

## Exploring Joara Foundation: New executive director to expand educational efforts

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The Exploring Joara Foundation recently announced Marie Palacios has joined their team as the executive director of the organization.

Palacios was formerly the executive director of Catawba County Hispanic Ministry or Centro Latino in Hickory, and has many years of experience working with nonprofit organizations.

Exploring Joara Foundation board secretary Dawn Poore said the organization conducted an extensive and careful search to find someone just right for the position, and there were many qualified applicants.



Marie Palacios

Palacios will be Joara's very first executive director. After the discovery of Fort San Juan at the Berry Archeological site last year, the foundation has been expanding and felt there was a need to hire someone to head the organization.

"We've been a growing organization," Poore said. "With so many things happening and the archeology expanding, we realized that we needed to be more of a regional, state and national organization. We needed one person who could coordinate all of the things that were going on, a public face for Joara and one person that would head our organization."

Poore said she thinks Palacios will be taking the organization in a different direction and has a lot to offer to the community.

"We're just extremely fortunate to have her because she has a wealth of experience with nonprofits," she said. "She's going to be able to expand our educational outreach. A lot of our efforts early on were concentrated on raising funds and doing the exploration, (but) we also want to greatly expand the educational outreach and make the awareness of the Berry site and the importance of the archeology of North Carolina and North America."

Palacios has received several awards, including the Lenoir-Rhyne University Community Service Award and the Hickory Ministerial Alliance Spirit of the King Award.

"Palacios plans to engage the public with the mission and outreach of Exploring Joara, as well as expand the educational opportunities offered to schools and students. She also will be working on the

growth of the Catawba Meadows site and will be heavily involved in plans for the 450th anniversary celebration of European exploration of the Americas,” according to a press release.

After working within the Latino community for years, Palacios said she is excited to provide more of a common education about the Latino and Spanish history and influence in the country.

“Fort San Juan is exciting, and it’s also education, because it shows that the Spanish actually were here, and it’s a different part of the history books that were either skipped over or never really paid attention to,” she said. “It’s kind of a forgotten past.

“Many people may not understand the Latino and the Spanish influence in our country and will hopefully understand it a little more.”

She also is excited for kids to learn more about people and cultures that they may not be familiar with, Palacios said.

“I always studied the Cherokee and English settlements, but never in school actually focused on the Catawba Indians and the Spanish influence in this region,” she said. “The Exploring Joara Foundation is going to open up an entirely new chapter for the kids in the future.”

What the Exploring Joara Foundation does is a part of the people because it’s all a part of history, Palacios said.

“All history is important because it tells us where we come from,” she said. “Every little piece of that history is important in understanding how we got here today.”

Palacios said she hopes that the organization having an executive director will bring more attention to Joara and everything that they do.

“I’m hoping that because I’ll be present, Joara will have a stronger presence in the community, because they’ll have a director accessible to the community (who will) generate the resources that are needed so our educational and outreach projects can move forth in the upcoming years.”

Palacios said the Catawba Meadows site that the organization is working on will be a way for people to “explore Indian life” and show how tribes lived when they were here. The first Indian house is complete, and they will be working on the second as a community group project. Schools and groups will be participating in helping to build the interpretive center.

“It really is designed to be a community effort,” she said. “The intent is to engage the community in this building process so that they can understand how the Indian tribes that occupied that land before us built their homes and put the community piece back into education.”

They hope to also have a museum and tours of the site in upcoming years, Palacios said.

She also would like to encourage people in the community to get involved with Joara’s membership program to support their efforts, Palacios said.

“It supports the education that Joara is offering and allows families to get engaged,” she said of the program. “Consider the possibility of supporting our work, because this is going to be work that is extremely important to the children of our entire community. We’ll hopefully be developing an even stronger program.”

With a yearly membership, people can become involved in archeology labs at the Wall Center, member days and other events, field trips and Annual Foundation meetings.

For more information on the Exploring Joara Foundation and upcoming meetings, call 828-439-2463 or visit [www.exploringjoara.org](http://www.exploringjoara.org).