

NMSU Archives
Oral History Collection

New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 12

Gabriel Anaya Transcript Index & Excerpt

**El Caldito's Volunteer Executive Director and the "Empty Bowls"
Fundraiser**

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

31 August 2018

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

Sponsored by Doña Ana County Historical Society

Copyright Gabriel Anaya — 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 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

Gabriel Anaya was born and raised in Moriarty, New Mexico. In high school, Anaya worked at a family restaurant on the famous US Route 66 and developed a love for cooking from the simplicity of recipes. An early alumni of New Mexico College of Agriculture & Mechanics Arts, Anaya attended the Las Cruces land-grant college during its name change to New Mexico State University. A member of NMSU's Reserves Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), Anaya went on to serve for thirty years before retiring from the United States Army as Colonel.

After a two year commission at Fort Benning, Georgia, Anaya returned to New Mexico and applied to become a math teacher at Silver City High School. With a masters degree from Western New Mexico University, and introduced to John Paul Taylor at a National Education Association (NEA) meeting, Anaya was again hired to teach mathematics at Las Cruces High School where he spent more than twenty-five years alongside continued active and reserves U.S. Army service.

Following retirement, Anaya volunteered at El Caldito Soup Kitchen and helped increase options to include Saturday "Sack-lunch" and a "Sunday meal." Responsible for additional weekend meals, and more active volunteer help, El Caldito now offered daily food service delivery on the Hope Campus. With volunteer "Working Board" membership supported across the Las Cruces community, Anaya became El Caldito's volunteer executive director in charge of the local Food Rescue Program, including scheduled "Gleaning" pickup of donation foods from contributing supermarkets, bakeries, and hospitals.

With El Caldito's Empty Bowls fundraiser, sponsored by the Potters' Guild of Las Cruces and Saint Paul's United Methodist Church, Anaya helps to continue a cherished local tradition. With ticket purchase, patrons may select "from over twelve-hundred" hand-made pottery bowls, choose from a variety of specially made hot soup created and served by local restaurants, and together share a thoughtful meal as a community committed to ending hunger in New Mexico. In 2020, Anaya's role as El Caldito's volunteer executive director changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The 27th annual Empty Bowls became a "Soup-less event" with an online auction of Potters' Guild of Las Cruces bowls and artwork available.

Index of Interview

00:05 - Interview introduction

01:26 - Family biography of Estancia Valley, Fort Sumner, and Moriarty, New Mexico; college at New Mexico Agricultural & Mechanics

02:37 - Early vision of career as high school math teacher; Farm and restaurant work in Moriarty; short-lived first job “Pulling pinto beans”

04:30 - Learning to cook and use recipes; favorite foods; Las Cruces, New Mexico A & M name changed to NMSU; ROTC military service obligation

06:36 - Silver High School, Western New Mexico University Masters degree, National Education Association meeting with John Paul Taylor; began twenty-five years teaching math at Las Cruces High School

07:52 - Retired from military reserves as colonel; Working with “Underrated” teenagers at Las Cruces High School

09:20 - John Paul Taylor education system influence, and campaign for state representative; Funding Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, early vision of Consolidated Services Model, and first buildings constructed

12:00 - Las Cruces and New Mexico employment, finding job openings

12:40 - First El Caldito volunteer work after retirement; El Caldito origins, hours of operation, “Saturday Sack Lunch” and “Sunday meals” with NMSU International Club engagement

15:57 - From eighty clients served per day to as many as three hundred and fifty served today; Las Cruces community donations; El Caldito volunteer to board membership contribution

17:54 - El Caldito operations, “Pool of volunteers” over seven hundred people; Grocery store gleaning, Roadrunner Food Bank, Feeding America and Food Rescue Program; local farmer donations, support from varied grants— “Biggest source of monetary comes from individuals”

Index of Interview (cont.)

20:23 - Corporate, state of New Mexico, and City of Las Cruces funders; Home Builders Association; grant help for refrigeration and gleaning van maintenance costs; Local church, organization, and individual contributors

22:05 - Preparing and serving nutritious foods; Reputation of El Caldito; Increased client meals during weekday city bus service; Gospel Rescue Mission; Expansion of Casa de Peregrinos to help establish community organization food pantries

25:06 - Limited but willing El Caldito capacity to support southern New Mexico “Satellite” soup kitchens

26:40 - Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) available through Mesilla Valley Community of Hope; Additional food support to El Caldito community visitors

28:34 - Supermarket gleaning contributions paired to perishables delivered by Food Rescue Program; Timely support before food waste

30:10 - Scheduling food gleaning; High School aged “Gleaner” turned board member; NMSU board representation

31:18 - El Caldito volunteer “Working board” membership, organization, publicity, and grant writing; The soup kitchen’s next generation

34:00 - “Will” recipient donation that allowed El Caldito’s needed floor tiled dining room

34:33 - Volunteer “Working board” pros and cons rather than hired paid staff

35:27 - Importance of New Mexico soup kitchens to the homeless community; El Caldito’s relaxed and safe atmosphere

Index of Interview (cont.)

36:41 - El Caldito's professional chefs, and excellence of food and dining service; Hale Farms melon donations; Creating Sunday meals

38:00 - Sugary sweets an unfortunate substitute for alcoholic cravings, danger to diabetics; potential for Volunteer nutritionist perspectives

39:42 - Addressing volunteer burn-out; Community service backup from church member organizations— "The soup kitchen is more than a soup kitchen," serves as retiree "Therapeutic area"

41:26 - The eleven o'clock volunteer meal before daily serving; "Different categories" of Community Service

44:00 - Consistent El Caldito need for volunteers, and funding to provide future services

44:44 - Outside sources with additional volunteers and funding to establish southern New Mexico "Satellite" food distribution sites

46:00 - City of Las Cruces project to expand El Caldito dining room; Original MVCH organizational buildings

48:11 - Professionally redesigned kitchen upgrades to benefit volunteers

50:36 - Volunteer orientation to learn new kitchen organization

51:50 - Board member friendships, and grateful clients who returned

52:48 - The "Saint Andrew's Crew," and fond memories of volunteers who passed away

56:00 - El Caldito's yearly "Empty Bowls" fundraiser sponsored by the Potters' Guild of Las Cruces and Saint Paul's Methodist Church

57:27 - Closing conversation

Interview 12 Excerpts — Gabriel Anaya:

Becoming volunteer executive director, and serving El Caldito meals

I had a friend that called me up, and I had never heard of the soup kitchen. But, I had a friend call me up, he says, “The soup kitchen is having their Thanksgiving dinner, and they’re looking for volunteers,” and says, “Why don’t we volunteer?” So, I came, and she never did. (Laughs) She got involved somewhere else. But anyway, I came over, and met the manager at the time, and she says that “We need help.”

And the soup kitchen had just expanded. It got started at Saint James Episcopal Church, probably around 1985 maybe— because those folks there saw the need. There were a lot of the homeless hanging around their church on Alameda Boulevard, and they saw the need for it. So, they got started, and they contacted other churches. So, several of the other churches were involved. So, they would eat— provide the meal Monday through Thursday. And then, when “Julia” got the Community of Hope started, and they moved here [on the Hope Campus], Friday was then added.

So, that’s about the time I came along, and the manager at the time said, “Well. We need help on Wednesdays and Fridays,” and I didn’t have sense enough to know I could go Wednesdays or Fridays, so I volunteered Wednesdays and Fridays. I still work on Wednesdays and Fridays. And I made the mistake of letting people know I had some restaurant experience from the old days. (Laughs)

Gabriel Anaya:

And so, then I got asked to be on the board. And so, I've been on the board for a number of years. Two years ago the president retired, and I got suckered into it, and I'm still here. And at the time, by the time I got started, like I say, we were from Monday through Friday.

Later on we added the Saturday. And the Saturday, we came up with a sack lunch because of the logistics. It would be an easier thing to do. That's probably one of the better things we did because that way we can get a lot of kids involved when school's out. A lot of kids like to get involved. And then, about six years ago, I had folks come to me, and says, "You know, you feed six days a week. What's wrong with Sunday? People are still hungry on Sundays." So, I put it back on their shoulders, and said, "Get me a group. When I have groups volunteer to take over the Sundays, we'll do it."

And I started the first Sunday with college students. And they were from the NMSU International Club, and they were an amazing group because every first Sunday they would get students from different countries, and their menus would be very diversified. The young people could fix menus from their country. So, that was always interesting. But, then they graduated, as they should, and then things changed. When we started we were feeding like eighty people a day, and we have gone up to as many as three hundred and fifty.

Gabriel Anaya:

“Working Board” membership and community support

Well, the board is made up of thirteen volunteers. And when I first got on the board there was little money. The building was relatively new. It had been built by the city. The city owned it. And the resources were all rather limited. We started recruiting some of our workers from the—that were involved. Recruiting them for the board. So, as other board members retired, we replaced them with people who are actually working in the kitchen. So, we called it a “Working Board.” So, everybody that was on the board was involved somehow.

The president of the board at the time was in charge of the [Supermarket] gleaners. We had a lady that— a retired Elementary teacher, a great organizer, and she took over special events like the Thanksgiving dinner, the Christmas dinner, the dinner for the veterans: a special dinner for veterans. She was just a great organizer. We had another one that— just full of energy. She was in charge of publicity. She started the program for volunteers. We’d always get volunteers to come to the door, but she kind of organized it to where we knew who our volunteers were. And we had another one that— She and I went to a class for grant writing. She pursued it. I didn’t. So, she became our grant writer. So, everybody on the board had a job.

Unfortunately, those folks have pretty much retired now, and left me holding the bag. (Laughs) But, we’ve been recruiting new board members. And the ones we have now are really good, too. And they picked up from where the others were.

Gabriel Anaya:

The secretary at the time was also very well organized. She had been a nurse, and she just got all kinds of things. But, when she got ready to retire, she recruited somebody and trained them to take her job. And the same with the volunteer coordinator. We got another retired teacher. And things just kept going on. So, our finances now are good compared to what they were when we got started. We've had some good grants that've come in, or donations come in for specific purposes.

So, we had the lady that had left us in her will, and that provided us with the new flooring. Well, before it was just the concrete floor. That allowed us to put in tile floor, which is easier on our volunteers.

Gabriel Anaya:

Potters' Guild of Las Cruces "Empty Bowls" fundraiser

Empty Bowls is the only fundraiser we really have. And we do it in conjunctions with the Potters' Guild of Las Cruces. The individuals that volunteer to the Potters' Guild work all summer long, and make: Oh, over twelve hundred bowls. We contact around fifty restaurants. Each one donates a soup of their choice. We sell the tickets, and people come to— The venue is Saint Paul's Methodist Church. So, people buy a ticket, come there, they can pick a bowl of their choice, and then have all the soup that they wish to eat. So, it's always... It's not just a fundraiser anymore, it's an event for Las Cruces.

del Norte: Do you, by chance, remember when it occurs this year (2018)? The date?

Anaya: The 19th of October. I'm selling tickets, so I have to remember the date. (Laughs)

del Norte: And tickets are, of course, a flat price?

Anaya: They're twenty dollars. Twenty dollars a piece. And we've got different venues in Las Cruces that sell them. And then, every board member selling them, or they can come to the soup kitchen. So, no excuse that anybody can't buy one.

Recommended Citation

Anaya, Gabriel, interviewed by David Lee del Norte. August 31st, 2018.
Hope Stories oral history project, New Mexico State University
Library Archives and Special Collections.

Recording Information

Hope Stories 12 — 57m duration. Recorded at El Jardin de Los Niños en 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.