

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

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Women of Change

UC San Diego Farmers' Market gives female refugees a fresh start



Photos by Alex Matthews/ Qualcomm Institute at UC San Diego

Sisters Julie and Maria Lopez are two of several new faces at the Tuesday Farmers' Market at UC San Diego. Their family-run booth, Pupusas Express, sells freshly made pupusas, a traditional Salvadorean dish of a stuffed corn tortilla filled with cheese, pork, chicken or beans.

The story behind Pupusas Express starts in 1997 in El Salvador, where Julie was studying for a degree in public relations. Only semesters away from completing her major, she became pregnant. In her community, having a child out of wedlock was heavily stigmatized and a

source of shame for both mother and family.

Seeking to shield her from ostracism, Julie and Maria's elder sister convinced Julie to come to the United States and start over. Although the pain of leaving her education behind is still evident in Julie's expression, she speaks proudly about her family's business and the progress they have made in establishing themselves at farmers' markets across San Diego.

Now, through the support of the university, she and her sister Maria are sharing their food and their stories with the campus community.

Pupusas Express is part of the latest university-community collaboration called "Source of Change," a project that helps female refugees establish a small business at the UC San Diego Farmers' Market. By offering these women a platform to establish and manage their own business, the university hopes to help them find a dignified, self-sustaining way of life that relies on neither charity nor exploitation.

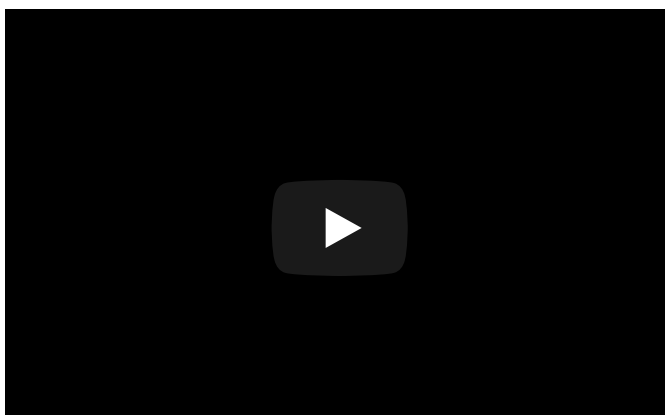
"These talented entrepreneurs are a wonderful addition to our campus. Their presence is a continuation of the university's long history of pioneering change and transforming communities," said Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla.

Owners of the Source of Change booths Pupusas Express, Hayaat Kitchens/United Africa and United Latino offer international, made-from-scratch dishes based on family recipes. Hayaat Kitchens/United Africa has a weekly presence at the Farmers' Market, while Pupusas Express and United Latino alternate weeks.



"Sisters Julie (left) and Maria Lopez (right) emigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador. They take pride in their family-run business, which sells handmade pupusas at farmers markets across San Diego."

The Source of Change booths are staffed almost entirely by refugee women who have braved the journey from more than seven countries across South America, East Africa and Southeast Asia, sometimes enduring incredible hardships, including human trafficking.



“A woman is better able to negotiate her economic, political and social rights—her human rights—when she is financially independent. I am delighted and humbled to support the university’s mission to empower underserved women with businesses for social change through the UC San Diego Farmers’ Market,” said Naila Chowdhury, director of Social Impact and Innovation, which is housed at the Qualcomm Institute at UC San Diego.

The addition of the new booths is a collaboration between UC San Diego Social Impact and Innovation and Housing, Dining and Hospitality (HDH), which provided the vendors with internal support and training. The project steering committee also includes faculty and representatives from Student Affairs; the Price Center; the Bookstore; the Sunshine Market; the Center for Student Involvement; and student leaders.

Many of the new vendors currently support their families on \$1,000 a month, in a city where the average monthly rent can far outstrip this amount. With added income from their sales, Source of Change vendors will have the chance to attain a sustainable and livable wage. Training courses in business and hospitality offered through HDH are ensuring that the participants have the skills and knowledge to support their businesses in the future.

“Having access to UC San Diego opens a door of opportunities for these small business owners and provides an invaluable opportunity for students and the campus community to learn about other cultures,” said Hemlata Jhaveri, executive director of HDH. “We are committed to providing support to these women entrepreneurs, to empower them and help them become more successful.”

Jhaveri and Chowdhury were part of a driving force that invited the new vendors to campus by posting flyers and other outreach around locations frequented by refugees. Due to space and safety restrictions, the number of vendors they could bring in was limited, but Chowdhury remains hopeful that securing more space will help other women find a foothold here in the future.



“The women who run the Hayaat Kitchens/United Africa booth at the farmers market hail from multiple countries across the African continent, including Somalia and Morocco.”

The Source of Change booths will be a center for growth and cross-cultural exchange for the community as a whole, as well. Visitors have the opportunity to hear the refugees' stories and can support them simply by purchasing a healthy meal at an affordable \$8 - \$10. This initiative also offers internship opportunities for students interested in gaining leadership skills by assisting with the development, organization and promotion of the Source of Change project.



"Source of Change booths Pupusas Express and Hayaat Kitchens sit side-by-side at the UC San Diego farmers market. A third Source of Change booth, United Latino, alternates weeks with Pupusas Express."

UC San Diego Social Impact and Innovation was founded in 2016 to create a more inclusive society through global alliances and collaboration. Increasing public awareness of social issues is a central part of the Social Impact and Innovation mission. Beyond Source of Change, Social Impact and Innovation hosts events to raise awareness and inspire action on social issues, such as human trafficking and inequality.

Contact socialimpact@ucsd.edu or visit the [Social Impact and Innovation website](#) to share your social innovation ideas and get involved.