

## TOLC HISTORY

Gary Titus, a community organizer from San Francisco, moved to Oaxaca in 1990 for restoration and retirement. Unable to sit still for long, he soon began tutoring and mentoring young people out of his garden and supporting them as they worked their way through school. In 1992, he teamed up with Jaasiel Quero, a public-school educator in Oaxaca to remove barriers holding back historically disenfranchised indigenous Oaxacan youth.

Together with other community members Jaasiel and Gary began building the Oaxaca Learning Center: a comprehensive tutoring center for Oaxaqueños and by Oaxaqueños. Jorge Rosario, one of the first students Gary supported through school, went on to become the Center's first Coordinator. Their cross-cultural team had a single-mindedness of purpose. "We all had the same vision," Jorge explains. "We walked together in the same direction." The vision was creating something beyond a tutoring center: a refuge for Oaxacan youth with limited resources. Jaasiel explains, "Gary Titus dreamed of creating a special space in which everyone could grow, listen, engage in dialogue, discuss, learn and above all initiate a process of academic, professional and personal growth."

One hundred percent staffed by Oaxaqueños, the Center's first class of 30 students graduated in 2005. The Center started off providing science, math and English tutoring but quickly expanded to match students' additional needs and address the environment in which they live. Oaxaca has one of the highest rates of gender violence across Mexico and so workshops on machismo, sexual diversity and gender equity were made mandatory. Today, the holistic program continues to evolve. The Center has grown to include individual and group psychological support and scholarships for transportation, books and tuition for continued education. Recently the school has been challenged by the CoVid-19 pandemic, specifically

mandatory school closures and students' limited access to computers and technology. Rather than let students flounder, the program implemented an imaginative distance learning approach which may evolve into a program to reach youth in more remote villages. Continuous improvement is a hallmark of the program team.

In February of 2020 over 230 supporters, students, family, staff and graduates came together to celebrate the Center's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Together we honored the growth and success of our program by focusing on students' stories. We listened as they told us that the Learning Center prepared them to take on adversity in their lives. We watched this resilience in action as an alumna, who had struggled with anxiety, mounted the stage, took the microphone and started, "Sometimes I think about what my life would be like if I'd found the Oaxaca Learning Center earlier."