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Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 11

Gabe Martinez Transcript Index & Excerpt

El Caldito Dining Room and Food Distribution Volunteer

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

14 August 2018

La Paz Room at Jardin de Los Niños on the Hope Campus

Sponsored by Doña Ana County Historical Society

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Project History

The Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH) is a homeless services corridor in Las Cruces, New Mexico. In the 1970s, Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church began Soup Kitchen service which later became El Caldito. As need for food and healthcare clinical service increased throughout the 1980s, the Las Cruces community supported Saint Andrew's congregation members with the opening of Saint Luke's Health Clinic. With a long history of compassionate services for visitors, the City of Las Cruces recognized the importance of limiting distance and travel-time between public health and human service organizations located throughout different parts of the city.

Incorporated as a non-profit in 1991, additional support continued to form what became known as a collaborative alliance with operations at 999 Amador Avenue nearby to downtown Las Cruces. In 2011, following a particularly harsh Las Cruces "Deep Freeze" winter that caused health concerns for the housed, and deaths for the homeless due to exposure, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope staff banded together with clients to appeal to the City of Las Cruces for sanctioned overnight camping status to found the Camp Hope transitional living program.

In 2018, the Hope Stories project collected fifteen oral history interviews to learn about the development of the consolidated services model at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. The term "Corridor of Care" refers to a perspective in the healthcare industry known as the consolidated services model that helps people access health and human service related programs in centrally located "Hub" or "Node" areas.

This public history graduate project asked participating narrators questions about how the Las Cruces community first began to advance, reinforce, and collaborate through the actions necessary to become the Hope Campus at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. Rather than conduct interviews with those who experienced homelessness, the project features staff and volunteer narrators who shared community engagement stories about the consolidated services corridor concept.

Two additional perspectives from outside the Hope Campus, the fourth interview with Glenn Trowbridge took place at CARE Complex in Las Vegas, Nevada, an out-of-state counter-balance to the history of homeless consolidated services in the United States; while the fifteenth interview with Kit Elliot and Meg Long occurred at Aggie Cupboard on NMSU campus, a satellite food pantry inspired by Casa de Peregrinos.

Today's work to help the homeless in Las Cruces is the result of a compassionate, multi-organizational approach by non-profit service providers. In 2018, these five core non-profit homeless services include Mesilla Valley Community of Hope; Casa de Peregrinos food pantry; El Caldito soup kitchen; Jardin de Los Niños educational program; and Amador Health Center (formally Saint Luke's Health Clinic).

With Hope Campus the geographic center of non-profit homeless service providers in Las Cruces, it is important to note resources offered by City of Las Cruces, State of New Mexico Health and Human Services, and many other local organizations not located at 999 Amador Avenue. For a comprehensive listing of community service organizations, including for those experiencing homelessness, use online search term "Las Cruces Community Resource Guide," or ask for an updated copy.

Narrator Summary

Gabe Martinez grew up in the agricultural “Bread basket” of California’s San Joaquin valley. A veteran of the United States Air Force who, following “Retirement,” also served with the United States Air Coastal Guard, Martinez has helped people during times of distress, times of repair, and times of homelessness and hunger. Martinez was “Part of the 325th Bomb Squadron” on Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington; later studied Business Management at NMSU, and, more recently, commuted from Deming to Las Cruces, New Mexico to help prevent hunger.

Martinez volunteered at El Caldito soup kitchen to stay active, to give back to the community, and to limit food insecurity for the people of southern New Mexico. With kindness, respect, and collaborative problem solving conversation, Martinez visits with clients, staff, and volunteers to connect common interest through art, storytelling, or likeminded volunteerism, and to laugh and joke with the spirit of resiliency. For places like Mesilla Valley Community of Hope to exist, Martinez describes geographically convenient Consolidated Services Models for homeless health and human services. To increase beneficial outcomes for those unable to reach the Hope Campus in Las Cruces, Martinez suggests an increase of community “Satellite” food pantry locations throughout Doña Ana County.

A keen lapidary artist, Martinez carves personalized, memorialized, and strikingly beautiful Yuca and Sotol Walking Sticks as gifts to military veterans. Whether unloading the big trucks of Casa de Peregrinos, or keeping the bread basket wagon stocked with gleaned donuts and bakery items at El Caldito, Martinez’s volunteerism brings people together to help one another address New Mexico’s poverty, homelessness, and hunger.

Index of first hour

00:03 - Interview introduction

01:00 - El Caldito volunteer duties; Juices, unloading trucks, food gleaning; Supermarket “Biggest donors”

02:47 - Unloading Casa de Peregrinos’ “Big truck”

03:32 - Available El Caldito foods “To-go,” Local farmer and orchard food donations

05:17 - El Caldito, Hope Campus, Gospel Rescue Mission origins

07:04 - Traveling migrant workers, visitors from “Different parts of the United States;” El Caldito volunteerism, “Using the resources you have”

08:50 - Grandparents bringing grandkids to El Caldito; Importance of consistent and available hot meals; Monthly budget for high food costs

10:07 - Early education; First learning about “Retiring” after work, “If your work didn’t kill you, you just kept on working— until you died.”

12:00 - Mendota, California; Picking cotton at age eight “Was like going to school,” adding strap to gunny sack to weigh cotton during harvest

13:57 - Tranquility Union High School; School bussing students from surrounding Mendota farming communities

15:01 - Modern-day Southern California drought conditions; High costs to improve well water systems; Luna County, New Mexico well water

16:21 - Sonoran desert borderland farmers denied access

17:00 - Tapping farming well water systems; Retrieving fifty-five gallon drums of water for personal use

18:44 - Infrastructure and developed areas of Mendota, California; Flood conditions following rainstorms; Waiting for the bus in the mud

Index of first hour (cont.)

20:40 - Mendota's basic needs met with "No commodities," riding the Greyhound bus to Fresno to buy school clothes

21:51 - San Joaquin Valley and harvesting food throughout California

24:24 - United Farm Workers (UFW) "Short Hoe" ban to prevent injury, California economic agriculture; Supplying Port-o-Potties; Lack of fresh drinking water, and fieldworker labor conditions for men and women

26:14 - Foods between farmworker families; "When there's a drought then you're— Everybody's suffering;" Necessary travel to where the work is; Picking grape in northern California wineries

29:16 - New Mexico and California UFW influence and activities compared; Filipino farmworkers of Delano

31:27 - Salinas Valley and Monterey, California; Picked lettuce "By-hand;" No active union for farmworker job loss after introduction of cotton machinery "Done in the field"

33:55 - No protections for laid off farmworkers; Process of picking and packing cantaloupe trucks in the field; Mexican labor force economics, and housing camps of the El Paso Bracero program

36:18 - United State Air Force; Spokane, Washington 325th Bomb Squadron; Mid-flight KC-135 "Re-fuelers" for B-52 aeroplanes; Air National Guard in Fresno, California

39:30 - NMSU Business Management degree; Wife Imelda's business years as professional hair salon stylist

42:50 - El Caldito perspectives on managerial communication and people listening skills; Retiree volunteer numbers and educational skills

45:05 - Las Cruces churches, El Paso Electric, Solar Electric; Contributions to Community Service hours to receive "Food Stamps" or other types of "Subsistence" support

Index of first hour (cont.)

45:52 - Mental illness, drug abuse, and early education needs; Supported onsite MVCH Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous programs

47:27 - Societal perspectives on the hardships of homelessness; “People are unaware of what goes on.”

48:10 - El Caldito volunteer resiliency; Difficulty of maintaining health during experiences of hunger and homelessness

49:37 - Wife Imelda’s volunteer hairstylist contribution to MVCH event “Stand Down” for veterans

51:13 - Making El Caldito volunteer connections through lapidary, carving, and stained glass classes at Munson Senior Center

54:15 - Lapidary, carving, pyrography artistry, and creating numerous Yucca Walking Sticks for military veterans

Index of second hour

01:06:34 - Making artist and volunteer connections

01:08:21 - Kitchen support for Potter's Guild "Empty Bowls" El Caldito annual fundraiser

01:11:57 - Visitors seeking to duplicate MVCH Consolidated Services Model for communities outside New Mexico

01:13:21 - Fragmented homeless services of Albuquerque in need of centrally located collaboration

01:15:00 - MVCH support for residents of New Mexico Colonias; Commodities delivery from Las Cruces organizations

01:16:25 - Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and available Roadrunner Food Bank commodity pick-up locations

01:18:27 - El Caldito maintenance, yearly income from "Empty Bowls," and the importance of consistent small donations

01:21:00 - City of Las Cruces funding, community support, and private donations during economic downturns; El Caldito operation costs

01:23:50 - Perception "We don't have a homeless problem" because of MVCH resources and location; Albuquerque homelessness; Las Cruces people without overnight shelter who rely on El Caldito to get-by

01:26:30 - Clients who return to become volunteers

01:27:47 - Personal self-care habits; Meditation, walking, home improvement

01:29:47 - Wellness programs for Quality of Life support; Munson Senior Center; bereavement workshops led by long-time El Caldito volunteer

Index of second hour (cont.)

01:32:00 - Narrator perspectives on soup kitchen operations, student volunteer engagement, food distribution throughout county locations

01:36:00 - “Homegrown” cooperative farms to increase food access; NMSU farming and harvesting classes; competitive supermarket food prices; Las Cruces Farmer’s Market SNAP & TANF “Point system”

01:39:24 - Hiring homeless clients within the Las Cruces community; MVCH Mano y Mano day labor program

01:40:50 - Increased opportunity for Las Cruces transportation, city bus upgrades, and optimized “Bus Pass” program

01:43:40 - Necessity of transportation, and local volunteer’s free bicycle repair program; potential for bicycle related non-profit organizations; Ciudad Juarez housing renovation activities

01:46:36 - United States soup kitchen rankings

01:47:42 - The future of El Caldito; Navigating extreme weather conditions on the Hope Campus; Importance of local community volunteering and visiting out-of-state volunteers; Increased access for the disabled and handicapped

Interview 11 Excerpt — Gabe Martinez:

Well. I think that a lot of times you cut out “A piece of the pie” that works for you, and you deal with that. And sometimes you get lost in that piece. But, here at the Community of Hope a lot of the pieces are “Cut together,” and they make a good effort, and have the resources to make a good change when you got a lot more ideas coming into play. I’ve always noticed the people that come into the area, and get involved, are the people that bring in new ideas.

We had two people that came in from Waco, Texas. Two ladies. And they had heard about El Caldito. And Gabe Anaya sat down with them because they wanted to know how they made it run somewhat steady, and somewhat— What they did to get to where they’re at right now. So, they were gonna take it back to Waco, and try to kind of mimic this. And try to do that up there where they had everything together. Their home there. They would always talk to the Community of Hope people. The Tent City. The clinic. And then, they went to the soup kitchen. And say, “You know what? We have something similar to this, but it’s all scattered.”

The same thing in Albuquerque. Albuquerque is so big. All the people in there, they have the same resources as here, but they’re not concentrated in one area. And that’s what the problem is up there. You don’t have everybody coming together because they are really protective of the [Pie] piece that they have.

Gabe Martinez:

And once they find out that they can— it'll work. Then, you can do that. You have a very— You have, like I said, you have a lot of people that want to do things, but they don't have— They don't know where to go.

Sometimes, it's not that you might not want to talk to somebody, it's that you're really tied up in the middle of lunch, or you're unloading something, or you're doing something, and if they had one place to go, you could say, "Hey, you know what? I want to meet with you because I want to throw this idea out, and see where I could help."

So, you see a lot of stuff that'll work together here. You don't have to go ten miles down the road, or twenty miles down the road, or half a block. Everything— everything is here. And then, you're close across the street to the [Gospel] Rescue Mission. And they also have the availability of what's here, too.

I think right now the economy is getting better, but when the economy was sliding you could see it in a lot of donations. The city was strapped for money, also. So, they had to do a lot of fundraising in here. And then, putting for grants. And I think they started doing more grants to get more funding throughout. Because sometimes it's shared between El Caldito and Community of Hope, and sometimes it's just a grant for tent city [Camp Hope]. Sometimes, it's just a grant for the soup kitchen. So, a lot of the time they do combine them to get funding.

Gabe Martinez:

A lot of times, we have people, companies that come in, and they'll say, "Hey, you know what? We just got word that you guys put out a newsletter." And "We had sent some volunteers."

And "We got word that you guys needed funding for a new refrigerator." "You're putting on a dinner, and you wanted to get extra funding for that. So, we're going to donate to you." On a private side. So, that's what they have a lot of times.

And what happens is, a lot of people— There's a guy that comes down, I forgot his name, but he comes in every year, and during Thanksgiving he'll buy turkeys, and he'll buy all this other stuff, and then he'll give the soup kitchen a check for two to three hundred dollars.

Or, at work, some company might say, "You know what? For Christmas, we heard you guys are always hurting for stuff, but we're just going to give you—" You know, "We collected five hundred dollars at work from our workers." And they said, "We'll bring down the check today."

So, you deal with that. But, as far as funding for the soup kitchen and that, a lot of times it's private stuff that comes in. The small donations is what makes El Caldito.

Gabe Martinez:

And, like I said, it depends. You get a big chunk of money, but the majority of it is— Even though you're just giving one meal a day, the refrigerators are running Twenty-four [Hours a day] Seven [Days a week]. The air conditioning comes on, and then, at peak season, it's more expensive than other times.

And then, you don't know what's going to come down the road. The van might break. You got to fuel the van. You got to maintenance the van. You got to make sure it's safe for people to go out there. And then, you got to replace equipment, and you got to replace stuff. So, you try to budget for that stuff. But, you never know what's going to come up.

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Transcripts and Recordings

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