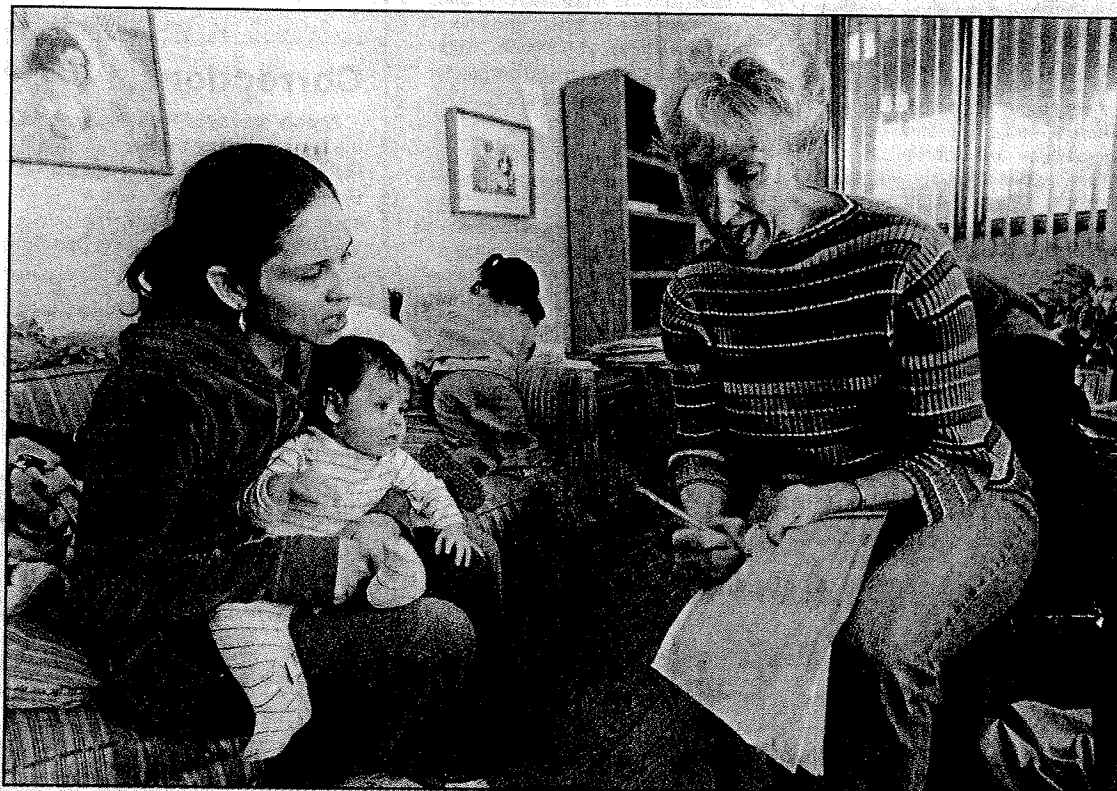
His roommate, Lee Shainis, went to Costa Rica for the summer and started working with a few families when he came back.

The pair quickly realized how large the unmet need for English-language instruction was, and they started pulling in friends, co-workers — anyone they could talk into it — to teach new families.

In early 2001, they formed Intercambio de Comunidades — Community Exchange, in English — over meetings in their kitchen. They trained volunteers in borrowed space at CU-Boulder and begged for the use of photocopiers from whoever would listen.

“We kept talking about starting really small, and that just didn’t happen,” Shainis said. “Within three months, we had more than 100 people, and we started getting calls from

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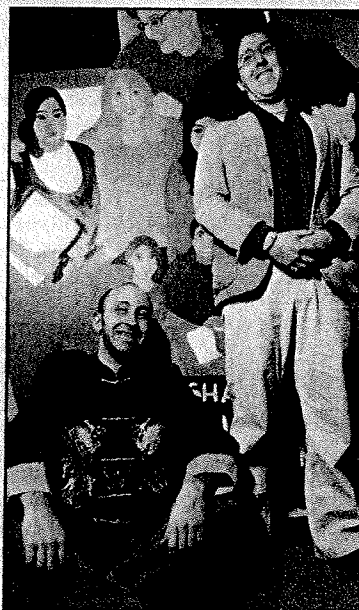


Above, Intercambio de Comunidades ESL volunteer Sylvia Jensen, right, helps Maria Cardoca with the pronunciation of a word while she holds her son, Nicolas, and her daughter, Natalia, plays during an English as a Second Language class last week at The Parenting Place in Boulder. **Watch a video interview with the founders of Intercambio de Comunidades at www.dailycamera.com.**

Mark Leffingwell | Camera

Right, Shawn Camden and Lee Shainis, founders of Intercambio De Comunidades, pose for a portrait in their office in Boulder last week. Now entering its 10th year, Intercambio employs nine people, has a \$500,000 budget and has helped more than 5,000 people in Boulder County learn English.

Kasia Broussalian | Camera



Resources

Intercambio de Comunidades

What: English classes, resource workshops, intercultural social opportunities

Contact: 4735 Walnut St., Suite B, Boulder
303-996-0275

More info: www.intercambioweb.org

El Centro Amistad

What: Referrals, civil rights education, leadership training, empowerment groups

Contact: 2222 14th St., Boulder
303-443-9899

More info: www.elcentroamistad.org

Immigrant Legal Center of Boulder County

What: Legal assistance with immigration issues

Contact: 948 North St., Suite 8, Boulder
303-444-1522

More info: www.boulderayuda.org

Intercambio spreading its model

Continued from 1A

Lafayette and Longmont.

Now entering its 10th year, Intercambio employs nine people, has a \$500,000 budget and has helped more than 5,000 people in Boulder County learn English.

With funding from a combination of private donors, government grants and the group's blowout Fiesta every fall, students pay just a small fee for materials.

Intercambio has spun off a franchise in Denver and a pilot program in Boise, Idaho, that works primarily with African refugees. It has sold its interactive English language curriculum and its guide for immigrants to communities around the state and the country.

And it has done all this with remarkably little backlash in a time of rising anti-immigrant sentiment by staying away from politics and focusing on forming close bonds of friendship between volunteer teachers and their students.

"Most people realize our whole community is better off when people speak English, understand the laws and understand our culture," Shainis said.

Alex Acosta started studying with Intercambio in its first year. He had been in the United States for three years, but he knew only the English he'd been able to pick up here and there.

"It was really hard because sometimes I just did what my supervisor told me using hand signals," said Acosta, a custodian at CU-Boulder.

With better English skills, he soon started to get promotions at work. Ten years later, Acosta continues to study with a volunteer in Longmont, where he now lives, working on pronunciation, idioms and more advanced writing skills. He's also gotten more involved in the community, serving on the Longmont Human Services Committee and the Longmont Police Review Board.

The Community Foundation was among Intercambio's first funders in 2002 and has given about \$250,000 to the group over the years.

"It has been a terrific investment," Community Foundation President Josie Heath said. "That seed money has yielded tremendous results."

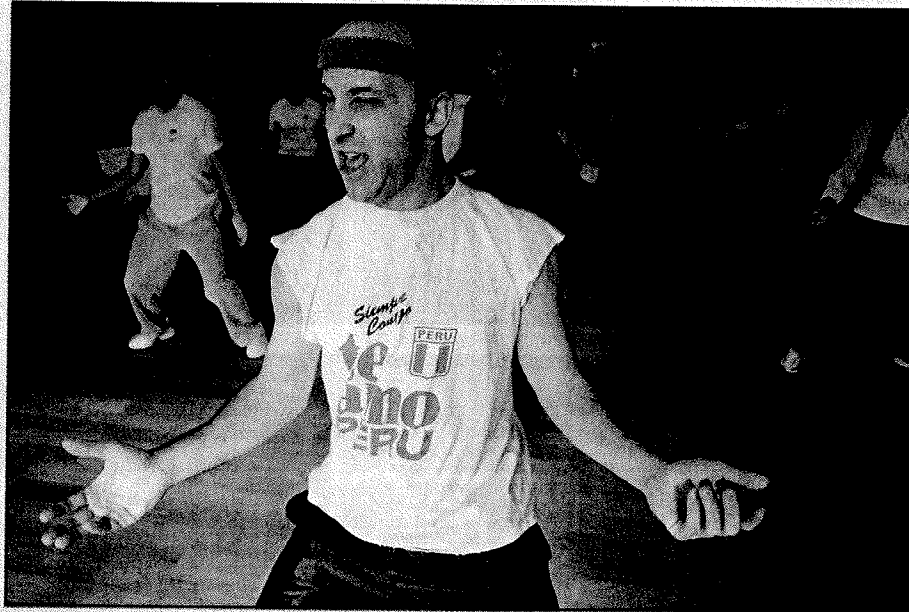
Heath said Intercambio was the first group in Boulder County to create an organized system to match volunteer teachers and adult students who wanted to learn English.

"What Intercambio was able to do was take it to scale in a huge way," Heath said. "And it went well beyond language with families really getting to know each other."

El Centro Amistad, a Boulder-based organization that promotes civil rights for immigrants, started about the same time. Centro Executive Director Jorge De Santiago said his organization often has collaborated with Intercambio, and the group fills an important need.

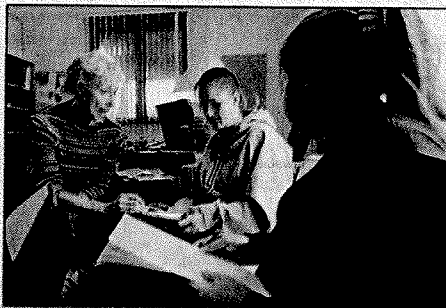
"We refer a lot of people to them," he said. "We know that one of the main problems immigrants have is the language. It's good to have something that is culturally appropriate and proven to be effective."

Camden said he believes that Intercambio has helped make Boulder a more welcoming place, one where people



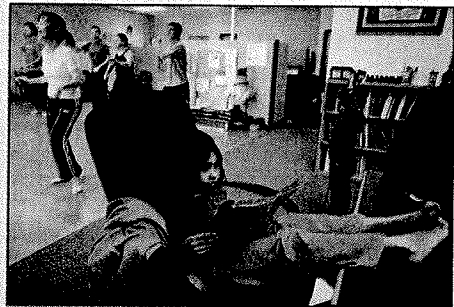
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Lee Shainis, co-director of program expansion at Intercambio De Comunidades, improvises his own routine during a dance class Saturday. The class is offered to promote exercise and cultural exchange for Intercambio participants. For a video of the class, visit www.dailycamera.com.



Mark Leffingwell | Camera

Intercambio de Comunidades ESL volunteer Sylvia Jensen helps Betty Ruiz, center, and Maria Fraire, right, with the pronunciation of a word during an English as a Second Language class held at The Parenting Place in Boulder last week.



Kasia Broussellan | Camera

Sujei Martinez, 7, reads while her brother, Jose Martinez, 5, jumps rope and watches a routine during a dance class at at Intercambio De Comunidades.

De Santiago has a more complicated view on the relationship between immigrants and the rest of the Boulder community. He said many people are welcoming, but anti-immigrant sentiment at the national level has filtered down to Boulder County. Many here are hesitant to take a stance on immigrant issues, he said.

Intercambio helps counter that by providing people with personal experience getting to know immigrants and their families. And while he sometimes wishes Intercambio would join with Centro on political and civil rights issues, the group probably has been so successful precisely because it stays away from politics.

"We don't expect them to do what we do, to go out on the street," De Santiago said. "What they do has given a life to so many families, and on an individual level, it's great. And we have had people come to us after volunteering with Intercambio who want to do more to get down to the root issues."

Shainis and Camden said many Intercambio volunteers and board members feel strongly about immigration reform, but they've made a decision to leave activism out of the program. Debating stances at board meetings distracted from their core mis-

sion. As the group turns 10, its focus is more on spreading the model to other communities that could benefit than on growing locally, but Intercambio continues to serve hundreds of new students every year.

Shainis said they could not have done it without the support of the community.

"We've been pleasantly amazed at how many kind and open-minded people from both sides are continually attracted to our mission of building re-

spectful communities," he said. "It seems like half of the city has been a part of Intercambio."

Contact reporter Erica Meltzer at 303-473-1355 or meltzere@dailycamera.com.

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