

PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

RSCJ and others help new immigrants rebuild lives

Esperanza Jasso, RSCJ, has vivid memories of her friend Carol Putnam's last days – the days in which the pampered daughter of a Mexican general and a doting mother, as Sister Jasso describes herself, would agree to take up residence in a rundown trailer in Mecca, California, one of the poorest cities in the United States. Her saga began on October 10, 1992, when Sister Putnam phoned her from a hospital in California's Coachella Valley to report that she had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. Knowing that she would be unable to continue the work she had begun with Native Americans and migrant workers in the valley, Sister Putnam pleaded with her friend to carry it on.

Sister Jasso could hear her friend crying out in her sleep, "The clinic, the clinic." Grieving and torn, Sister Jasso reluctantly told Sister Putnam she would "give it a try."

"Go in peace," she told her friend. "I am going to go to Mecca."

"Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine, secundum verbum tuum in pace," Sister Putnam replied in Latin: "Lord, you now allow your servant to depart in peace, according to your word." She died April 16, 1993.

Even before that life-changing encounter, the two RSCJ had developed a strong bond. Both had served for many years in Sacred Heart schools, Sister Putnam as founder and chair of the art department at Newton College, Sister Jasso as administrator of Sacred Heart schools in Mexico. In the late 1980s, their lives had converged in Indiantown, Florida, where, in working with migrant pickers and their families, Sister Jasso first experienced a "different face" of the country she knew from attending Sacred Heart schools in Lake Forest, Illinois, and Menlo, California, and from her father's diplomatic forays into Washington D.C.

Now, as a result of her promise to a dying friend, and a follow-up discernment with Rosemary Bearss, RSCJ, then U.S. provincial, Sister Jasso's experience of America's disadvantaged would grow, and the Society's commitment would expand. She and Sister Bearss reflected on the move to Mecca in the context of "An Act of Hope," a 1992 document of the U.S. Province that put into new language the Society's historic commitment to people who are marginalized and poor.

Three ways out

Like the holy city in Saudi Arabia of the same name, Mecca in California is a place of pilgrimage. To reach Mecca, Mexicans seeking work across the border must make a dangerous trek, often across the Rio Grande or long stretches of desert, while avoiding El Centro, a major immigration checkpoint just eighty miles to the south. Many who complete the journey choose to stay.

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Fields of crops abound in the Coachella Valley.



At the northern end of the Coachella Valley, forty miles away, is Palm Springs. The highway passes near lush fairways, gated developments, and chic restaurants and shops. The drive, notes Fran Tobin, RSCJ, is study in economic contrasts, “a theological reflection in itself.”

When Sister Jasso first arrived in Mecca, she worked with Native Americans, giving them religious instruction and other kinds of help. After brainstorming with Georgie Blaeser, RSCJ, who “came for a day and stayed for a week,” she collected books from Sacred Heart schools around the country and set up libraries on the reservations. Then, as she became more familiar with the area’s culture, she redirected her energies, and her native

According to Sister Tobin, a immigration lawyer, “There are three ways out of Mecca: papers, education and courage.” She referred to metaphorical Mecca: the life of poverty that Mecca represents. Early on, Sister Jasso enlisted Sister Tobin and the Religious of the Sacred Heart at the Spiritual Ministry Center in San Diego to help with all three. Sister Tobin guided families in the process of obtaining legal papers, often representing them in court. The sisters at the center, and later Sister Eileen Bearss, brought a faith dimension to the educational work. Sister Bearss made bi-monthly trips over the mountains from San Diego to teach the women of Mecca about the courage of women in the Bible. Knowing little Spanish, she



Olga Granados traces the course of the Mississippi River on a classroom map.

Gradually, participants realized “they were like the disciples being sent, and they began to teach others,” she said.

Sisters Bearss and Tobin were among some forty RSCJ who came to visit and show their support in just her first year in Mecca, according to Sister Jasso. Together, using the methods of “popular education,” or education for positive social change, they planted the seeds of an empowerment program for women in Mecca that has helped them to find a place and a voice in their complex and often intimidating new home.

On its face, the empowerment program, as it has evolved today, is simple. On a morning last February, for instance, a half a dozen young mothers and their preschool children drifted into a classroom at Mecca Elementary School, directly across the street from Sister Jasso’s trailer. Sister Jasso gave the children snacks while their mothers set to work making Valentines. After a while, the women gathered around large table for their daily English lesson, leaving the children to play together or watch educational videos. On this particular day, the women practiced words for family relationships – uncle, aunt, cousin, father-in-law, sister-in-law and the like – in connection with computer presentations they were preparing with help from Elena Alonzo, computer teacher and librarian at the school. When a small child brandished a plastic hockey stick, Sister Jasso quietly exchanged it for a safer toy, a case study



Young Pedro bites into a freshly made tamale while his mom works on Valentines. Soon he will join his friends to play.

language, to working with Spanish-speaking families of field workers. She established an after-school program in the trailer she inherited from Sister Putnam to keep children off the streets until their parents finished working in the fields.

relied on simple words and gestures. Sister Jasso invited women she had identified as potential leaders to take part. In alternate months, participants would go to San Diego, many leaving Mecca for the first time. “Some had to overcome their husbands’ fears that they would not return,” Sister Bearss recalled.

for her ongoing lessons in parenting skills. As the child drifted off again to play, the mothers took turns reading aloud in English. Sister Jasso coached them in correct pronunciation and inserted brief text-related lessons in American culture and social skills.

Huge in magnitude

Over the past eleven years, the program has helped to transform the lives of more than a hundred women, many of them on temporary leave from field work while caring for young children. One participant, Jaquelin Ramirez, speaks for others when she describes herself as less isolated, more assertive, and a better parent. She sits on the “site council” at Mecca School, a forum developed by Sister Jasso to allow parents and educators to work together on issues of concern. Olga Granados, formerly a nurse in Mexico, is gaining enough confidence and proficiency in English to consider resuming her career in California. Several women said their participation in the program had strengthened relationships at home.

Manuela Sylvestre, principal of Mecca Elementary School, praised the program, noting that it had transformed not only individuals, but life at the school and throughout the region. “Sister not only teaches English, she teaches protocol in a system of education the women don’t know,” Sylvestre said. Previously, she said, frustrated parents often approached her with anger and blame. “Now, they come with specific questions and ask how we can work together to solve a problem.” She noted that the site council model at Mecca has been adopted by seventeen other district schools.

“I think it would be an endless list if we tried to name everything Sister does for the community,” Sylvestre said. “She trains five people and they train five others. She has key people at every apartment complex, every community site. In Mecca, if people are needed for any event, we just give Sister the date, and they are here.”



Women arrive early in the morning for the daily empowerment program, bringing young children, who play together while mothers learn.

“The program seems simple but is huge in its magnitude,” agreed Pam Cantine, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of California Riverside, who meets with women in Mecca to record their stories. “It is a huge deal when women are isolated because they don’t know English, in a country that demands so much from citizens. She helps the women understand and deal with the structures of this country – the doctors, the politicians. They will go to the council meetings now and voice their opinions. They never would have done that before.”

Visitors to Mecca can see that dramatic changes have occurred over time. When Sister Putnam first arrived, many of the town’s streets were unpaved and makeshift housing was everywhere, according to Sister Tobin. One of Sister Putnam’s first improvements was to set up showers for migrant farm workers who slept in the brush. Today there are paved streets, blocks of subsidized apartments and a new community center, where programs include legal and social services and a health clinic – the fulfillment of Sister Putnam’s dream.

Sister Jasso, a key player in making the center happen, serves on the Farm Workers Board of Riverside County, which meets monthly to talk about workers’ issues and needs.

College attendance, once as low as five percent in Mecca, is today the norm for young people. With the help of RSCJ, several have attended the University of San Diego, and one young man whom Sister Jasso taught to read now attends Stanford. Some women in her program have become teachers or teachers’ aides; some men, with her encouragement, have left the fields for jobs in area businesses. A few have even started businesses of their own.

The names of RSCJ who have helped her in Mecca roll off Sister Jasso’s tongue. They include Sister Bea Brennan, who taught English to women who now serve as teachers in Coachella valley schools, and Sally Furay, who helped to secure scholarships to the University of San Diego. Pat Shaffer, RSCJ, annually brings students from Mecca to the university, and university students to Mecca. Retired sisters at Oakwood and Kenwood have given support in money and in prayer.

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“Our work as Society of the Sacred Heart has mushroomed here because of so many people” – so many who have brought their love, their support, their skills, Sister Jasso said. She has received several grants from the U.S. province Fund for Ministry, and the Sacred Heart parish in Palm Desert has provided substantial funds. Students from Sacred Heart schools, in Network-sponsored programs, have taught children to read.

Another world

In her dozen years in Mecca, Sister Jasso has kept vigil with her friends through waves of anti-immigration sentiment. In the mid-1990s, when Proposition 187 denied social services to undocumented immigrants (a law later overturned in federal court), helicopters hovered threateningly overhead and Sister Jasso sheltered frightened children in her trailer, teaching them Bible stories.

One day she had enough of fear. “So much fear. I got sick of all the fear,” she said. Immigration officials would come around “like dogcatchers,” and people without papers were afraid even to ride the public buses. But it wasn’t just the undocumented immigrants’ fears that she was chasing. It was her own.

Although she is often described as fearless, Mecca has been hard for her, she said, “another world.” When the Santa Ana winds blow, whipping up dust and wildfires, she has been known



Jaquelin Ramirez, here engrossed in an English lesson, says she is less isolated as a result of her participation in the empowerment program.



Sister Jasso talks with Moises Moreno, a young friend, who shares his excitement about his role in a high school play.

to joke, “I am going to buy a pair of red shoes, because my trailer is going to go as far as Kansas!”

Possessions sit lightly in Sister Jasso’s trailer – she gives away most of the gifts she receives, Sister Tobin lamented with a sigh – but there are a few that stay. One is a photo of Sister Putnam that hangs on her living room wall. “I keep it there so that I can argue with her,” Sister Jasso said, her words betrayed by the twinkle in her eyes. “I ask my friend Carol, ‘What were you thinking? Why did you want me to come to this dusty town?’ ”

She also keeps, though not on display, the numerous plaques and carvings, each bearing her name, that have come in recognition of her work. She is especially fond of an inscribed crystal vase, because it came from her alma mater in Menlo (now Atherton).

By far her greatest reward, though, is seeing the skills and courage of the immigrant women grow. If once they were too afraid to ride buses, today they join arms with U.S. citizens to

demonstrate for immigrant rights.

In recent weeks, as the U.S. Congress has deliberated over the fate of undocumented immigrants, Sister Jasso has accompanied friends from the Coachella Valley to demonstrations. No longer cowering in fear, her friends are lobbying in the streets for legal status in the country where they live and work.

“If I wanted to see the results of my work, I saw it there,” she said. “It was the women standing up for their rights. Education has given them the words.”

As she reflects on her years in Indiantown and Mecca, her own pilgrimage, Sister Jasso notes that this growth has not been a one-way street. If her presence among the new immigrants has made them stronger, they have had a similar effect on her.

“I have helped to shape them, and they have shaped me,” she said. “In helping the people to conquer their fears, I have conquered my own. Today, I have to say that this journey has been, for me, a journey of joy.” ❖