

NMSU Archives  
Oral History Collection

New Mexico State University  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

**Mesilla Valley Community of Hope**

2018

**Hope Stories**

Interview 10

**Karen Currier Transcript Index & Excerpt**

**El Caldito Kitchen Volunteer**

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

31 July 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 this 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**

Karen Currier studied Commercial Art in Dayton, Ohio, traveled to New Zealand, Australia, and Argentina; and, before settling in Las Cruces in the 1980s, lived on a kibbutz in Israel to learn Hebrew. An artist, Currier became fascinated with lapidary, decorative painting, and designing gourds alongside Avon cosmetic sales. Currier volunteered at Black Box Theater, joined book clubs, and explored New Mexico mountain peaks with Ocotillo Hikers of Las Cruces.

An early volunteer at the original Saint Andrew's day-lunch program, Currier developed friendships that led to over five years of service with El Caldito Soup Kitchen. Many churches, local organizations, and students from New Mexico State University contribute to morning preparation and afternoon serving of El Caldito's lunchtime meal. Volunteers are always requested to lend a gracious hand Sunday to Friday from 8 am to 2 pm for food service at 11:30 am to 1 pm.

Each Saturday, "To-go" sack lunch is available from 11:30 am to 12 pm. Currier shares the concerns of many about maintaining consistent volunteer help, revising kitchen use of recyclable plastic containers, and serving clients the most nutritional daily meal possible. During busy summer months, El Caldito sometimes must work with a minimal "Skeleton Crew" of cooks, lunch-line servers, and dining room helpers. With compassionate service to those who visit, Currier speaks about the challenge of cooking from scratch from available El Caldito ingredients.



## **Index of first hour**

00:07 - Interview introduction

01:57 - Las Cruces first years, selling Avon, volunteerism, art classes

03:49 - College in Dayton, Ohio for Commercial Art, Paste-up work in Albuquerque

05:00 - Travel to Europe, New Zealand, and South America; volunteerism on a Kibbutz in Israel to learn Hebrew

06:27 - Gourd artistry

08:34 - Ocotillo Hiking Group of Las Cruces, climbing New Mexico's Organ Mountains "Needles" and Deming's "Cokes" Peak

12:38 - Perspective of Mesilla Valley Community of Hope; volunteerism El Caldito at Saint Andrew's Church with Temple Beth-El

15:30 - Switched volunteer days from Monday to Thursday, connecting with Ocotillo Hikers of Las Cruces

16:17 - Love of cooking and serving the community of Las Cruces

17:44 - Compassion for those in need; boarding students from France

20:15 - Necessary caution to feed the homeless outside of El Caldito; sadness about homeless drug and alcohol abuse

21:52 - Serving food on soup kitchen "Line" 11:30 am - 1 pm

23:40 - Difficulty serving "Seconds" before "First-timers" eat

26:08 - Running out of lunch-time food, seasonal change of clients seeking food, number of regular kitchen volunteers

29:13 - Coordination of regular and temporary volunteer duties

**Index of first hour (cont.)**

30:00 - Preparing entrees from available El Caldito kitchen ingredients

32:15 - Supermarket food donations and client preferences

34:30 - The “Motley Crew” aprons for regulars connected to Ocotillo Hiking of Las Cruces

36:07 - Book group donations to Jardin de Los Niños; volunteerism Black Box Theater

38:06 - “Volunteer City” of the Las Cruces community

39:25 - Serving specific foods to memorable El Caldito clients

42:54 - “Gleaning” and picking-up food items from Las Cruces area supermarkets; items purchased by El Caldito, Roadrunner Food Bank

45:04 - Farmer donations of onion, chiles, corn; one-time donation of two-hundred Thanksgiving turkeys

46:13 - Suggestions marking “Best-used-by” dates on packaged foods, preventing food waste, organizing recyclable plastics use of “Seconds”

51:00 - El Caldito regular kitchen volunteer camaraderie

52:13 - Downtown Farmer’s Market use of food stamp program

53:00 - The need for soup kitchens to serve the hungry; perspectives on client intake and utilization of prepared food

55:40 - Abundant supermarket holiday food donations, excessive sugary desserts and breads, and “Using what we have”

58:09 - “Marking-out” supermarket prepared foods to prevent returned items for refund; the continued problem of preventing food waste

**Index of second hour**

59:48 - Cycles of food cost connected to gasoline prices; food coupon sales' purchases

01:02:30 - Keeping busy; stress relief with artwork, reading, swimming; becoming an empty-nester; Medicare eligibility, Obamacare

01: 05:56 - Comfortable camaraderie, rote tasks, staying active

01:07:13 - Memorable El Caldito founding member

01:08:27 - Friendships with regular volunteers, bonding with temporary community service volunteers

01:12:00 - Potential return to Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs

01:13:21 - Economic growth of Las Cruces since late 1980s; minimum-wage inadequacy

01:14:30 - Perspective of Las Cruces housing programs for immigrants

01:16:10 - Thoughts on the future of Camp Hope and "Rate of success" statistics

01:18:13 - Concluding conversation



## **Interview 10 Excerpt — Karen Currier:**

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I don't know if you've noticed, but sometimes they'll come through the line, and they can't have, or they don't like, what I'm serving. And there's been times that I'll go into the oven and bring out something else for them. Or, you know, when you do this for a long time there's repeat clients, if you want to call them that. And you know what their basic needs are as far as what they like to eat, or what they are capable of eating. And so, I'll cater to their needs a lot.

We start serving at eleven-thirty. And the line comes through. And first they'll have a choice of: "Do they want salad," and then, I think, fruit. Then, they come through. They can have deserts, and they get to choose. And, as servers, we put the food items onto their trays, for sanitary reasons. And then, they have a choice if they'd like soup, and their entrees. But, everything's placed on their plates. And the line moves pretty fast. Eleven-thirty to One o'clock goes pretty fast when there's people there.

A couple weeks ago, I made these meatballs that came out excellent. They were ground pork, and ground turkey, and then I had Italian sausages. I chopped up mushrooms, added onion and seasonings, and I tasted them: they were really, really good. And one time, more than once, but the first time, I made stuffed bell peppers that were really good. And, you know, that's the other reward. Sometimes, people come back through the door, and ask who made a certain dish, and it's really rewarding to get that compliment.

## **Karen Currier:**

Yeah. A lot of times it's mindless stuff to just cut up, and put into pans, add a little water or sauce. It just depends on what's there. One time I was asked to make tuna fish salad, and I had a hard time, at first, regulating sizes. So, I took all the cans out of the pantry, (Laughs) and I made tuna fish salad. Probably enough to feed the whole city of Las Cruces. (Laughs) There was a lot of tuna fish salad.

del Norte: So, did you have to give it away the next day?

No, we made— No. No, they used it all. They made sandwiches. You know, I don't remember why we would— Because it seems like we've had lunchmeat ever since that. Always have some kind of lunchmeat.

Yeah. It's really funny how the things have changed. I mean, when I first started it would be like, we served chicken, and then they— everything else in the soup line. Now, we're like doing a vegetable in every entree because we're getting in an abundance of fresh vegetables. Fresh and packaged vegetables.

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### **Recommended Citation**

Currier, Karen, interviewed by David Lee del Norte. July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018.  
Hope Stories oral history project, New Mexico State University  
Library Archives and Special Collections.

### **Recording Information**

Hope Stories 10 — 1h 18m duration. Recorded in the narrator's home.

### **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.