

Indigenous crafts find a market

Grant fosters cottage industry in Greenfield

By MARIA INES ZAMUDIO

The Salinas Californian

When Merced Olivera moved to Greenfield five years ago to work in the crop fields, she never thought she might end up making a living by sharing part of her Mixtec culture.

But now, Olivera, 31, is learning how to weave traditional handmade Oaxacan textiles along with other Mixtec and Triqui women who sell their wares every Saturday at Greenfield's farmers market.

"We hope to see this (enterprise) grow," she said in Spanish, with audible traces of her indigenous language. "We want to work and help our children move forward."

Last week at a three-day workshop more than 40 women learned how to make the textiles using looms, traditional weaving machines which were brought from New Mexico.

The city of Greenfield received a \$300,000 three-year grant for use as a business incubator, said Paul Muga, city director of Redevelopment and Housing and farmers market organizer. He said helping the indigenous communities start their own businesses using something they are already good at seemed like a natural fit.

"We hope that they become a key part and an anchor to the farmers market," Muga said. "We want the indigenous community to produce a special and unique feature to the Greenfield market."

Making the transition from working in the fields to selling enough textiles to live comfortably will not happen over night, said Francisco Casas, who has worked with indigenous groups in Greenfield for years.

But most of the organizers and indigenous women remain hopeful about the future of their enterprise.

"This can become a home-grown industry with products that you can't really find anywhere else (in the Salinas Valley)," Mugan said. "These (textiles) are going to fly off the shelves in the region."

Though producing and selling traditional indigenous textiles has been on the minds of many people in Greenfield, it took years for city staff and officials to gain the trust from the indigenous community, Casas said, but the project has been worth the wait.

There are more than 4,000 people from Oaxaca, Mexico in Greenfield and most of them work in the fields, Casas said. For many of the women weaving is part of their culture, passed on from generation to generation, Olivera said. Some of the women already know how to weave, and by teaching other women, the groups are keeping their more-than-500-year culture alive, Olivera said.

"My mom didn't teach me how to weave," she said. "But I like learning, and I think it's important to teach young people so that we don't lose our culture."

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TO ATTEND

The Greenfield farmers market is held from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. every Saturday at Palm Avenue and El Camino Real in Greenfield.

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