

Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)

OLIVIA NIETO HERRERA GIVES HAVEN, HELP AND HEART TO THOSE IN NEED

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Olivia Nieto Herrera listens affectionately as a middle-aged man from Guatemala tells about getting cheated out of a paycheck. He's worked hard on a construction project for five days and has earned nothing.

He's hungry.

For the past half hour, Herrera, a heavy-set grandmother who rules her sanctuary with absolute belief in the strength of the individual and the power of faith, has listened to the man's unhappy story. She has smiled, asked questions, joked a little, dispensed advice and encouragement.

Now she leans forward in her chair and looks directly into her client's dark eyes. Her tone is melodious, but firm: "Usa tu cabeza cualquier cosa pueda decir un gringo tu tambien puedes," she says. "Use your head. Anything an American head can do, yours can do, too."

Minutes before, the man wore an expression of gloom. Now he smiles.

Next comes a pretty young woman. She confides that her husband abandoned her and their four children. They are hungry.

"Puede usted ayudarme," she asks. Can you help me?

Herrera already is shuffling her old vinyl house-slipped feet toward a box filled with used paper bags. As she bends down to pick out a couple of containers with handles, she gently scolds the young mother:

"You came with no faith," Herrera says. "You did not even bring a bag."

The young mother acknowledges Herrera's message with a shy smile.

An agitated young man of about 18 suddenly appears. "Le trabajo por nada nomas deme un plato de comida," he declares with urgency. "I will work for nothing. Just give me a plate of food."

With a grandmotherly expression that assures him he need not be afraid or hungry, Herrera says, "Descansa un rato."

"Rest a moment."

Decades of good work

For the past three decades, the name Olivia Herrera has echoed throughout the underbelly of Long Beach where hundreds of poor, Spanish-speaking people live. It has come to be associated with food and knowledge, kindness and safety.

"Olivia Herrera will help you," people from places like El Salvador and Honduras and Mexico say. "Go see Olivia Herrera."

"She can translate. She will try to find you a place to sleep. She will not let you go hungry."

"Olivia Herrera will know what to do."

So they come, a constant stream of "illegals," many with acute needs and no social rights.

Earlier this month, for example, Herrera happened to be at her Long Beach home near 17th and Temple Streets when a taxi pulled up. The passenger who climbed out was wearing a hospital gown and had a cast on his leg. He'd been in a car accident. A

local hospital had patched him up but couldn't keep him.

"Olivia Herrera will help you," the nurse who called the taxi had told him.

"I have absolutely nowhere to put him," Herrera had thought to herself as she greeted the bandaged man. "I am not equipped to handle an invalid."

To the man she said: "Descansa un rato."

For the next couple of weeks, the man convalesced in Herrera's bed. The 57-year-old grandmother of six slept on the couch at her daughter's cottage, located in the rear of the three-bedroom house Herrera rents. The nine other people currently living at Herrera's "crash pad" as she calls it, helped feed and care for him.

"We're the lowest rung on the social ladder," she says of the Centro Shalom community she founded in 1977. The agency is an outreach of the Latin American United Methodist Church, located across the street from Herrera's house, which is sponsored by the South Coast Ecumenical Council to serve the needs of the Spanish-speaking community.

"We take people who have nowhere else to go. I don't care if people are 'legal' or 'illegal.' People are people. If they're already in this country and they need help, they need help. Hunger doesn't wait.

"I believe we are all one," she adds. "One hurt is a hurt to us all. When one of us falls, we all fall. Shalom is a Biblical term that means the love and peace of God - without boundaries or limits."

On this summer day, Herrera is seated on a folding chair in the dining room/kitchen area. She's in the process of moving Centro Shalom into the church building adjacent to the sanctuary from her old headquarters on Third Street and Linden because she needs more space. She didn't have to publish an announcement about her whereabouts. Before the first box was unloaded this morning at 8 a.m., clients already had lined up at the door near a sign that says: "Lleve pan, gratis aqui." Free bread here.

As she talks about her work and her life, a team of loyal "helpers" hauls old desks and filing cabinets into what will become an office area.

Herrera has told the spontaneously assembled crew she'll be occupied in the dining room for awhile. She doesn't give instructions or bark orders about how the furniture should be arranged or what to do for needy clients.

She assumes - given half a chance - that people will use their brains to work things out.

"Everything will get done," she frequently says. "People have brains. I don't need to do their thinking for them."

By her own description, Herrera is a born hippie, a free-spirit, an outspoken troublemaker who was brought up by ecumenically minded parents who believed "that God gave us laws to live by, not to oppress."

"I am a happy person," she says simply. "I've always been happy. Real happiness is based on love that you share with your fellow human beings."

Referring to the dozens of people who make up the extended Shalom community, she adds, "I have great love for these people.

"There's no feeling of hopelessness here like you get from Americans who have everything. These people lift my spirits. Poor people enjoy simple things. If a 21-year-old Mexican boy gets a letter from his Mother, he hangs on every word. He's happy for days.

"I am a poor person by choice. I am bilingual and educated. I've chosen to be poor because it's the only way to have freedom. You have freedom if you have a lot of money - or none. If you have property, it owns you.

"I could not be bound by that. My life is to live."

A heritage of helping

To understand this highly educated, independent woman who has chosen to live

among the poor, one must begin in El Paso, Texas, where she was born May 8, 1933. Herrera's parents christened their first of six children "Olivia" as a symbol of peace and good will. As the daughter of a circuit Methodist minister who traveled throughout the Southwest during the Depression, she can never remember a time when the plight of the poor was a removed concept. As a young girl, she often joined her father, Edmundo Alvillar, when he went to train stations to administer to hungry people.

Then, as now, he and her mother Trinidad "Trina" Herrera Alvillar operated what Herrera calls an "open door policy," sharing all that they had with whoever was in need. Even today, at 75, Trina puts in long hours as a volunteer at Centro Shalom where she has been a pivotal supporter since its inception.

In 1943, the growing family moved to Long Beach. Herrera was 10. In those days, speaking Spanish at school was strictly forbidden. Never one to sit back timidly and wish the world made better sense, Herrera instead insisted on answers to her many questions. The Spaniards and Mexicans lived on this land now called the United States long before the Americans, she reasoned. "So why is speaking Spanish bad?" "Why is a sandwich better than a burrito?" "Why do protestants and Catholics act like they're so different?"

"Why? Why? Why?"

At 15, to the horror of parents who'd raised her to value education, Herrera dropped out of school to get married. At 16 she had her first baby. By the time she was 21 she was the mother of five.

When her youngest entered school, she was determined to get her high school diploma. She earned straight A's at night school and went right on to California State University/Long Beach, where she graduated in 1967.

Dramatic years

The following years were politically and personally dramatic. Her house became headquarters for kids who had nowhere to go. She was told she was too fat and had too much of an accent to teach, so she began social service work as assistant director of the East Long Beach Neighborhood Center and on to a job as a social worker at the Department of Public Social Services.

She saw her eldest son join the Marines; her second oldest, a straight-A graduate and student body president of Wilson High, beaten and arrested during the student riots at University of California, Santa Barbara.

She got a divorce.

"I had a very short crying time," she recalls of her 20-year marriage. "It should have happened years before. I had such a life to live. In my marriage it was not possible to have a brain or a life of my own.

"I remember the day I left my husband at his mother's. I knew I had to fly. I swung my purse and whistled 'La Calandria' as I went out that gate. The song is about a bird who flew and flew and flew.

"Volo y volo y volo."

"I gave the house away. I couldn't be tied down."

In 1974, she stretched her wings again. After working for the county for five years, she no longer could stomach her job as a social worker. Eligibility requirements had changed, and she daily found herself having to turn more and more needy people away.

"I couldn't do it anymore. Could you?" she asks simply. "So, when my baby turned 21, I abandoned my children. I left Long Beach to join Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. I went to the Delano area for two weeks and stayed three years."

Following her work as an organizer and lobbyist for the farm workers in the Coachella Valley where she earned \$5 a day, Herrera returned to Long Beach with the grape picker she'd married. She and Pablo were together seven years, a fact that both

amazes and amuses her.

“My children couldn't believe it,” she says, laughing easily at herself. “It was a tragi-comedy. We had great fights and a lot of fun. It was a mistake.

“Since then, I've have five offers (of marriage),” she adds. “If I get married, that's fine. If I don't, that's fine.”

Cooperative effort

By her own admission, housework and waiting on people aren't Herrera's strong suit. Those who move in with her - whether for a day or a year - are on their own. Herrera is nobody's dishwasher or cook.

She does have a few house rules, however: Don't put metal in the microwave. Don't put your toilet paper in a box. Flush the toilet.

That about wraps it up.

A couple of the nine people currently living at her house contribute what they can to the \$1,000 a month rent. She earns as much as \$500 a month as a board member for the Civil Service Commission, where she has served for five years, and receives another couple hundred from the Methodist Church.

Like her clients, she gladly accepts free food, scrounges in bags for clothes and has no health insurance or retirement plan. She's been on a few trips in her life, but they've always been related to her work as a community activist.

But, for the most part, the world comes to Herrera.

On any given day, her house is likely to be filled with people of all ages and backgrounds. On this afternoon, a man from Morelia, Mexico, is talking to four youths ages 10 to 18 who are sprawled out on Herrera's wide front porch. Two of the kids are from Mexico City. Miguel, the man from Morelia, has slept in a car parked in front of Herrera's for several weeks; a young woman who works at Taco Bell sleeps in the van parked in the driveway.

Miguel is a cheerful gentleman of 48 whose easy smile reveals his lack of lower front teeth. He's come to the United States to look for his 22-year-old son, whom he misses very, very much.

Inside the house, a couple of younger children are playing with Ninja Turtles on the well-worn carpet near a table covered with a plastic sheet that can seat 12.

Back across the street in her office, Herrera confers with a couple of men from the phone company who've come to install Shalom's new line and returns to her desk to visit with clients.

Dorothy Hodges, an active member of the Belmont Shore Methodist Church and Shalom volunteer, drops in after a morning of trying to get food donations from local supermarkets. She has worked closely with Herrera and her mother for years. Surveying the new office, she expresses her approval and adds, “When Olivia and her mother go to heaven, they are going to live in a mansion like you have never seen before.”

Clients come and go. Others have just come by to chat in Spanish. Many who don't have addresses, stop in to pick up their mail.

Herrera makes time for everyone. A 12-year-old girl silently brings a bowl of pot roast soup with carrots and cabbage and a stack of hot tortillas to her on a tray.

Herrera has not asked for lunch. Like much of what goes on here, things just get done, because, as she frequently notes, “This is a happy place.”

Like a mother bear

Simple as that. Though she's the first to admit that many of her clients arrive in this country with no English and few skills and obviously have crossed the “Tortilla Border” illegally, Herrera is like a mother bear when it comes to defending the right of every human being to shelter and food. She can cite countless cases of illegal aliens who put their fate and fortune in the hands of The Coyotes at the border because no other

avenues for survival existed - the accountant whose business collapsed with the dramatic devaluation of the peso in 1985; the fisherwomen who recently came to Long Beach from a poor, rural village in Mexico because the lake that was the entire source of their livelihood dried up.

"They had to flee," Herrera says. "They couldn't make it. Now they will take the jobs no one else wants to do.

"Whether they leave their home for political or economic asylum, it excites me to think about what type of person would leave the known for the unknown," she adds. "I think it takes someone very gutsy, a person with a lot of faith in God and in themselves - a person who will face the unknown because they know there's got to be a better way to live."

Community honors

Earlier this month, the Long Beach chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens Council hosted its second annual Latino Awards Banquet at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

Following dinner, well-dressed politicians and community leaders applauded as several people were honored for their special contributions to the Latino community.

But when Olivia Herrera stood before the microphone to accept the Community Service Award for her work at Centro Shalom and as one of the founders of the East Long Beach Neighborhood Center and LULAC Head Start program, the applause became a thunderous standing ovation.

"Olivia, Ole," the crowd chanted. "Olivia, Ole!"

Wearing an electric blue dress given to her by her children for the occasion, Herrera looked out at the admiring crowd and said she was moved and speechless.

"I always felt people saw me as a troublemaker," She said later. "But everyone said such nice things. I saw one man who used to be sort of an enemy. He said, 'You know, Olivia, there've been times I couldn't stand you. But you stayed in the front lines all these years. Thank you.'"

Before the banquet, she had described herself as "a child of God. Just another child doing what most people want to do - being in the middle of things that are happening, trying to help make the world a better place by helping people reach their own potential."

That's not such an unusual thing to do, she had observed.

Maybe not. But for the dozens of people she comes into contact with daily, and the hundreds more she has touched over the years, there is something unusual about the beloved grandmother with the moles on her face and the crooked teeth.

She believes people - all people - have brains. When treated with dignity and respect, a strange and wonderful thing happens to just about everyone, she says.

They learn to think for themselves. "Pensar por si mismos."

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