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20 gain leadership skills in PERL

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LONGMONT — Josie Vigil is not exactly the shy, retiring type. But now she's really ready to help set the pace for Longmont.

"I want to show that Latino people can have a voice and that we can make a difference in the community," said Vigil (pronounced VEE-hill).

Thanks to PERL, she's got a lot of company.

PERL, or People Engaged in Raising Leaders, is a new face on the scene. It got its start after a study that found the leadership of Boulder County's non-profit groups didn't look much like Boulder County's population. The suggested answer: Train some new leaders.

A coalition called the Boulder County Community Action Program took the lead. The result was PERL, a six-month program to train minorities in leadership skills, decision-making and just how boards and commissions work. The first 20-member class graduated Thursday night, including eight people from Longmont.

It should be noted that PERL's first class wasn't starting completely from square one. Retired teacher Marietta Gonzales had been active in the community — enough so to recruit three high-school students for PERL. Bertha Olivares, like Vigil, is a young mother who works for Alternatives for Youth. Lupita Chavez, a Skyline High School graduate, recently won a \$500 scholarship for excelling in academics, sports and community activity.

So none of them were afraid to use their voice. PERL's goal was simply to make it a little louder and a little more effective.

"I think it's going to make a difference," said Vigil, one of the Longmont graduates. "Everyone that was in PERL wants to do something for the community. And now that we're trained, we know how to take that a step further."

Even among PERL graduates, Vigil counts as busy. Her list is a long one: a program director assistant at Alternatives For Youth; a volunteer coordinator for Reading to End Racism; and chair of Sharing Achievement through Student Success and Education (SASSE), a program started by PERL members that encourages Latino students to get ahead.

Now add the fact that she's a business student at Front Range Community College and the single mother of a 5-year-old daughter, Beyonce, and the question becomes: How does she do all this?

It's a question Vigil asks herself almost every day. But working at AFY helps. The non-profit works with parents and teens, often in difficult situations.

"It's just working with all these people, having them smile and talk to you," Vigil said. "I look at them and I say, 'OK, I can actually do this.'"

It doesn't hurt that it runs in the family, too. Her mom, Mary Vigil, is similarly active and graduated from PERL with her.

"I see that sometimes there's a lot of differences in families," Josie Vigil said. "For me, it's more important to follow her footsteps."

Josie Vigil started getting involved in the community about seven years ago, volunteering to help plan the Cinco de Mayo festival. It took her about three years to really find her voice, Vigil said, but before long she was in the thick of things.

But she wanted to do more. In particular, Vigil said, she wanted to find a way to get more youth involved with their community.

That's where PERL came in. The program not only provides skills for future board members, it also provides opportunities. Several participants joined a non-profit board or commission during their training, several more got the opportunity to do so during a "recruitment fair" held after graduation.

Ironically, Vigil's new board is the Community Action Program — the coalition that helped get PERL off the ground in the first place. She's already attended two meetings and can't wait for the third.

It all comes down to the same message she's given to kids over and over again.

"You can do it," Vigil said. "You can do it. Don't let anyone tell you you can't do it. You can, because YOU want to do it."

For more information on PERL, contact Perla Delgado at 303-441-3956.

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Josie Vigil is a recent PERL graduate who works at Alternatives for Youth. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**