



Neighbors Milvia Randall, 65, left, and Sheila Kersey, 66, chat outside their homes in Sunrise Village Retirement Community, a service of Southside Community Center in San Marcos, Texas. Photo by Nile Sprague.

# The Umbrella

SOUTHSIDE COMMUNITY CENTER IS A SHELTER DURING LIFE'S STORMS FOR PEOPLE IN SAN MARCOS, TEXAS.

by **NILE SPRAGUE** and **GABRIEL RAMOS-ROCCHIO**

Southside Community Center is a very busy place, providing temporary shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, quick financial assistance for those who can't pay a utility bill, a place for youth to gather and constructively use their free time after school, renovations for nearly uninhabitable homes

in the community and inexpensive homes for the elderly.

In 1972 United Methodist Women founded Southside Community Center, in San Marcos, Texas, to provide services and programs for the disadvantaged, help families meet their basic needs and increase awareness in the

community.

There are five distinct services that gather under the Southside Community Center umbrella: youth services, homeless shelter and meals program, specific assistance, summer work camp and Sunrise Village Retirement community.

"Corey" and "Chippo" stand outside Southside Community Center's homeless shelter after eating a meal. Below, Katarina Solizar, right, a freshman at Texas State University, plays with teens in the Southside youth program.

## Dominoes

The Youth Services Bureau (YSB) has addressed the fallout from an inhalant abuse problem in the San Marcos area since 1975.

Donnie Ortiz is one of YSB's first participants. Twenty-one years ago when Mr. Ortiz was 17, he was convicted of grand theft auto after stealing in order to sustain a drug habit. "I was using heroin, cocaine, smoking crack, sniffing gasoline, paint-thinner, varnish whatever I could get my hands on," Mr. Ortiz said. "I went from a 160-pound athlete to a 98-pound sack of balls in about two years. My mom tried to get me help, so she came to YSB."

Program staff stepped in and advocated on his behalf in court, which helped to keep him out of prison. "They were my advocates when I was a teenager to try and sober me up, and they did." Although Mr. Ortiz still has some trouble with the law in regard to minor fines, he has come a long way from the heroin addict he once was.

Over time, YSB's focus evolved into an after-school program for at-risk youth between the ages of 11 and 17. Program director Julie Holler said youth enroll in high school and can participate until they graduate. Everyone accepted into the program must play a game of dominoes with Eugene, YSB's 83-year-old primary foster-grandparent.

"He's kind of our intro into the program," Ms. Holler explained, smiling. "We always make sure that the kids sit down and play dominoes with Eugene, which makes them feel more comfortable, and we can observe whether they're at ease with the older generation."

Many of the kids lack social skills and don't know how to carry on a conversation. With their parents working to make ends meet, no one is home to



A volunteer serves up chili dogs for Southside Community Center's meal program.



Nile Sprague

meet them after school, and they are left to their own devices. Many spend hours in front of the computer playing video games.

"I had one kid who wanted to go into the computer lab all the time," Ms. Holler recalled. "I asked him to first spend time with Eugene or some of the volunteers because they were here for him, and then he could go into the computer lab. After some time passed, he stopped asking to go into the computer lab. I think he valued the interaction with the volunteers and Eugene more than the 'reward' he received playing video games on the computer."

Not only are the youth encouraged to engage the foster grandparents and volunteers, but they are also encouraged to volunteer in the community to build their resumes for both college and work. The volunteer work includes going to animal shelters to clean cages, or to the park where they might pull weeds, haul mulch and pick up cigarette butts. During the summer months, the youth go to a miniature horse farm.

"There's a lovely lady who is a cancer survivor and owns a miniature horse farm, and we help her wash all the little horses and all the big horses," Ms. Holler said. "By the end of the summer the kids are comfortable enough that we take the horses to the nursing homes and visit the folks there."

Ms. Holler has a strong core of 11 volunteers. Many are students from nearby Texas State University pursuing degree programs ranging from criminal justice to international studies. "They love mission work and are very inspiring to the kids," she said. "We talk about college every single day. It's expected around here that the kids will go to college. I started here seven years ago,

Julie Holler, center, works with youth at Southside Community Center in San Marcos, Texas.



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and the kids that are graduating from high school this year that came here on a regular basis are all going to college. I'm so excited."

Volunteer Katarina Solizar, a freshman at Texas State University, plans to return to help the program after she's completed her required community service. Choosing to work off a fine she received for a minor infraction on campus, Ms. Solizar said she'd never even heard of the Youth Services Bureau.

"I wish back in my hometown we had something like this because I know there's a bunch of kids that don't do anything," she said. "There are a lot of kids who get into trouble."

National statistics show young people are more apt to get into trouble —

whether doing drugs, getting pregnant, joining gangs, being injured by violence or being violent — between the time after school and 6:30 in the evening.

When asked how she felt about being in the position of a role model, Ms. Solizar responded, "It's a little weird. I'm not used to it. You have to watch what you say and do. It's a lot more complicated, but it makes me feel mature and makes me think twice about what I say and what I do, so it's beneficial for me and the kids."

#### Service then Schlitterbahn

During the summer months, 400 to 600 junior high and high school students from several states descend on the town

of San Marcos for summer work camp. United Methodist youth groups stay in Texas State University dorms and work four days a week, renovating homes for individuals who can't afford to pay for the repairs.

"It's not just painting," said Julie Gray, activities director at Southside Community Center. "Last year we completely gutted a house, and we were working on the frame, drywall, floors, bathtub, kitchen counters and more."

Tuesdays and Thursdays the youth attend worship services, and on Fridays they go to a nearby water amusement park. Although the amusement park is fun and memorable, it doesn't compare with Thursday evenings when the kids have a meal with the homeowners.

“I think it’s one of the best nights,” Ms. Gray said. “Even if the kids don’t get to see the finished product, they get to see it in the sense of who they’re helping. The homeowners stand up and say thank you. They’re all very grateful.”

### A place to retire

Sunrise Village Retirement Community’s quaint, one-bedroom homes, with porches, small manicured lawns and foundation plantings reflect the individual personalities of the residents.

“Because this is a good community to

live in, we don’t have a big turnover,” said Beatrix Natal, Sunrise Village property manager. “I can say after being here for seven years, there’s only been two times where we weren’t completely full.”

The village is self-sustaining except for a meals program and a van used to transport the seniors. The meals program, known as the “Bistro,” offers the seniors a nutritional meal and the opportunity to socialize. For those seniors physically unable to leave their homes, a to-go meal option is provided where warm meals are delivered to their doorstep.

Besides the Bistro on Wednesdays, there is bingo on Thursdays, and there are frequent trips into town for medical appointments and shopping.

Gloria Saenz, 69, is one of the residents at Sunrise Village. A mother of two boys, she lived with one of her sons but chose to move out.

“They need to be alone. They don’t need their mother hanging around with them. I had an argument with him to let me move over here. I love it,” Ms. Saenz said. “I’m close to my doctor, close to the hospital. I’m on my own.

And I’m friends with everyone here.”

When Milvia Randall, 65, and Sheila Kersey, 66, also residents at Sunrise Village, were asked how they liked the village, Ms. Randall answered, “I love it here. It’s open, people are friendly. I love it, except I don’t have enough closet space.”

“Amen,” added Ms. Kersey. 

**Nile Sprague** is a photojournalist based in Mendocino, Calif. **Gabriel Ramos-Rocchio** is a freelance journalist, poet and horticulturist in New York City.

Julie Holler and Katarina Solizar plan an activity for youth.



Nile Sprague

## Fellowship of the Homeless

SOUTHSIDE COMMUNITY CENTER IS PART OF A CARING COMMUNITY OF HOMELESS PEOPLE IN SAN MARCOS, TEXAS.

by **NILE SPRAGUE** and **GABRIEL RAMOS-ROCCHIO**

Julie Gray is activities director at Southside Community Center in San Marcos, Texas, now, but she began as a volunteer at the center’s homeless shelter.

“When I got the job I felt God had just opened doors and honored my heart,” she said. “Here I’d fallen in love with a place and people and something I loved to do on my own, and I now get to do it as a job.”

During that first year of volunteering, Ms. Gray was often the only one in the kitchen preparing, cooking and serving 8 to 12 people a night. Now, the shelter serves anywhere from 20 to 40 people. “The need keeps growing,” she said. “We are seeing more homeless, and

we’re seeing a ton more people coming to the shelter each night. I think a lot of it is the economy. People are losing their jobs who have never been in this situation before. They come in and really don’t know what to do because they’ve never been without a job. It’s been really tough.”

Corey, 20, unemployed, but interviewing for jobs, and Chippo, 21, self-employed as a jewelry maker, are two frequent clients of Southside’s daily meals program. When asked why they attended the meals program, Chippo answered, “It’s better than stealing food and



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Patsy Butler, 63, once stayed at Southside Community Center’s homeless shelter after her husband died. Now she drives a van to bring homeless people to Southside’s meals program.

being thrown in jail or having to pay a fine you can’t pay. I was arrested for stealing food. I hadn’t eaten in three days, and I was sick. I got caught stealing sushi. I thought sushi goes bad after a couple of hours, so it was a reasonable loss. It wouldn’t hurt the owners. When I got caught, I asked to be incarcerated because I couldn’t afford to pay the fine or afford a meal. With something

like this food program, there’s no need for stealing.”

Corey agreed.

“I’m not homeless but I probably will be if I don’t get the job I’m interviewing for,” Corey said. “Coming here helps me at the end of the month when I’ve paid all my bills but have no food in the house.”

Chippo, who lives in a tent at a campsite in San Marcos, believes the meals and shelter program offered by Southside Community Center keep a lot of folks from teetering and falling over the edge. “Sometimes all you need is that little bit of help to keep your head above water,” he said.

The shelter offers free laundry and shower services. It used to have only one washer and dryer, but now there are two to accommodate the influx of people. There’s a sign-up list for both the laundry and shower facilities. More food has been donated by the area food bank, which has helped with the enormous increase in food expenditures. Feeding 40 people a night boosted the grocery bill to \$4,000 a month, even with help

from the food bank.

“The food bank does an incredible job of giving us food that’ll keep our clients nourished,” Ms. Gray said. “For some of them this is the only meal that they’ll get all day, so that’s really our goal: to keep them really healthy and nourished all day.”

Sometimes Ms. Gray takes the opportunity to sit and talk with the people she serves. “I just fell in love with the people,” Ms. Gray said. “You think they’re coming only to receive, but they give so much. They give you a sense of purpose.”

Ms. Gray shared the story of a man named “Gary” who would come in, speak with her about his beliefs and all the hard times he’d had, then leave with all of his possessions on his back in hopes of finding shelter under a bridge for the night. “Then he got a truck driving job, and he’s doing wonderful,” she said, calling him one of the nicest men she’d ever met. I still hear from him.” 

Then there was “Barb,” a woman who hadn’t had a sober day during the first

two years of Ms. Gray’s tenure at the shelter, who suddenly quit drinking and has now been sober for a year.

“She was sleeping on a mattress under a bridge,” Ms. Gray said. “One time we had such a heavy rain the water just swept the mattress away. Now she’s a caretaker for a woman and lives in her house.”

“The shelter isn’t just a place to get food and to eat and to shower, there’s fellowship here. There’s a community among the homeless. They really take care of each other and watch out for each other. When we come together at night, there’s laughter and wonderful conversation, and there’s joy. That’s something you wouldn’t expect at a homeless shelter, something you wouldn’t expect from people who are going out at night to find a place to sleep somewhere in the woods, under a bridge or in a parking garage.” 

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