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New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 14

Julie Boxer Transcript Index & Excerpt

El Caldito Soup Kitchen Crew Chief Chef

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

21 September 2018

in the narrator's home

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 a small lunch service which later became El Caldito Soup Kitchen. As need for food and healthcare clinical service increased, the Las Cruces community supported the Saint Andrew's congregation 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 shape collaborative alliances with operations at 999 West Amador nearby to downtown Las Cruces. In 2011, following a particularly harsh "Deep Freeze" winter that caused health concerns and exposure deaths for the homeless, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope staff banded together with Hope Campus clients, appealed to the City of Las Cruces for sanctioned overnight camping status, and soon founded Camp Hope transitional living program.

In 2018, the Hope Stories project collected fifteen oral history interviews to learn about the legacy of organizational homeless services at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. The term "Corridor of Care" refers to a healthcare industry perspective known as the Consolidated Services Model that helps people to access health and human service related programs quickly, reliably, and within centrally located "Hub" or "Node" areas of potentially consistent preventative care.

This public history graduate project asked participating narrators questions about how the Las Cruces community first began to advance, reinforce, and collaborate with 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 consolidated services “Campus” concepts.

The project ended without narrators to represent the community’s food pantry. Founded in 1979, Casa de Peregrinos relocated to the Hope Campus as an alliance member during the 1991 opening, and today continues to serve Doña Ana County with increased food delivery and expanded satellite locations. 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 the 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 organizations 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 assistance and resources offered by the City of Las Cruces, the New Mexico Department of Health, and the New Mexico Department of Human Services. For an updated and comprehensive list of regional community services, insightful for anyone experiencing homelessness, inquire City of Las Cruces or MVCH with search term “Las Cruces Community Resource Guide.”

Narrator Summary

Julie Boxer grew up hiking the forests of Washington state, a colder, rainier, Pacific northwest ocean climate compared to the Chihuahuan Desert which surrounds the City of Las Cruces. Boxer became an outdoors skills trainer with The Mountaineers, a Master of History at University of Washington, and contracted overseas teacher for the United States Air Force with University of Maryland.

When deciding not to become a career teacher, Boxer chose to combine the love of cooking and the livelihood of restaurant ownership with Dad's Place, a breakfast and lunchtime diner located in the downtown Washington State Capitol district of Olympia. With laborious hours and lively working shifts, Boxer transformed the diner into a successful catering side business, and, as Catering Director, incorporated important avenues of revenue for large scale venues and guest events.

Boxer has traveled to Japan, and England, and most recently "Thru-Hiked" from hut-to-hut in New Zealand. After retirement to the southwestern United States, Boxer joined an active community volunteer movement during Las Cruces' Volunteer Fair. A member of Ocotillo Hikers Group, and El Caldito's working board Secretary, Boxer leads the kitchen as Crew Chief Cook each Thursday. Shifts begin in the early morning hours to prepare hot entrees, side-dishes, and the daily soup to be served for the 11:30 AM lunch hour.

Boxer says that as Crew Chief Cook the “Chief Challenge” remains consistent volunteer engagement for those handy at making sandwiches, preparing salads, and capable of preparing and serving varieties of hot and cold foods to El Caldito guests.

As Secretary, Boxer reminds us that weekly tasks include annual events’ preparation for Potters’ Guild of Las Cruces “Empty Bowls,” Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Military Veterans’ dinners, and more. Boxer names El Caldito as part of the successes of Camp Hope, to include Community of Hope collaborative alliance partnerships working in tandem with Roadrunner Food Bank and Casa de Peregrinos Food Pantry to help end hunger in southern New Mexico’s Doña Ana County.

Index of first hour

00:03 - Interview introduction

01:30 - Potters' Guild of Las Cruces Empty Bowls October fundraiser

02:06 - Grew up in Seattle, Washington's Magnolia Bluff neighborhood; University of Washington master's degree in History; Potential history teaching career; Overseas teaching contract with University of Maryland

05:40 - New Zealand travel "Thru-Hiking;" Visits to Japan and England

06:20 - Entrepreneurship coupled with work to pay college tuition; Student car-pools to campus; 1960s tuition costs compared to present-day United States' student debt

08:24 - Waiting bar tables for tips on Navel Base Pier Ninety-One during "Fleet Week"

09:55 - Selling real estate, escrow title closings, and later working as savings-and-loan company Branch Manager

11:03 - Owner-operator of "Dad's Place" restaurant in downtown Olympia, Washington; Lost breakfast customer base after four years when automobile sales district moved away from the area

12:15 - "Dad's Place" cooking menu made from scratch

13:36 - Transition to grocery store Food Service Manager and Catering Director business

15:35 - Volunteer outdoor organization "Mountaineers," rock climbing, teaching classes, and chairing Climbing Committee for outdoor skills

17:36- Aptitude testing, "Women Reentering the Workforce" community college course, and process to become lawful Health Department licensed kitchen caterer

Index of first hour (cont.)

20:38 - Catered menus, portion control, and serving food to large groups with ten-to-fifteen kitchen employees, and twenty-to-thirty servers ready “On-Call”

22:16 - Differences between legal and illegal kitchen catering business; Thanksgiving food contamination case, and importance of legitimate licensed kitchen when serving food to the public

24:25 - First experience with soup kitchens, volunteer church organizations, and food pantries of Olympia, Washington; Elderly feeding programs, Meals-on-Wheels, and senior center food options

26:50 - Size of Olympia compared to Las Cruces, high costs of the Rent-Zone “Bedroom Communities,” and today’s long-distance workplace commuting throughout Seattle area

29:00 - Differences between food “Pantries” and food “Banks;” Roadrunner Food Bank, Feeding America services, and access to shopping cart full of food at Casa de Peregrinos

30:30 - Differences between “Dry goods,” “Perishable,” and “Frozen;” Absorbing foods from Casa de Peregrinos for daily El Caldito use

31:57 - El Caldito Kitchen Crew Chief; Outdated food stock to farmers; Creative cooking from limited available foods

36:10 - Love of cooking for large groups, learning to increase serving portions from smaller yield recipes that “You would cook at home,” and challenges to making nutritious food

37:23 - El Caldito food donation support from Las Cruces community grocery stores, bakeries, and hospital cafeterias; Donations from Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Odd Fellows, and Elks; Individual donator who brings sandwich makings and lunchmeat every year

39:25 - El Caldito supermarket gleaning and food rescue from farmers, local neighborhood fruit trees, and small orchard agricultural zones — Part-time employee to inspect food safety of gleaned and rescued items

Index of first hour (cont.)

42:54 - The cost of food in the United States; \$2.60 estimate for each single meal at El Caldito to cover year-round overhead operation costs

44:44 - Food preparation on a deadline, volunteer readiness, and service delivery Monday - Friday for the 11:30 AM lunch hour

47:18 - Support from fellow Crew Chiefs, local retirees, and consistent need for reliable year-round “Regulars” and volunteers

49:28 - Hard work of preparation labor and kitchen cooking; Safety precautions to avoid injury, reduce fatigue, and prevent hospital visits

52:04 - El Caldito dining room services; Organization of non-perishable daily food donations; Bread and pastries, beverages, and importance of scullery coordination to rescue soup bowls, utensils, and food trays

54:40 - Decades-long board member Becky McNair: Special Events Coordinator, Boxcar catering equipment stock organizer, and working-manual writer for El Caldito volunteers during various yearly events such as Empty Bowls, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Veterans’ dinners, and currently inactive volunteer appreciation picnic

57:33 - Empty Bowls fundraiser event sponsored by the Potters’ Guild of Las Cruces; Choosing your own bowl, and several choices of soup made by local restaurants; Live music, potters’ demonstrations, silent auction of regional ceramic artworks

59:07 - Betty, retired Grants Coordinator, now seated by Candice; Secretary Boxer writes El Caldito board approved funding appeal letter twice annually sent to previous donors by El Paso direct mail company

Index of second hour

01:01:00 - State of New Mexico and City of Las Cruces grants coordination; Past funding from United Way, local banks, and various charitable organizations; Albuquerque funding seminars to seek donors; Grant reporting requirements

01:02:44 - Pros and Cons of potential paid El Caldito executive director; New leadership needs coordinated to “Working Board” fundraising; High costs of paid positions e.g. vitality necessary of Kitchen Manager

01:04:38 - Potential for more efficient organization with trained grant-writing executive director to help coordinate El Caldito working board members; Casa de Peregrinos fundraising efforts

01:05:08 - El Caldito’s part in the nutritional success of Camp Hope; Casa de Peregrinos’ Mon., Weds., Fri. operating hours, and visiting lunchtime clients to El Caldito

01:07:04 - Success of Consolidated Services Model, including access to food provided by Casa de Peregrinos in coordination with El Caldito, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, and especially with Saint Luke’s Health Clinic expansion into newly incorporated Amador Health Center

01:08:26 - “Eat healthy” to maintain personal self care; A chef’s pride in their “Own cooking” paired to “Daily exercise;” Laborious combined hours required of El Caldito Secretary & Crew Chief Cook

01:09:33 - Duties, tasks, and demands of El Caldito Secretary: public viewing record keeping, donation handling rules compliance, PO Box visits, organizational accounting; All in conjunction with special events

01:11:52 - Monthly “Regular donors,” additional food and utensil product donations, and business vendor donations; Every donor acknowledged with “Thank You” letter; Stationary and letterhead costs

01:12:37 - Reporting El Caldito annual account totals; Legal out-of-date destruction of organizational records

Index of second hour (cont.)

01:13:51 - Volunteer community programming such as Senior Centers, Yoga and meditation classes, Pilates; Munson Senior Center available courses — Locating and accessing wide variety of free support services; Las Cruces Annual Volunteer Fair

01:15:28 - Joining Las Cruces volunteer community to become part of local care related support; El Caldito kitchen Thursday volunteers originally from Ocotillo Hikers of Las Cruces; Local “Social contacts”

01:16:44 - Yearly Las Cruces Volunteer Fair held at Saturday Market downtown plaza; Boxer’s Las Cruces volunteer-ship as reading tutor, and Fountain Theater in Mesilla; Outdoor groups, book clubs, and community theater networks

01:18:28 - Compassion and friendliness of Las Cruces community

01:20:32 - El Caldito employee benefits healthcare program via New Mexico Restaurant Association “Group Plan;” Chamber of Commerce “Group rate” insurance options

01:23:14 - Reference to Nancy Barnes for potential volunteer workshops to learn more information about available support

01:24:10 - Future programs to feed hungry of Las Cruces: Meals-On-Wheels, Munson Senior Center, East Mesa’s “The Cafe,” churches, Newman’s Center for NMSU students

01:25:00 - Distributing surplus to alliance members before best-by dates; El Caldito licensed to rescue but not deliver food

01:26:24 - Seasonal lunches provided to Las Cruces Public Schools students e.g. Young Park summer food distribution program; Reminder about the importance of licensed kitchen caterers

01:28:18 - Successful Olympia, Washington “Tiny House” village sponsored by Washington Builders Association; Amenities paired to community center resources like MVCH although with more funding

Index of second hour (cont.)

01:30:42 - Las Cruces “Tiny House” village proposal

01:32:00 - Mano y Mano day labor program facilitated by MVCH

01:32:56 - Future of El Caldito in light of thirty years of operations;
Reminder of daily “Chief Challenge” to find volunteers and board
members to fill scheduled kitchen and dining room shifts

01:33:54 - Continued yearly Volunteer Fair outreach; Media presence on
radio and newspapers; And yet, “People just don’t have time”

01:34:28 - Request for notice of completed Hope Stories project;
Narrator appreciation information about 21 February 2019 public talk
sponsored by Doña Ana County Historical Society (DACHS); Narrator
notice for shared authority of interview content

01:37:20 - Closing thoughts with appreciation for El Caldito experiences

Interview 14 Excerpt — Julie Boxer:

Now, our grants coordinator does our state grant, and our city grant, and she's also always on the lookout for other granting organizations. We get money— Some years we've gotten it from United Way. We've gotten it from several of the banks, and some of the charitable organizations. And there's websites you can go on, and look up all of the different grant funders. And we can go to seminars where they introduce different funders, and you can interview them. And she's very good at it.

del Norte: Does that happen here in Las Cruces? Like they can actually—

Boxer: No. Usually it's Albuquerque.

del Norte: Okay. So it does happen. It is happening.

Boxer: But, there's a lot of information out there, and if you hear of a grant you can usually find where it's published on the internet, and it'll tell you what the requirements are, and how to apply, and what the "Reporting" requirements are. And Candice is very good at that. So, she's gotten us really a lot of money through her efforts in that department. And it's a lot of reporting, and it's a whole job in itself.

del Norte: I'll bet.

Julie Boxer: And she's working full time, too.

del Norte: In terms of benefits, and drawbacks, of salary positions, in an organization that functions through board member management— Can you talk about some of the benefits of having, say, an executive director who's salaried or paid, and maybe some of the drawbacks?

Boxer: Well, an executive director would be a great benefit because they could do a lot of the things that the board members are now doing, and as we age, and retire— No one is stepping up to take over these jobs. And it is a kind of a normal process in nonprofits where at some point the board becomes the fundraising arm of the organization, and the executive director actually does most of the work that the working board used to do. And it's a good thing if you can afford it, but it's quite expensive. And we would really have to kick up our funding if we were to afford an executive director.

I know that some of the other organizations at Community of Hope have an executive director. But, I mean, we have a kitchen manager who is full "Up-to-here," and couldn't take that job on. And we have an administrator who is really trying to get our inventory together, and get control of our costs. And you know, an executive director could do all that, but it would cost us a whole lot more than what we're paying.

del Norte: It sounds like that that would be ideal—

Boxer: It would.

del Norte: –it’s just not possible.

Julie Boxer: It would. I don’t think it’s possible at this point. If we wanted to become a fundraising board, then every board member would have to go out there and raise forty, fifty, sixty grand a year. And that’s a lot to ask in this community. It really is.

del Norte: So, just to push the question a little bit, can you name a few benefits, that we haven’t already talked about, to having an executive director?

Boxer: Well, it would make it easier, probably to— I think you might be able to run a more efficient organization. And some of the duties that the board members are doing, in our own way— (Laughs) I mean, I never did fundraising before I decided to start doing this appeal letter. I’m not that good at it. So, a trained executive director could do a much better job, I’m sure, than I am doing. So, like, you look at the fundraising efforts that Casa de Peregrinos is putting out. They are very professional compared to what we’re doing. And the grant writing, that’s something that executive directors just know how to do. And so, that would be something that we wouldn’t have to burden Candice with.

del Norte: Do you think it’s a possibility in the future.

Boxer: Well, in the future, I hope it is. I certainly hope it is.
Yeah.

del Norte: Julie. Are soup kitchens vital to the homeless communities in New Mexico—

Julie Boxer: I think so.

del Norte: —and of course Las Cruces?

Boxer: Yes. I think that we are one of the reasons that Camp Hope is successful. Because we offer a free lunch everyday for everybody down there. Every volunteer. Every employee. All the tent city inhabitants, and anybody that wants to come over to Casa de Peregrinos and pick up their food box. I mean, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, they're open from nine-to-eleven and one-to-three. So, you're either there in the morning or afternoon, and in the meantime you can have a free lunch at El Caldito. So.

del Norte: Is that kind of coordinated?

Boxer: Well—

del Norte: Because it works for folks? Is there—

Boxer: I'm sure it does. You see people loading their cars up with what they got from standing in line over there. And then, they come over here and have lunch.

del Norte: Makes sense.

Julie Boxer: Or they come in a little early for the afternoon draw, and have lunch first, and then go get in line. So, I'm sure it's part of their success.

del Norte: So, I won't wander, but it's really interesting to learn about the "Corridor of care" model—

Boxer: Mm. Hm. [Yes]

del Norte: Where folks that might be coming to Casa de Peregrinos also have that benefit to be able to access a meal while they're picking up.

Boxer: Mm. Hm. Yeah, and they can access some services at Community of Hope, or if they have children that they can drop off, go get their box, have lunch, and then pick up their kids. I mean, there's a lot of benefits to having it all there together. Especially with the clinic [Amador Health Center].

del Norte: You mention the clinic.

Boxer: Yeah.

del Norte: Can you just describe some of those benefits in relation to the clinic?

Julie Boxer: Well, I mean, if you have a bug, or a sore tooth, or a sprained ankle, or whatever, and you can't afford to go to a doctor, and you don't want to go wait forever in the emergency room, you can go in there [to Amador Health Center]. And they do a lot of different services. I don't know. I'm not that familiar with everything they do, but I know they do a lot.

del Norte: Lots of changes in my almost year of focus.

Boxer: Yes. It expanded.

del Norte: Saint Luke's Health Clinic to Amador Health Center has been a significant change.

Boxer: Yes. They've really expanded a lot. I don't know what all they are now doing.

del Norte: Well, thinking about healthcare, and taking care of yourself, transitioning the interview to the Hope Care section of questions— In your own daily and weekly routine, can you define self-care, or down time to recharge, that works for you?

Julie Boxer: Self care?

del Norte: Yeah. Anything that you do to make sure you're taking care of self before you try to help others.

Boxer: Eat healthy.

del Norte: Tell me more.

Boxer: I like my own cooking, and I do eat healthy. And so, I really enjoy cooking my own dinner every night, and I pride myself on being quite good at it. And also exercise. I daily exercise, and I either ride the bike or I hike— And my six hour shift at the soup kitchen I consider aerobic exercise. (Laughs) It's hard work. I could only do that one-day-a-week.

del Norte: So, about six hours as a volunteer soup chef, and then at least—

Boxer: Yeah. And then, another twenty hours a week doing the secretary stuff.

del Norte: Interesting. So, the labor intensive of being in a kitchen versus a secretary of administrative duties. Can you talk about that?

Julie Boxer: Yeah. Because, Okay— The secretary is in charge of—Well, all the normal things a secretary would do. Taking minutes, and publishing everything to all the board members, and keeping current records for public viewing, and complying with all the rules for donation handling. I'm the one that visits the post office box several times a week, and processes all the checks that come in. And Dennis and I do that jointly. But, I'm the one that goes to the post office, and enters them into our accounting— our donation software, and then mark them for deposit. And then, Dennis goes through them, and checks everything, and makes the deposit. And so, I write all the "Thank you" letters to everybody that donates. And that's a big chunk of time, especially when we're doing fundraising in the fall. I mean, that'll be a three-times-a-week, several-hours-a-day job.

del Norte: So, without special events added to this chunk of time.

Boxer: Oh, and then you got Empty Bowls on top of it. Oh, Lord.

del Norte: Right. I was just gonna say.

Boxer: That's a huge job.

del Norte: You've got already about twenty six hours which is pretty much thirty hours a week that you volunteer. On top of the soup kitchen. Yeah.

Julie Boxer: Yeah, and then Empty Bowls comes along, and I have to account for every dime that comes in on that. All the ticket sales, and all the donations for the silent auctions. Because, the potters do this for us. It's for El Caldito. And so, all the money that they make on the silent auction comes to us, but this money is just trickling-in over the month. From October to February there's a constant trickle of all this money coming in. And then, there's a couple dozen businesses in town that sell tickets for Empty Bowls, and their money comes trickling-in, and we have to account for the whole thing.

del Norte: So, it's my fault that I wandered from Hope Care. But you've got me on a good direction here. You mentioned just now "Trickling"—The money trickles-in October to February.

Boxer: Mm. Hm. [Yes]

del Norte: Can you talk about, ah— Why, I guess that would be March to September; and the difference of maybe— does it dry up during these months?

Boxer: It doesn't dry up. We have regular donors who donate every month, and there's a steady stream of regular donations. Plus, all of the food products that get donated. Or the utility— the disposable utensils. A lot of vendors in town donate stuff to us. And so—

del Norte: So, they know that they're needed during this time?

Julie Boxer: Yeah. And they're much appreciated, but they all get "Thank you" letters. So, I mean, there's a stream of donations coming in, and every one is acknowledged with a "Thank you."

del Norte: That's tons of work.

Boxer: Tons of work. Yeah.

del Norte: Ah— Stationary, and you know.

Boxer: Yeah. We have printed cards, and then we have letters that go out on our letterheads. And some of them just want an annual total. But, they're all different, and I have to keep the records on all these things. So, it's big job.

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Transcripts and Recordings

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