

## Sisters' program yields brighter futures

Judy Gross | Apr. 10, 2010



Mercy Srs. Jennifer Lang, left, and Michele Schroek, who both taught with San Jose Mobile School, visit with former students Daniela and Senaida and their families in Ohio in 2009.

Migrant farm workers in this country have always faced a multitude of challenges, more so if they have children. Decent housing, food and medical care are rare commodities for those who move from harvest to harvest. A lack of permanency extracts a deep price on children whose education is continually disrupted by moving on as crops ripen.

An innovative program started by Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in 1994, (and featured in *NCR*, Oct. 14, 1994) provided a mobile school for children whose parents followed a migratory path from Sandusky County, Ohio, to Plant City, Fla. Sr. Gaye Moorhead, with the backing of her order, wrote grants, asked donors and recruited a team of teachers, a laywoman nurse, a social worker and a bus driver. Drivers, including Moorhead, covered miles, from one migrant camp to another picking up children for school.

Although San Jose Mobile School lasted only until 2001, the impact of an unbroken educational experience for youngsters from kindergarten through third grade laid a foundation lasting until adulthood. Before San Jose, migrant children fell far behind students who stayed in one classroom -- following the crops with their parents meant no child could complete an entire school year with one teacher.

Parents eagerly embraced the idea of knowing where their children were being taught, and who was teaching them. Moorhead said the program was "extremely rewarding, because of the commitment of parents who wanted the best for their children." The children themselves began to form community and flourish in the environment. The program began with kindergartners and first-graders, gradually expanding each year until, at its highest enrollment, 56 students, kindergarten through fifth grade, were in the program.

One former San Jose student, Isabel Arevalo, says today, "What the program did for me was exactly what my mom wanted it to give me, a foundation." Arevalo, whose mother herself dropped out of school to go work in the fields, is soon to be a college graduate.

"Migrant families have a hard road here," Moorhead said. "Many states won't give scholarships to children of undocumented workers." She noted that as a driver, "I never once saw a white face in the fields."

Mercy Sr. Mary Rosaria, a former teacher at St. Joseph School, which hosted San Jose students in Ohio, noted the fear of deportation often would prevent parents from asking for help, but she would tell them, "Only ask for services for the children." She said St. Joseph had a "migrant food package," for hungry families, no questions asked.

Retired St. Joseph School secretary Jean Foos said if parents pulled out of the San Jose program, "The sisters would go looking for them." Often there would be problems with Green Cards, the government working permit, so the sisters would help with the mountains of paperwork. Foos said she loved seeing the kindergarteners and first-graders return to Ohio because "they had a big smile on their face." She was sorry to see the program end because of the good it accomplished.

Almost all San Jose students had parents who only spoke Spanish and as the children became fluent in English, said Mercy Sr. Michele Shroeck, one of San Jose's traveling teachers, "the oldest child in the family became the primary translator for the family."

Shroeck taught second and third grades and still stays in touch with many of the students. She says she was amazed at how easily the young San Jose children learned to read. By the end of their third grade, her students were reading at grade level or beyond. "It all had to do with having the same teacher and in the same class." Now she helps those same students to fill out college and scholarship applications. Though some did return to the fields when they reached 14, the legal farm work age, most families understood the value of education required for citizenship.

The logistics of moving teachers and staff, two vans and two cars from Ohio to Florida, finding classroom space and living quarters proved just one of their challenges. Fortunately a Catholic school in each area gave them classrooms to teach in and generous people furnished housing.

What Isabel Arevalo's mother, Margie, wanted for her children was a better future than she had. Growing up, she went from Texas, to Ohio to Florida following the crops, never completing one full school year, or participating in extracurricular activities. Falling so far behind, Margie Arevalo dropped out of school and went into the fields.

"The mobile school was not only a way for me to succeed," said Isabel Arevalo, now 21, "but was also the push my parents needed to break the chain and out of working in the fields." Now Margie Arevalo speaks impeccable English and works as a migrant liaison in Mulberry, Fla.

San Jose Mobile School, a faith-based program, received no government funding, so when the money from donors and from the Mercy Sisters ran out, the program ended. By that time, the migratory pattern had changed and more farm workers had settled into permanent locations.

However, the program leaves behind a legacy of success. According to Moorhead, the 56 students who were served by San Jose have furthered their education, with the youngest students now in high school.

There was always a hope the mobile school program would be replicated. Maria Pouncey is director of a program stretching across 17 counties in agricultural North Florida. The Panhandle Area Educational Consortium works with migrant and farm worker children in some of the poorest counties in Florida. Pouncey heard of the mobile school and said she wishes there were one like it in the area she serves.

The consortium has partnered with Collier County for two teachers who accompany children of Immokalee tomato pickers for summer sessions in Gadsden County. Volunteer migrant advocates have, with in-home tutorials, taught parents healthy eating and preventive medicine for preschool children. The consortium also

established the first Girl Scout troop for migrant girls.

Serving up to 1,000 migrant students a year stretches consortium staff and volunteers thin. If the San Jose Mobile School is ever reopened, Pouncey said, she would "welcome them with open arms."

[Judy Gross writes from Tallahassee, Fla.]

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