

NMSU Archives
Oral History Collection

New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 13

Nicole Martinez Transcript Index & Excerpt

“Housing First,” Camp Hope, and The City of Las Cruces

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

4 September 2018

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

Sponsored by Doña Ana County Historical Society

Copyright Nicole Martinez — 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

Nicole Martinez grew up in California and Oregon, studied Sociology at Brigham Young University, and, after working for Utah's child protective services, earned Social Work and Sociology masters' degrees from Western New Mexico University and New Mexico State University. In 2006, as Housing Programs Manager, Martinez helped transition Hacienda Del Sol women's shelter into the organizational care of Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH), closing shelter services and emphasizing the Las Cruces community's need to expand resources.

Permanent Supportive Housing programs continued, such as Adobe, Inc group home to assist chronically homeless clients. With principles of "Housing First," MVCH improves local housing opportunities for Las Cruces area residents and visitors. In 2011, Martinez became MVCH executive director at a time when overnight campers began to sleep nearby to Hope Campus buildings due to severe winter weather and significantly risen numbers of people seeking daytime hours of operations.

In collaboration with homeless clients, Martinez and other staff members appealed to the City of Las Cruces for lawful overnight camping measures which resulted in extensive planning to introduce safe, sanitary, and rezoned areas for sleeping, preparing meals, and remaining close to MVCH services on the Hope Campus. With the creation of the self-governed tent city known as Camp Hope, Martinez advocated for transitional housing grants to match the needs of Las Cruces permanent housing opportunities.

As MVCH executive director, and Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW), Martinez supports caseworkers who assist clients by working to secure funding for programs like Sue's House, a group residence for chronically homeless women; Veteran's Housing and Supportive Services; a biweekly Homeless Legal Clinic; and long-time requested establishment of the Mano Y Mano day labor program. To help support the operational needs of Camp Hope, Martinez created the annual Tents-to-Rents online fundraiser, available to business organizations who volunteer to raise money and provide resources, and for compassionate individuals who seek beneficial avenues of donation.

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope partnerships continue with the City of Las Cruces, the Veterans' Administration, and New Mexico's Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD). Martinez and MVCH staff also collaborate with New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness (NMCEH) to complete federal Continuum of Care applications, advocate homeless issues during yearly legislative lobby day sessions, and offer technical assistance and best practice training workshops for southern New Mexico organizations who seek to help those experiencing homelessness within their own communities.

In 2018-2019, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope served 2,971 clients on the Hope Campus, an increase of 343 clients from the previous year.

Index of first hour

00:05 - Interview introduction

01:04 - Family biography, growing up in California and Oregon

02:29 - High School in Brookings, Oregon; Decision to attend college for sociology

04:14 - Utah Child Protective Services; Decision to attend New Mexico State University, Sociology graduate assistant; Description of 2005 Thesis *Perceptions of Place and Identity in the Community of Doña Ana*

07:23 - Thesis study using oral history, ethnography, and transcription

08:08 - Overseas travels

08:54 - Local organizations and institutions: NMSU, partnered alliances within Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH), and the Southwest Environmental Center (SWEC)

10:27 - Growth and development of Las Cruces compared to other college towns; Community identity

12:25 - Engagement with local community resources and civics to promote economic growth; Progress of downtown Las Cruces and Convention Center Bureau

13:57 - Challenges of homelessness: stressors of “Living outside,” “Lack of sleep,” “Lack of safety,” “Constant anxiety,” Tobacco abuse, and Jardin de Los Niños smoking cessation programs

15:53 - Fear of violence, theft, and inaccessible medications; Las Cruces homeless population compared to Los Angeles, California; Affordable housing and services’ needs

17:44 - Absorbing Hacienda Del Sol shelter into MVCH services, completion of ten month Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grant, and funded programs to house people in their own homes; Shelter Plus Care Grant

Index of first hour (cont.)

- 19:23 - Subsidized group homes, Housing First principles, and addressing the issues of homelessness after people become housed
- 20:07 - City of Las Cruces recognizes Hope Campus illegal overnight campers, deadline to vacate city property, and The Great Conversations; Youth violence against homeless; Client driven agenda to open sanctioned tent city
- 22:54 - Camp Hope proposal to Las Cruces City Council; Planning and Zoning Commission, sixteen conditions for rezoned city property, and “Bringing Camp up to code”
- 24:37 - Fire and police department first responder regulations; Residents accessing MVCH partnered programs from Camp Hope; HUD verification of homelessness
- 26:03 - MVCH intake process, caseworker connections, and referring clients to partnered organizations; Capturing “Data snapshot” statistics, Camp Hope’s limited resources as an unfunded project, and demands of an accurate services’ count
- 28:41 - MVCH caseworkers address variety of homeless related issues: mental health, housing veterans, apartment locating with partnered landlords; Helping clients move into new housing, and “Using donations as intended”
- 29:57 - Caseworkers as housing facilitators; Identifying “Secondary trauma” and “Compassion fatigue;” Staff-workers who located clients outside the Hope Campus, and importance of “Clients’ preference”
- 31:44 - Listening, understanding, and recognizing various client needs and timelines; Staff turnover, best practices, and annual evaluations
- 33:20 - Mobile Integrated Healthcare with Paul Ford of the Las Cruces Fire Department; Mitigating between emergency medical and social service calls

Index of first hour (cont.)

34:50 - MVCH “Service center” to “Housing organization” evolution, Saint Luke’s Health Clinic; Decreased client support during State of New Mexico Medicare fraud investigation, rebuilding structure of Families & Youth, Incorporated (FYI) and La Clinica de Familia

37:03 - Doña Ana County Health and Human Services; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); Court-ordered Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) program

38:08 - Client self-determination, incarceration, and Las Cruces community perspectives on Doña Ana County behavioral health services

39:08 - Partnerships with AOT program and La Clinica de Familia

40:24 - Food insecurity, Casa de Peregrinos food assistance, and the modern-day limitations of food stamps; Accessing meals at El Caldito Soup Kitchen, Gospel Rescue Mission, and church organized pantries

42:40 - Camp Hope program services delivered by MVCH organization; City of Las Cruces partnerships to create Consolidated Services Model; Limiting client transportation issues to reach resources within walking distance

43:47 - Las Cruces community perspectives of homelessness, crime, property value, and businesses around MVCH neighborhood areas; Benefits of “One-Stop Shop” consolidated services

45:54 - Amador Próximo community revitalization plan, and suggestion to move MVCH to another Las Cruces area; Livable wages, better healthcare systems, and more affordable housing

48:50 - HUD’s Housing Authority, Section-8, and public housing programs; Competitive Continuum of Care funding, New Mexico’s Mortgage Finance Authority (MFA), and partnerships with New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness (NMCEH) for state-wide HUD funding sources

Index of first hour (cont.)

52:18 - Community outreach and staff presentations to clarify separate MVCH partnerships regardless Consolidated Services Model support with independent organizations working at the Hope Campus location

54:07 - MVCH “Tent-to-Rents” Camp Hope annual fundraiser for Las Cruces community driven donations to increase awareness akin to Saint Luke’s “Run With Your Doc,” and El Caldito’s partnership with Las Cruces Potters’ Guild “Empty Bowls” fundraiser

57:00 - “Tents-to-Rents” funding goals, financial contributions, and business community sponsorships to cover initial clients’ move-in and rent costs of Camp Hope temporary program toward permanent housing

59:17 - Building ongoing fundraiser opportunities; Problem of “Keeping homelessness quiet;” Consistent, long-term Las Cruces community partnerships with MVCH board members and Development Committee outreach

Index of second hour

01:02:51 - Federal and State institutional challenges to funding operational costs; HUD conditional requirements, coordinated entry bottlenecks, excessive proof of vulnerability, and housing waiting lists

01:04:18 - Difficulty of locating clients after long wait times; Operational costs, and paying staff well, versus pushback for funded organizational programs

01:05:41 - *Charity Case* YouTube video about non-profit organizational costs under twenty percent; MVCH at ninety-one cents on the dollar toward programming, and nine percent toward overhead; Request for assistance with operational costs

01:07:32 - MVCH funding within Las Cruces city limits, addressing poverty in Santa Teresa, New Mexico and other Doña Ana County Colonias, and the limitations of helping rural area housing needs

01:09:00 - Potential to end homelessness throughout state, and MVCH staff led volunteer trainings on Coordinated Entry and HUD funding for Alamogordo and Deming, New Mexico

01:11:55 - Staff trainings, support, and incentives for self care; Recent purchase of new van to help staff reliably assist clients; Allowing flextime, promoting vacation time; Retreat trainings, processing difficult client stories, and resiliency to “Grow from every experience”

01:15:45 - Good Samaritan Society staff trainings, and lack of State of New Mexico support for staff healthcare and retirement options

01:17:41 - State bureaucracy, best practices, and red tape; Navigating New Mexico poverty and homeless services with City of Las Cruces partnership support of MVCH agencies

01:19:01 - City of Las Cruces Community Development Neighborhood Services Department partnerships for Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), health related public services to indigent and disabled people, and available housing grants

Index of second hour (cont.)

01:20:29 - Support for “Mano Y Mano” day labor program with City of Las Cruces Parks and Recreation Department; City support to purchase MVCH group homes, approve Camp Hope, and participate in “Tents-to-Rents” fundraiser

01:22:00 - City of Las Cruces Housing Trust Fund, Land Bank, and a Permanent Supportive Housing Toolkit to promote continuous development of affordable housing

01:23:25 - Immediate relief for the homeless with more affordable housing, and more “Robust mental health response” with proscribing professional healthcare combined to “Alternative holistic responses for people who aren’t interested in taking medication”

01:24:45 - The future of Mesilla Valley Community of Hope housing programs to mitigate Las Cruces area housing unit deficiency; Maintaining, protecting, and adding to current programs; Increased rural New Mexico support for the southwest region

01:26:42 - Praise for City of Las Cruces support of MVCH with CDBG funding, receiving HUD national recognition, and 2018 Hope Campus promotional video

01:27:11 - Personal story about client who returned after eight years to give thanks

01:32:15 - Positive reinforcement, encouraging resiliency, and “Recognizing that it is our job to be there when they’re ready.”

Interview 13 Excerpts — Nicole Martinez:

Improved “Housing First” Programs, and Opening Camp Hope

I came to work for an organization called Hacienda Del Sol in 2006. It was January 2006. And I was called in because Hacienda Del Sol was being taken over by the organization, the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, which is not just an “Umbrella,” it’s an actual organization, again, of which I’m the director. I was called in to just— Since I had Child Protection Services experience, some social work experience, the director of the Community of Hope at that time asked me to come help run-out the ten-month grant, the HUD (Housing & Urban Development) grant that was keeping the shelter going. And then, it was going to be transferred to another organization. And when that did not happen we decided that, “Well. Let’s not continue to run a shelter. Let’s house people.”

“Let’s try housing.”

So, we did that. I found placements for all of the families. And met with landlords. Began paying rent for the families. Did home visits with them. Helped them to obtain income. Exited them from the program. They stayed housed, taking over the rent on their own. And so, because that was a successful transition, we decided to start to apply for more housing funding. And that became our goal. And that became my position.

Nicole Martinez:

So, I ended up— We shut down the shelter. I moved over to the actual physical building over at the Community of Hope, and I started creating and implementing housing programs for people experiencing homelessness. And it was a very slow process. But, we quickly started to— And we also had one grant that had been running for one year which was formally called Shelter Plus Care Grant [S+C]. And so, that was really also getting the feet wet in housing. So then, we started to bring on more and more housing programs. Even the director at the time purchased a couple of group homes that came with a subsidy. So, we got our feet wet in group home; Housing homeless people in group home settings.

Housing First, where you meet people where they are, creating a very, very low barrier to any type of housing. Not requiring income. Not requiring sobriety. Or any thing. Very difficult to accomplish those things if you're living in the street. Or in a ditch. So, get to help people into their own units first. And then, work on the issues that led to their homelessness.

So: "Housing First." And then, I had been doing that for about six years, and this was in November— Starting, actually, in September-October, the City of Las Cruces, who owns all this property, found that there were a lot of homeless people sleeping on the Hope Campus overnight. And camping is not legal on city property.

Nicole Martinez:

So, city officials said, “You need to have homeless people go somewhere else at night.” So, I said, “Okay. If they’re not staying at the [Gospel Rescue] Mission, then there’s a reason why they’re staying out here.” “There’s nowhere else for them to go.”

“Where do you suggest we have them go?”

So, they gave us a deadline, and when that deadline became closer, we said, “There’s still nowhere.” “We can go tell people to trespass, but that’s not what we feel like doing.” And yes: There were a lot of issues having people sleep here, as you would have with a lot of people sleeping anywhere that’s not structured. And we did have a lot of litter. Bathroom— We didn’t have outdoor bathrooms at the time. Some people would get rowdy. So, at that time, we just weren’t sure what to do. So, we kept asking the city— “We don’t want to open another shelter, those are expensive.”

“We really just want to continue housing people, and serving them.”

And, at night, nobody wants to drive by somebody in the middle of February at five p.m., someone who’s hunkered down, and say, “Beat it.” “Go trespass somewhere else.” Then why would they come back for any service?

Nicole Martinez:

So, at that time, Randy Harris started with his Great Conversations, and sat down with people who were homeless, and said, “What are the issues? What’s going on?” And they said, “Well. Soon, we’re not going to be able to sleep here at night. We don’t know where we’re going to go.”

“We don’t feel safe anywhere.”

We’d been experiencing young, not homeless — we don’t know if they were homeless — Youth who were targeting people who were homeless, and beating them up over at Burn Lake [near Interstate 10] and other areas. So, we wanted to provide a safe place.

And there were at least three people who were homeless, and have been homeless for quite some time here, who said, “Well. We’re really interested in maybe seeing if the city would let us start a tent city.” And they did their research. The director at the time was open to it because, again, we didn’t know what the plan was going to be. She didn’t expect it to be anything long-term. Just in the interim. And so, she went with the three homeless reps to city council, and proposed opening a “Tent city,” to which the council agreed for a three month period. And two weeks later the director took a job at Saint Luke’s Health Clinic, and I became interim director. And so that’s how I became familiar with the camp pretty quickly, because I worked at Community of Hope already.

Nicole Martinez:

And so, we decided to start this program, the “Tent city.” And very quickly it became apparent that we had people who were right in our backyard that we could house really quickly, that we could serve with services. We started to get more infrastructure. Donations from the [Las Cruces] community were really helpful getting everything started. So, after three months there was still no long-term solution. So, I created a Power Point presentation. I went to city council, and I said, “Can we?” “Can we keep this?”

So, went before city council, and they said, “Yes.” There was— that’s, you know: “As long as you can get this rezoned, you’re going to have to go through Planning and Zoning commission, and work with the City Planning department. As long as you can do that then we can keep the camp.” And that was it. I never had to go back to council again about the camp, or anything like that. It was just that one time.

So, then I did work on rezoning the area. It took a long time. They came up with about sixteen conditions that had to be met. Things like putting tent pad sites. Having a cooking area. Distance between tent pad sites. Making sure the landscaping met city codes. Things like that. So, we worked really hard, came up with a lot of donors, grants, legislators who pulled through funding for us, and brought the camp up to code. And as long as we continue to meet our end of the bargain, then the City of Las Cruces is willing to let us to continue to operate it.

Nicole Martinez:

So, it's not a funded project. We don't answer to anyone, except first responders of course. You know: are we meeting fire department [Regulation]; are we meeting the laws that law enforcement would encourage us to do? Are we meeting the codes of the City of Las Cruces? So, those kinds of things. So, what I mean in terms of "We don't answer to anyone," I just mean— It's not HUD funded, or New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority (MFA) funded. So, we don't have funding in that sense, in terms of the operations going on there.

But, I mean, each of those organizations do still play a role in that it's people from the camp that are getting into their programs, and how we're documenting how people are making that transition is something that's a benchmark. Something that HUD is looking at, making sure that we're verifying legally that people are homeless. "What services were they provided?" "What's the trajectory for them?" That kind of thing. So, in those ways, HUD and our funders do still have a finger on what's happening at the camp. But, again, operationally we really only answer to the City of Las Cruces.

Nicole Martinez:

Housing resource engagement with City of Las Cruces

The City of Las Cruces has started in the last few years really focusing on housing issues, and so they've put aside funding for a Housing Trust Fund, and a Land Bank. And they also partnered with Community of Hope on a Permanent Supportive Housing Toolkit, which is where we were going to bring some more affordable units to Las Cruces. Unfortunately, we weren't, this round, successful in obtaining the tax credits to make that possible, but we're going to try again. But, they're going to offer those monies out to organizations that can bring more housing to Las Cruces. There's still a long way to go. I mean, there are a lot of other things they could be doing, like waiving impact fees. Developers giving incentives for them to develop more affordable housing. But, we've definitely made some strides, and I think that in the future that's gonna be something that's on their radar especially as we continue to be vocal about it.

Recommended Citation

Martinez, Nicole, interviewed by David Lee del Norte. September 4th, 2018. Hope Stories oral history project, New Mexico State University Library Archives and Special Collections.

Recording Information

Hope Stories 13 — 1h 33m duration. Recorded 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.