**Date:** May 22, 2020 at 10:36:15 PM CDT
**To:** Sally Brennan <sjbrennan@aol.com>
**Subject:** **Casa Esperanza**

In 1994 I was completing a sabbatical following a 25 year ministry at Sacred Heart Schools in Chicago. I was discerning my next ministry.  The Society of Helpers had just moved their novitiate from a poor neighborhood in South Chicago. Jean Kielty, s.h. was the director of a large Catholic Charities Shelter in Chicago. She knew the plight of the homeless. She asked her provincial to keep the house and develop it into a second stage shelter for homeless woman and children. The Helpers mission is "to journey with those most in need”. I was approached about working with Jean to begin this project. Jean knew the need for a second stage shelter for woman who had made important changes but needed more time. Casa was designed to allow the woman to stay for two years. Some stayed longer if it meant completing a degree or if it was the right thing for them. Surviving homelessness, rejection by family and friends takes time to heal. It was a moment for me. I knew I could do it, something I wanted to do. I knew it was the call I wanted. Peace filled me. I had dipped into work with the poor over the years taking students to soup kitchens, visiting the elderly in projects, always wanting to do more and here it was. I never for a moment had a second thought about accepting the offer to be the director of this new project. It was a gift to me and I knew it was Gods action in my life.

Annette was my first resident. She arrived with her 18month old son, Kristofer, and a drug addiction. She was my first teacher. I was nervous working in South Chicago, 20 miles from my home, helicopters flying low over the house looking for suspected gang members. Gunshots were normal sounds in the neighborhood, gang graffiti was everywhere. Casa, being on the boarder of two gangs has a lot of activity. One summer day while I was cutting the grass I noticed a car of boys circling the block, looking at me. I felt fear and went into the house and told Annette what was happening. She said they’re probably just curious seeing a white woman doing the yard work. And so it went. Annette went with me to Aldi’s one day when I was stocking up our kitchen. The store was huge and very busy. All of a sudden I realized I was the only white person in the store and said something to Annette. She said they all think you’re a social worker or a nun. You’re probably safer than anyone else in the store.

Casa is in a food desert. The closest grocery store is two bus rides away. Every summer we set up a fresh produce stand in our driveway. A grocery store in the area ordered fresh produce and sold it to Casa at cost. Sue Rogers was working at Earthworks in Indiana, about two hours from Casa. She grew produce for our market. No item was ever more than 5 cents. Fresh corn picked the day before was 3 cents an ear. (seven dozen ears!) Fresh homemade oatmeal cookies were there for a snack. It was a great project. Nancy Finn made beautiful signs that we hung on the fence announcing the opening dates each summer. The Sacred Heart students collected winter jackets for us. We hung them on the fence with a sign saying “Take what you need.” Moms came with their children and tried them on until they found the right one. The Women’s group at Saint Ailbes parish provided beauticians before Mothers Day to give manicures and haircuts. It just went on and on. A former dean of students who worked with me at Sacred Heart brought her own high school age children andtheir friends on Saturdays to do crafts with the Casa children. A former Sacred Heart parent who worked at a bank in Chicago advising older wealthy clients of places to give their money always put in a good word for Casa. That was a huge bonus in our early years. Different groups and organizations in South Chicago offered their services. One of the banks sent an employee to talk to the woman about opening a savings account, using a checkbook, and keeping track of their money. A public health nurse came to Casa to talk about nutrition for the moms and children, healthy living. A social worker gave a program on early childhood health and discipline issues. Some volunteers built a classroom in the basement and we were able to offer computer classes to neighbors on donated computers. A parent and good friend from Sacred Heart, Shelley Torres Aldeen, who is a Montessori teacher, came down every week. She created a classroom for the children. She worked with them on a variety of projects both in the classroom and out. They cleaned and organized ourcupboards, sorting our food. They made delicious salads, baked and decorated Christmas cookies and colored Easter Eggs. They cleaned the yard and helped plant vegetables and flowers in the three raised beds Shelley provided. They loved doing all of these projects with Shelley and had immediate gratification.

The saddest resident we ever had was raised in a very poor and drug infested project. She received little real education, experienced little family life, and arrived drug addicted. She loved the gardens. She went out every evening got the hose out and stood there for a long time carefully watering the gardens.

Friends of the Helpers formed a Board for the project. They are important to the project, doing fundraisers, advising in regards to investments, offering experienced advice, being interested in every part of the project. This is a work of the Society of Helpers. Their foundress, Eugenie Smet was educated at Sacred Heart in Lille, France. She knew Madeleine Sophie Barat.

Everything I learned in my training for administration in the Notre Dame program and with Kit Collins, gave me all the skills I needed to do this job. Working with the students and faculty taught me how to motivate the woman at Casa to make good choices. I took a lot of pictures of the children and families. Years later as they find me on Facebook I send them their pictures. Kyle told me it was the only picture he had of himself when he was little, imagine! Some of the woman keep in touch. It's usually the ones who gave me the greatest challenge.  The women were on their own when I wasn’t there. They knew men were not allowed above the first floor. The women did not like it if a man was invited for the night. They were afraid. I told them to call me and I would come down. Many a night I would get a call and Mary Ellen Moore, s.h. and I would drive down. I would stay in the car and call the offender and tell her to send her friend out the front door or I’d call the police and we would come in and arrest her guest. Always within minutes some young man would sheepishly come out the front door, down the steps and disappear down the street. One time a repeat offender was not cooperating and she had two babies. I decided I had to suspend her from the program for three weeks. It was very hard, she cried and made promises. I knew this was a good thing to do for her. I told her that she would be on a contract when she came back. Her room would be there for her but if she didn’t honor her contract the next contract would be more demanding. Sharron was a different resident after that. She’s someone I continue to hear from. Another resident needed her father’s signature for a special program she wanted for one of her children. Her father was a paraplegic, having been shot fourteen years earlier, and lived in one of the toughest projects. I told her I would drive her and go with her to ask her father for his signature. He didn’t know how to write and used an X for his signature. When we arrived at the project Yolanda told me to wait in the car. Soon she came back with two of her brothers and some of their friends. They surrounded me until we got to the apartment and they stayed with me until I was driving off. The apartment was barren, no cupboards, a sink but no counter, no doors between the rooms and little furniture. Her dad was on a bed where he had lived for fourteen years. Yolanda and her four siblings had been raised there. Her story still haunts me. Another Casa alum who lived there with three children got a job with the city which she still has 18 years later. One of the children, from another family, Marquell, was a model for American Girl. Years later she joined the Marines, is a piolet and is engaged to be married. While she was at Casa her mother got an Associates Degree. Another resident who came in as a beautician with several children went to one of the city colleges for a degree as a mortician. She had no trouble finding work! Still another resident through a city college, became a phabotinist.

When a homeless woman is accepted at Casa and signs an agreement to follow through on her goals she moves into a beautiful room. She knows when she wakes up in the morning she will put her feet down on the same floor as she did the day before. She will unlock her door and go down to the kitchen to fix her breakfast. If she goes out for work or classes when she comes “home” she will unlock the front door with her own key and come in to her home.

At the end of writing this I had a deep sense of wholeness and I knew who Sally Brennan is.