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CPO 1625

Dr. William Taylor Center Memorial Award

“Voy a volver” – I will return. This was my parting promise to the elders in my community. It is a promise that keeps my heart planted in the dusty tierra of my borderland and echoes in my ears even in the midst of the twang of Kentucky greetings. It is a promise wrapped in the wisdom passed on to me by the comadres* – the women who showed me the difference between serving a community and actually being a part of that community.

I came home eager to *serve* my gente. I had left New Mexico when I was 18 years old. Circumstances and empty nest brought me home 20 years later to Las Cruces, a mid-sized town with a predominately Hispanic population. I was assigned as a Vista Volunteer to an agency responsible for the county’s Meals on Wheels Program. The agency was in the midst of a \$200,000 shortfall. Higher gas prices, and a state mandated minimum wage increase had decimated an already tight budget. In the midst of the budget shortfall, the agency was trying to address an unmet need. A 70 year old man had confided in a social worker that he had not had a conversation with another human being in over six months. This confession was proof that profound social isolation was as pressing as hunger. The agency provided transportation for those physically able to get to the center. Our clients came as much for the socialization as they did for the free meal and were asking for more recreational activities. My Vista

mission was clear but seemingly impossible -- create a vibrant activities program using zero funds.

I embarked on my mission cynically and even a bit frustrated. How did these people expect me to put together a recreational program with no money? I complained about the injustice of it to anyone who would listen. Few did. So, I stopped whining and started investing my energy into exploring ways to creatively tackle the problem. I found someone who was selling a projection screen television and persuaded them to give it to the center. A local electronics store donated a DVD player. Movie Wednesday became the first activity on the calendar and was the start of my community education.

I showed new release movies in Spanish with English subtitles. At the insistence of a supervisor I showed only Rated G and PG 13 movies. I broke this rule to show "Like Water for Chocolate." Most of those who watched the movie were Hispanic women and I felt like the story would resonate with their experiences. Nevertheless, I prepared my seniors beforehand about the presence of some racy scenes. "What, you don't think we haven't seen it before?" quipped Stella. It was a not so subtle cue to stop treating them like children.

The movie ignited memories. The van on the way home was filled with laughter and stories about first loves and lusty affairs. "We want more movies like that," said Dolores. "Yeah, give us more movies with some sex in it." said Stella. "We like those." Hearing the discussion I realized that often we treat elders like they had no life before wrinkles and bad knees.

We forget that they were young, passionate human beings and we lose sight that even though they are older they are still very much those people. I decided to stop serving my clients and start seeing them as equal collaborators. We brainstormed on what we could do. "We like to go places," suggested Dora. "And we got those big vans."

That was the beginning of our exploitation of the transportation budget. I scheduled field trips to any place where I could get free admission. We went to art museums, zoos and state parks. One trip to the mall was particularly rowdy. For several weeks, 89-year-old Modesta carefully saved her money so she could realize her life-long wish of getting her ears pierced. All the comadres came to witness the event. The ladies were so loud and funny they actually drew a cheering a crowd. My supervisor upon seeing Modesta's new hoops quipped, "What's next, the tattoo parlor?" The next week the comadres all sported temporary tattoos as a practical joke. Treating them as equals - equals enough to share adventures and a good laugh had given them dignity and had made me one of them despite the language barrier.

A field trip to the Southwest Environmental Center spurred stories on how the river used to be "back in the day." This resulted in an initiative on SWEC's part to interview elders and use them as a resource in environmental efforts. This got Stella thinking. "You know, we got lots of time," she said. "You think the town needs help making flowers for the fiesta?" Volunteering became an activity. We made paper flowers for the fiesta with middle school students. We did activities with the head start

program in the building, including indoor fishing and dying Easter Eggs. Head Start was able to count the activities as volunteer hours. My elders had taught me to rethink definitions including what it means to serve. Simply trying to care for those with needs in our community diminishes them. Empowering them to continue to be vital participants is a collaboration that benefits us all.

Thinking creatively and making my elders part of the planning process gave us all room to try new things. It also broke the isolation so often imposed on our seniors and made them a visible part of the larger community. Each field trip spurred another idea and each idea was a bit bolder than the previous one. At Stella's suggestion I scheduled a trip to the outdoor pool, but with trepidation. New Mexico summers are hot and the public pools are usually overflowing with energetic and rambunctious children. My anxiety was fueled by staff who eagerly recited a litany of everything that could go wrong and the work involved. I did not sleep the night before despite my many prayers for good weather and no injuries. My misgivings however paled when measured against the raw enthusiasm of the comadres who arrived at the center with beach balls and sun glasses. Stella undaunted by the "Teeny Bikinis" in the store bought two swimsuits and sewed a large single one to fit her ample frame.

When we arrived at the pool, many of the teenagers did a double take at the ten gray haired ladies staking out their corner of the pool. I held my breath as the ladies eased into the water. Children came closer out of

curiosity. One brave 10 year-old boy, urged on by his friends asked Chavela pointedly, "How old are you?"

"I'm ninety," said Chavela.

"Whoa that is really old."

"Today is my birthday and my first time swimming," Chavela added in broken and halting English."

"Whoa that is really cool. My name is Juan. Hey, you want to play beach ball with my friends?"

"Sure."

Moments later Chavela was in the shallow end playing with Juan and his friends. I looked around and saw all my ladies engaged not only in the activity but actively engaged in life. Licha was eating pizza and talking to two teenage girls who also spoke no English. Agatha, who suffered from arthritis was vigorously exercising in the pool with some kids who were imitating her moves. Some of the ladies who had forgotten their swimsuits were clapping and cheering for the teenage boys showing off on the diving board. Having the elders at the pool provided opportunities to teach young people about how to relate to those much older. Having young people around reminded the older adults that they still had much to offer and could keep up. The cost of these experiences was the already budgeted gas for the trip and the \$1.50 pool fee willingly paid by the senior. The impact on the broader community was too big to fit within the lines of the largest fiscal budget.

Despite the challenges in creating the SER activity program, it was one of the most rewarding volunteer experiences of my life. I laughed a lot that summer, not just quiet chuckles either, but full on tears rolling down my face laughter. My volunteer work didn't feel like work at all, it felt like a joyful privilege. Moreover it provided me with experiences I will continue to apply and memories I will always treasure. Memories like 30 elders standing in a departure line on my last day at the center. As I walked through, they hugged me and gave me their blessing. Some uttered prayers in Spanish, others included admonishments, "Get good grades in school and then come back to us." Chavela gave me a card that she had taken the time to write in English with Stella's help. "Thank you for always treating us with dignity and respect. We will never forget you." My tears were the only response I had to let them know they had made a difference in my life as well. I still write to my comadres. I write my letters in Spanish as an affirmation that the new things I learn, as well as the things they taught me will ultimately be applied to my community. It is my way of showing I intend to honor my promise to return and collaborate.

*comadre has many meanings but in the Southwest it is a colloquial expression for close neighbors and friends.