

LOOKING FORWARD

# A progressive force in North County



**By Mark James Miller, March 24, 2017**

Whether it is community organizing, a citizenship fair or advocating for the Farmworker Bill of Rights, chances are you will find the people of the North County Coalition in the midst of it.

Since 2010 the North County Coalition has been at the forefront of progressive causes and activities in Santa Maria and the rest of North County, and according to its chairman, Abraham Melendrez, it has every intention of continuing that role.

“The purpose of the coalition is twofold,” Melendrez said. “To have great and already existing organizations collaborate on efforts that benefit the community and raise social justice, as well as to invite community members and organize their energy.”

This, he believes, will help provide better representation from “all our community’s voices” “and “inform community members about their rights.”

The coalition is an alliance of “community, faith, and labor organizations dedicated to building progressive political power in the Santa Maria Valley,” said Hazel Davalos, who trains and supervises community organizers in Santa Barbara and Ventura County. “A few member organizations include the Santa Barbara Action Network, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770, United Domestic Workers of Santa Maria, and the Guadalupe Catholic Worker, ” adding “that while the coalition’s activities are political in nature, all of our work is done in a non-partisan way.”

Melendrez is a local product. After graduating from Allan Hancock College in 2013, he studied in Europe, interning with a consultancy firm that focused on helping nonprofit organizations in London. While in London he witnessed the organized opposition to Brexit first-hand. He studied European immigration history and French/Muslim relations in Paris, then returned to the U.S. to take his bachelor's degree in psychology from UC-Berkeley before coming back to his hometown.

“I decided to return to Santa Maria after being inspired by the multi-faceted work being done in Berkeley, Oakland and San Francisco, as well as after seeing the similarities in struggles and injustices immigrants in Europe face to those in the U.S.,” he said.

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He also feels a special need to reach out to and represent millennials who, like himself, grew up in immigrant, farm-working households in Santa Maria. He recently chaired a Millennial Committee meeting at the United Domestic Workers Hall in Santa Maria, which also functions as the Coalition's office. The coalition meets every other Monday at 5:30 p.m.

Members of the coalition have been especially active since the election of Donald Trump.

“What do you do if ICE knocks at your door?” a flyer asks, part of the coalition's ongoing efforts to educate immigrants about their rights. The coalition has also created a Truth Committee to counteract misinformation and get the progressive message out to the general public.

The coalition has stood up for Muslims in the community as well. Partnering with the Santa Maria Arab and Muslim Association, the coalition helped lead a protest only a week after Trump's original — now rescinded — proposed travel ban from seven Muslim-majority countries. The coalition also took part in the Inauguration Day protests and the Women's March on Jan. 21.

Among the goals Melendrez hopes to see happen soon is the passage of a countywide farmworker bill of rights. He also wants to hold more citizenship workshops, and “replace hateful or discriminatory policies that affect our communities.”

With its ambitious agenda and members dedicated to carrying it out, the North County Coalition is going to be a progressive force in our Central Coast politics for years to come.

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