

NMSU Archives
Oral History Collection

New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 8

Yoli Silva Transcript Index & Excerpt

Project Link Homeless Education

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

17 July 2018

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

Sponsored by Doña Ana County Historical Society

Copyright Yolanda Silva — Copyright David Lee del Norte

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 Elliott 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

Yoli Silva helped New Mexico’s children as a Las Cruces Public Schools (Title 1– Education for the Disadvantaged) Social Worker for over twenty-seven years, including twelve years as Project Link Homeless Education liaison to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Silva worked as an investigator, a counselor for foster care and adoption with Children, Youth & Families Department (CYFD), and advocated for community awareness of youth experiencing homelessness. An important perspective on the State of New Mexico’s foster care system, domestic violence, and its historic struggles with childhood welfare, the CYFD mission statement reads, simply, “Improving the Quality of Life for All Our Children.”

Locally, accommodated by Project Link liaisons to promote enrollment regardless personal circumstances, Las Cruces Public Schools issues “Student Residency Questionnaires” to identify homeless youth and families in need of assistance. In partnership with Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Las Cruces started a fundraiser event for Project Link called “Linking Hands: Helping Our Homeless Youth” which raised over \$36,000 in 2018, and more than \$40,000 in 2019.

Silva emphasizes regular commitment of student support to match the determination that youths need to create lasting educational schedules and routines. This includes community recognition that youth homelessness requires year-round attention, Silva tells us, and not just during holidays or over the winter months of the academic school year.

A long-time partner to Mesilla Valley Community of Hope and collaborator with Audrey Hardman-Hartley of Jardin de Los Niños to provide students consistent access to educational resources, in 2018 Silva retired from Las Cruces Public Schools persistent to continue to seek funding sources for New Mexico's unaccompanied youth.

Index of first hour

00:07 - Interview introduction

01:08 - Las Cruces Public Schools' "Title 1" Social Worker for disadvantaged families

02:10 - Community awareness about Las Cruces homeless children

04:14 - Project Link and McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

05:08 - The law, and providing documentation to protect homeless youth

06:38 - Project Link community liaisons, identifying youth, and reasons for homeless status

10:22 - Childhood homelessness awareness, stigmatization, and acceptance

12:30 - Successful Project Link unaccompanied youth students

15:09 - Challenges to access community resources for homeless teenagers

16:30 - Community rallies to protect two homeless students over winter break

22:30 - Ups-and-downs of working with community kindness to increase awareness

24:19 - Momentum of McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act in New Mexico

26:25 - McKinney-Vento liaisons within local New Mexico school districts

27:51 - Albuquerque mentor Helen Fox and liaison connections across the state

Index of first hour (cont.)

30:14 - “Fine-line” of Children, Youth & Families Department (CYFD) liaison referrals

31:47 - School House Connections (SHC) and youth homeless law protections

34:17 - Project Link liaisons and Las Cruces Public Schools Districts

35:47 - Awareness of New Mexico Colonias and educating families about rights to resources

39:31 - Difficulties of “Doubling-up” and living in someone else’s home

41:01 - Kids becoming “Parent-ified” and sibling caregivers

43:53 - Establishing consistency, everyday routines, and adapting to school opportunities

48:53 - Las Cruces community trust through Project Link intake process

52:30 - Limiting barriers to unaccompanied youth success

55:42 - Project Link origins with Las Cruces Public Schools and Erlinda Martinez

Index of second hour

- 01:00:32 - Homeless youth accountability politics of Las Cruces Public Schools
- 01:03:03 - “Linking Hands” leadership group fundraises \$36,000 to benefit Project Link homeless youth
- 01:07:24 - In-retirement private help contrasted to “Title 1” federal funding for homeless youth
- 01:10:34 - Families and Youth, Inc. (FYI) program collaboration
- 01:12:19 - Closing El Crucero transitional living center; downsizing Families and Youth Inc. (FYI), and Southwest Counseling
- 01:15:59 - Rebuilding Families and Youth, Inc. (FYI) services
- 01:20:30 - Project Link liaison support across New Mexico, and “Knowing the law”
- 01:23:14 - Collaboration throughout Las Cruces homeless services organizations
- 01:25:48 - Jardin de Los Niños and Project Link join forces to benefit homeless students
- 01:27:58 - New staff and volunteer collaboration with seasoned homeless service providers
- 01:30:09 - Health insurance benefits for Project Link liaisons, and organizational self-care
- 01:33:47 - Social Worker healthcare coverage needs at Community of Hope
- 01:36:44 - The future of youth shelter care with Families and Youth, Inc.
- 01:38:08 - Combination of Las Cruces affordable housing and supportive services

Index of second hour (cont.)

01:39:10 - Maintaining agency focus, follow-through, and contributions to homeless youth

01:43:00 - The future of Project Link programs

01:45:00 - Leadership champions for child welfare in New Mexico

01:46:36 - Hope Stories project description; influence of *The Cultural Geography of the Homeless in Las Cruces* by Kara Andrea Lory

01:48:34 - “The homeless face is now children”

Interview 8 Excerpt — Narrator Yoli Silva:

One of the things, as you get trained, and you work in this system, you get to see some of the things that teens need, families need, and mostly teens. Only because families, at least there's a parent who hopefully is looking to see how they can gather this or gather that. They can make that phone call. They can go and apply for Social Security. They can go and apply for food stamps and Medicaid.

A fifteen year old, the policies make that difficult. So, we had to look for different resources to see how to— because a fifteen year old, a sixteen year old, [isn't] necessarily able to go and apply for food stamps because they're not an adult. They can't go get a room, or an apartment. They're not an adult.

Community of Hope is one of our biggest partners, but everybody who they can house has to be eighteen years or older. We have fourteen, fifteen year olds. We have sixteen year olds. So, those are kinds of the things that we started to work on. Still providing us a lot of support, but we needed to make sure our community was aware.

And so, one of the things that was a big thing, that kind of got the big ball rolling, was we were getting ready for Christmas vacation in 2017, just six months ago, seven months ago.

Yoli Silva:

We were getting ready, and as a program we were working really, really hard to make sure that these unaccompanied youth had a plan. There was a family who they could stay for the two weeks that the school district is closed. A family.

And then, we were working, we were getting gift cards, and hygiene [Kits], and snack packs, things like that, that we could give our kiddos, so that they would have something to take them through the two weeks that we're also kind of off, and aren't answering the phone, per se, because we have a life of our own.

You know, and those kinds of things. So, we were looking at all that. And two— One of our young men who was a senior at the time, and his younger brother— We found out that they were, through the counselor— because again, that's where they build, also, very good relationships; that they were sleeping in the car in someone's driveway. And we were looking at the weather. It was supposed to get really, really cold.

So, making some phone calls, it's like, "Okay. What do we do with these kids, seventeen and fifteen?" "They can't be living in their car for two weeks. We need to figure out what to do." And there was community groups that, right way, a bunch of realtors that were getting together. We had Catholic Charities who was, like, "What? We can't— We need to figure something out."

Yoli Silva:

So, our— We had all of a sudden, city councilors who were very, very— Wanted to be involved because it's like, “What do you mean we have two kids sleeping in the car?” And, “Where's their parent?” And so, all of a sudden there were these questions. We had answers, but what were we still going to do about these two kids because we couldn't put them up in a motel. Because, then again, that would still be monies that we'd have to figure out how to get, and most motels wouldn't put them up because they were not eighteen years of age. So, “What are we going to do?”

So, there was a big uproar. I will be very honest. There was a very big uproar in the community about these kiddos, and that kind of thing. Catholic Charities did come through with private donations that they had, and other community members that they said, “If you wanna donate, and help us with these kids, donate through here, and we'll provide.” They actually paid for the kids, and took the responsibility of putting them up at a motel for almost a month.

del Norte: Wow.

Silva: From right before—

del Norte: Through the holiday?

Yoli Silva:

Through the holidays, and about two weeks after we came back. They were willing to put them up for— And that was a lot of money. And so, other community members, there were gift cards all of a sudden coming in for all kinds of different things. Clothes, and food, and gas cards, because now it's like: "There was a face," and now they were seeing that these kids weren't homeless by choice. These are circumstances.

And so, our community started to rally, and thank goodness that throughout, it didn't stop there. The boys are okay, and they turned— the older one, turned eighteen.

Community of Hope already had a plan. We already had worked with them. There was a program that they could qualify as soon as the oldest one hit eighteen. He was going to be eighteen in January. So, we just had to figure out how to keep him, keep both of them, safe until he turned eighteen.

The Community of Hope already had a plan. We were already working on that plan, and how we were gonna— What they needed to do, and how they were gonna work with us, and all those kinds of things.

Yoli Silva:

So, now they're housed, and the older one is at the Doña Ana [Community College] branch. He's gonna start in August [2018]. The younger one is gonna be a senior this coming year. So, they're doing well. Community of Hope now is their support system. So, it's that collaboration, and it's that awareness. But, the community rallied.

Recommended Citation

Silva, Yolanda, interviewed by David Lee del Norte. July 17th, 2018.
Hope Stories oral history project, New Mexico State University
Library Archives and Special Collections.

Recording Information

Hope Stories 08 — 1h 49m duration. Recording held at Jardin de Los Niños La Paz Room on the Hope Campus.

Transcripts and Recordings

Listen, read, and request Hope Stories complete transcripts, sound recordings, and 2018 project research box at New Mexico State University Library and Special Collections.