

SOCIETY OF HELPERS

VOICES of Hope



Education A Path to Hope

BRINGING HOPE TO THE HUMAN JOURNEY

Vol X Issue II

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Letter from the Editor



When we hear the word “education,” we often immediately think of school, from Kindergarten all the way to post graduate studies because this is the setting in which much education takes place. However, not all education happens in classrooms, or is facilitated by professionally trained teachers. The contributors to this issue of *Voices of Hope* have a broader view of education, not limiting it to structured classroom learning. Having had different opportunities to be educated, our writers have in turn found creative and thoughtful ways of opening the doors of learning to others.

Dan Sudran describes a Science Exploratorium that started out in a garage. Lizette Olvera shares her experience of education in the formal setting, but also her group work with women residing in a domestic violence shelter. Michael Bell and Steven Scotti share their process of self-education while being incarcerated. Each one of the writers in this issue describes how their own journey on the path to learning, as well as the particular journey their students experience, enrich their lives and give them a sense of hope for the future. Their articles offer insights into education as empowering and life-changing.

As you read these articles, we invite you to reflect on your own educational process, whether formal or informal, and the ways in which it has enriched your life.

Sr. Jean Kielty, SH



Lighting the Path, Showing the Way | By Elizabeth Hoffr



Education is an individual experience that has many challenges, yet yields an almost endless array of possibilities for those who look for and find the path that can transform their life. Simply put, education is the process of taking knowledge and using it to gain more knowledge in the hopes of becoming the best person you can be. Education is a mechanism to becoming a better person. However, finding that path can be very difficult for many children today.

School is the setting that many of us count on for invigorating our prodigy with the knowledge and processes that will allow them to access their personal best and reach for the stars. Unfortunately, for many of the children populating our schools today, the pathway to success can be hidden. Without the tools to access their own potential, many kids will end up living lives that mirror a man walking up a slope of ice in slippers. However, this can become the exception rather than the rule. All the children need is a few really good teachers to light up the pathway in a way that keeps the lights of learning on for a long time. They need that spark—that person to truly care and believe in them, while also having the ability to reach them in a way that gets them to believe in themselves.

Judy, my best friend and sister, came with me to the United States when she was only six years old. She did not speak English, nor did she have anybody at home to help her survive in the world of English speakers. Judy did not do real well in the beginning due in large part to the language challenges that she encountered. As she passed through elementary school, she slowly developed her language and academic skills. She did not test well enough to get into a highly rated public school, so my parents put her into Madonna high-school. It was hard for my parents, but it ended up being a life-changing decision.

My sister was a hard worker, but she lacked confidence, belief in her abilities, and that “something” that could drive her forward. My sister found that “something” in Sister





Sheehan. Sister Sheehan was the principal of the school. She took an interest in my sister. It wasn't just academic, it was also personal. Sister Sheehan took the time to show my sister that she already possessed everything she needed to become whatever she wanted to be. She would not allow my sister to feel inadequate in any way, and taught her to persevere and fight through any challenges. She pushed her to be her best, and my sister bought what Sister Sheehan was selling hook, line, and sinker. She took off. She started being a quiet and shy young lady who pretty much kept to herself and ended up being class president and a member of the honors society who earned a full scholarship to Loyola University. While at Loyola, my sister still remembered what Sister Sheehan had taught her, and she used those lessons and feelings to forge through all challenges (of which there were many) to achieve her dream of becoming a doctor. Now she is not Judy, but Dr. Judryn Racines.

Teachers have power. Teachers bring hope to students who can struggle to see it. Teachers can bring hope to parents who love their children immensely, but either do not have the skills to truly help their kids or just cannot find that magic elixir that lights up the pathway. Teachers can carry a flashlight for students. That flashlight may not work with all students, but it does not have to. If teachers can transform just a small portion of the lives that are entrusted to them, those lives can help transform others who see them and learn from them. We still have hope that more and more teachers can make that magical connection with their students. Sister Sheehan helped to light up the pathway for my sister. We have hope that more and more teachers can be that light for their students.

Elizabeth Hoffman taught in the Chicago Public Schools for nine years before attending Dominican University. While at Dominican, she received her Master's in Social Work with a focus in Gerontology. She lives in Chicago, IL with her family.

Judryn Racines moved from Chicago, IL to Novato, CA this past year. While in Chicago she worked as the Medical Director at Winfield Moody Health Center. She currently works for Kaiser Permanente-Health Care, specializing in internal medicine, in California.

Introduction



The Center for Exchange and Solidarity (CIS) in El Salvador coordinates a Scholarship and Leadership

Development Program for underprivileged youth in El Salvador. The program not only provides access to high school and university education to those who cannot afford it, but also builds community and leadership. Each Community has a volunteer committee to administer and support the program. Each student is required to do an annual volunteer project to "give back" to the community and develop leadership skills in the process. The students themselves develop workshops on important issues such as environment, gender equality, non-violence, social media and other issues youth face. The program is an alternative to migration and violence, teaching the youth to believe in themselves and their country; that they can be productive and have a future in their own country. The students are often the first in their family or even their village to go to high school or university, and the first to get a formal paycheck, and break the cycle of poverty.

We are grateful to the Society of Helpers for assisting Sandra Hernandez to get through university for the past 6 years. Sandra will gradu-

ate in 2020 with a degree in Public Accounting and is already working for a women's rights organization and helping her sister get through university.



Sandra's Reflections

Education helps a person foment and practice principles and values. It has helped orient me to complete goals in life, learn good from bad, know when to share an opinion and use my voice for good. I have become a professional with added responsibility to serve and act in labor environment.

During my studies, I have confronted various obstacles, principally having scarce economic resources and the insecurity in our country. These factors have been the most difficult for me and most youth in my country. We come from impoverished rural communities with few opportunities. This greatly affects our state of motivation, and in my case, I wanted to drop out of school several times. The distance from my home to the university is another obstacle.



I live approximately 55 kilometers from the university. I must travel 4 kilometers on the back of a bicycle with my father, leaving my home at 4 a.m., to get to the nearest bus stop. Thanks be to God, my father took me on the back of his bicycle every day. This was fundamental in getting me to school without failing or dropping out.

If I had not studied, I would not be where I am today. I have been working for four years in a non-governmental organization for women's rights as the auxiliary accountant. Thanks to this opportunity, I can contribute to my study expenses that the scholarship doesn't cover and contribute to my sister's university studies. Neither myself nor my sister would have been able to study without the scholarship and I would not have the job I have now without my studies. I have also built a room on to my father's house so I have my own space, and I am also able to help my family with some economic necessities.

I can say with confidence that without university studies, my life history would be very different. I would

be earning a salary less than minimum wage and would probably be a mother struggling to get by. Education has opened the door to opportunities of overcoming economic poverty, to be able to have dreams and reach them.

All of this has been due to the unconditional support and solidarity of the Society of Helpers, the Center for Exchange and Solidarity (CIS) in El Salvador, and the Guadalupean Women's Association (ADEMGUAPE) in my local community of San Pablo Tacachico. I am now proudly part of the local scholarship committee since January of this year. This is a new experience for me and gives me great satisfaction to be able to participate and orient other young people to study and form part of the scholarship program. I give thanks to God and all who cooperate with the CIS to make this program possible.

"Dreaming is beautiful; to reach your dreams is a blessing from God"

Sandra lives in the town of San Pablo Tacachico with her parents and 7 siblings. She has been a recipient of the Society of Helpers' scholarship fund for the past six years.

Leslie Schuld is the Director and one of the co-founders of the Center for Exchange and Solidarity (CIS) in El Salvador. She has lived and worked in El Salvador for 26 years. She is originally from Cleveland, Ohio.

A Passion for Education | By Patrizia Ventura, SH



I come from a peasant background; three of my grandparents and three aunts were illiterate. My own parents went to work after primary school. They emigrated to the northern part of Italy from the south in the 1950s to look for work. They wanted their daughters to have the opportunity to study in order to have "a better life."

I have always loved school. From the time I was a child, I loved to study and already in primary school, I found teachers and classmates with whom I felt comfortable. In high school, studies provided me, an introverted teenager with the typical adolescent problems, the opportunity to succeed and to enjoy satisfaction. Study also became a kind of refuge for my timidity, while at the same time allowing me to channel my strongest energies into reading and cultural activities. In high school, I found sincere friends who shared my passion for literature and with whom I would discover the fascinating world of Greek and Latin culture and the history of Italian

literature. A few friends that I met back then remain my friends today, years after having moved away!

When I look back on my years as a student, I realize that a boy or a girl having a passion for education, whether for literature, mathematics or other subjects, can become a means of "salvation" - of hope - because passion motivates you to use your energy in things worthwhile rather than expending it in superficial endeavors that leave you with an empty heart and feeling weary. I am not finding meaning in what you do. My high school classmates and I did not lack companionship or opportunities to enjoy teenage life. However, the time we spent studying was the occasion to discuss life, our hopes and aspirations, while concentrating on a formation that would serve us in the future.

For me, becoming a teacher was the natural consequence of all this. The professors I knew who were passionate about the subjects they taught were great role models for me. I learned something important that would be useful to me once I began teaching: *students are perceptive* and know if they have someone in front of them who is really interested in them and in their lives, or if they have a person who is doing a job without passion, just to obtain a salary. Teachers communicate with their students, not so

much in words, but by the quality of the relationships they have with them.

Today, the school where I teach is in a lower class neighborhood of Turin where there are no movie theaters or cultural centers. There are a few gyms, but the most important gathering places remain the two parishes the young people frequent for games and other youth activities. Catholics, as well as Orthodox and Muslims who do not attend Mass, participate in the youth activities. Some families come from Eastern Europe; others from Africa or Latin America. Some are open to different cultural experiences; many others are not. Therefore, for children coming from the latter, the school becomes the only place that offers cultural opportunities. Some students go to the theater only because the school suggested this. Some have visited the library only because the school organized a field trip. We teachers cannot suggest activities that cost a lot of money because many families do not have the money to give their children for these activities. Some families never go on a summer vacation because they lack the means.

Despite this, for some students, the education they receive at school has opened new paths. I think of one boy who had many family problems. Some of his brothers were already



committing petty thievery. He recognized that studies would give him the possibility to have a good job in the future and he worked hard. I also think of a student whose father did not want her to continue her studies after high school. However, with the collaboration of her teachers and her mother, she was able to pursue her education.

My colleagues, like me, have consciously chosen to work in this particular school in an outlying area instead of teaching in a school frequented by families of a higher social class. Our choice to remain in this school is evidence to our students that we believe in them and deepens their hope on the education path.

Patrizia was born in Vintmille, a small town in northwest Italy. She studied philosophy at the Catholic University of Milan and taught for three years before entering the Society of Helpers. She has lived in Turin since 2003 where she received credentials to teach high school and currently teaches Italian, History and Geography.



I am Magdolna Tomka, a member of the Society of Helpers since 1996. I live in Nyíregyháza, a city with a population of 120,000 inhabitants

in East-Hungary, near the border of Romania and Ukraine. I'm now a catechist in a primary school in Pócspetri, a small village 30 km from Nyíregyháza where I teach self-knowledge and German. I am also on the Theology Faculty.

A part of my mission is to work with young mothers who did not plan to have children. They are victims of rape or had not received any sex education.

I'm very thankful that I grew up in a family where education had a value. My mother is from Germany so I learned two languages in my childhood. This was the reason why I became a teacher. I know that my knowledge of German is a gift. I did not earn it, so I want to share it.

For me it's very important to find the way to reach each child or young person to help them become that person who he/she is inside. Education for me is an instrument of hope. It's an instrument that enables people to find the key to their problems, and to reflect on their feelings and reactions to them.

Often I need different methods or tools to do that. For example last year I taught in Nyírtelek (10km away from my city). The children there had difficulty expressing how they felt. So we made Bible-figures to use for our religion lessons. They are made of steel, so it's possible to curve their arms and legs. They don't have faces, but through the movements they can express their feelings. It was very impressive to see how the children played with the figures, and how they could speak about them afterwards. (They speak about their own feelings in the third person singular.) Since then they have learned how to speak about their feelings without the figures.

German gives my students the opportunity to discover that their world is bigger than they imagine and that it continues to grow. Many of the families in the surround-





ing villages have never travelled to another part of the country. Often they don't have the experience of other cultures.

I try to show them the values of their own culture, so they won't be afraid of other cultures. We organize different field trips to provide them the opportunity to meet people from other cities or countries.

My greatest desire in my work with young women is to help them

understand how precious they are. My aim is to help them learn self-respect even if they have made bad decisions in the past. I would like to end with a special story about how education changed someone's life for the better.

There was a little gypsy boy who didn't like to learn. His mother left him, and his father had a second wife, and he never had other sisters and brothers. He had no motivation to learn. Once I realized that he had a talent for music, I gave him a guitar. He loved to play it. In the afternoons we studied the different subjects he had to learn in school. In 5th grade he had to repeat four exams. In 6th grade he only had to repeat three, and in 7th grade he needed to take only two extra exams. In 8th grade he was able to finish his class without repeating. Now he is studying to become a policeman. He has a good relationship with his foster-mother, and his little sisters and brothers like him.



Education is Change | By Michael Bell



Learning and education have changed my life in many ways. Even though I'm aware that all these changes were in my best interest,

sadly there were times I questioned whether or not those changes were best for my sanity.

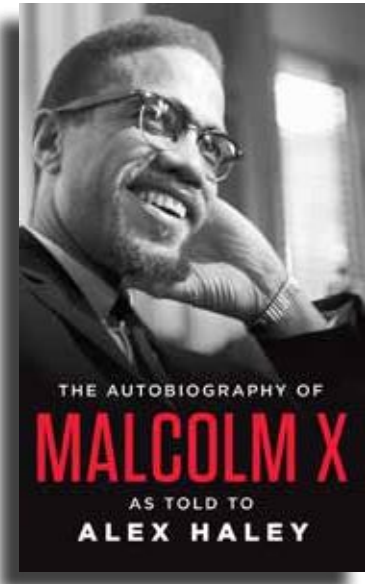
Often times, I am tortured by the hyper-awareness of the faults and shortcomings I suffered in my previous state; that awareness came only after I began to truly educate myself. I won't say I was "uneducated." That would be a disservice to many great teachers I've had throughout my life. It would also be disrespectful to my parents who worked hard to provide me with high quality schooling opportunities. I needed a different type of education; one that was not only mental, but equally, if not more importantly, social, moral and spiritual as well.

As an inmate serving a life sentence, quality educational opportunities don't come easily. Due to my lengthy sentence, I was always pushed farther down the waiting list for programs in favor of inmates who "would one day be released." That's not to say opportunities existed in abundance even for these future freedmen. I resided at a facility where the only possibility for schooling was an illegitimate GED program, with approximately twenty spots for

a population of over 2000 and a two to three-year waiting list. If I was to pull myself out of my moral, social and spiritual bankruptcy, I'd have to be autodidactic and I'd have to be creative.

I was always a "reader," but the novels I read at a manic pace were now seemingly useless to me. I would spend hours reading those stories using them as a temporary escape to transport me to worlds I'd never

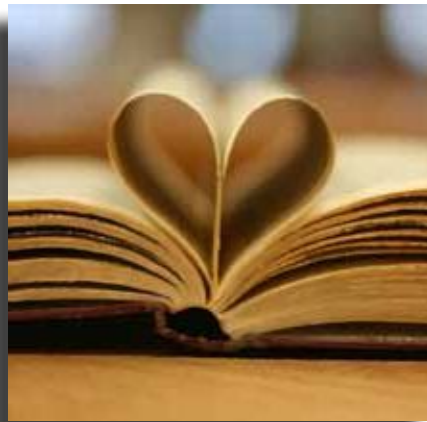
One of the most influential books I read early on was "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" by Alex Haley. In it he discusses how reading and his "homemade (prison) education" never changed the course of his life. He mentions an English writer who asked him, "What's your Alma Mater?" His response forever changed the course of my life. He responded "Books!"



I determined that I too would manufacture my own homemade education and my Alma Mater would also be "Books." Newspapers, magazines, textbooks, almanacs, medical/legal journals, anything I could get my hands on that provided me with educational information, I read.

I studied the world's religions, I've taken victim impact, anger management and AA 12 step programs. I've had many conversations with older inmates who saw something "different" in me and encouraged me to seek change.

I've had many literacy sponsors during my incarceration, with the most invaluable being my mother who has sent me any book I've ever requested and my cousin who would send me every textbook, quiz and exam she had during her college years, and would insist I complete every assignment and return them for grading.



All of this was done with the seductive whisper of the devil in my ear constantly asking, "Why are you doing this? You're never getting out." It was bigger than freedom, so I pushed on.

The more knowledge I acquired, the more depressed I became. My heart and mind were being opened in ways I couldn't predict. The clarity with which I began to see my situation and the means by which I had come to this end were overwhelming. The shame of my sins were almost too great to bear and their collective weight brought me to my knees. I began to crave the blissful days of my ignorance.

In ignorance, there is freedom. There's no conscience and no accountability. There's only the pusillanimous excuses of a cretin. Ignorance is a shield. It's a haven where one can seek refuge from culpability. But a cretin I am not. As safe and secure as that shield was, it was also heavy and cumbersome. It

was destructive and limiting. I had a choice to make. The options were simple, but they were as serious as life or death for me.

The doors I needed to enter and the bridges I needed to cross were too small for me to continue to lug around that oppressive yoke of idiocy. I wanted to live. I wanted to contribute and be an asset, not some parasite who only took and offered nothing. In order for me to do that, I had to make a definite decision to put down that shield of ignorance. The process was not easy, especially in an environment where stupidity and negativity were often times rewarded. In fact, it was long and slow and I found my greatest enemy was me. It was easier to just do nothing. For me, what purpose would an education and self-improvement serve?

It was not overnight, but with the love and support of family, friends, and of course, God, I was able to take those first steps and stay the course. I was gaining this new wealth of knowledge and now the question was, "What do I do with it?" I decided to weaponize my knowledge. I used it as an act of defiance to fight stereotypes and prove I am not my conditions or my crimes. I used it as a tool to teach and deter others from taking the path I had. I used it as an offering to honor and pay down my debt to those I had harmed. I used it as an example of

perseverance and redemption. I used it as an act of love, to make always supportive and unconditionally loving mother proud of the son who had wasted so much of his life potential and possibility.

Education has changed my life by being a constant friend, a stern disciplinarian, an always available escape and, most importantly, a mind, body and soul liberator. Education is change!

Michael Bell is a 47 year old incarcerated writer who is serving year 29 of life sentence he received as a teenager. He currently resides at Stateville C.C. Joliet, Illinois. He was born and raised on the southeast side of Chicago and is oldest of three boys. He is passionate about youth and has dedicated his life to doing all he can toward helping teenagers avoid the fates he and the many other men around him suffer. He has used his life and experiences to author three books on teen /gang violence prevention and anti-bullying. He is currently working on his bachelor's degree.



A Pathway of Hope Through Music

By Stephanie Bordes Torres



Since 1993, I have worked as an elementary school music specialist, teaching countless numbers of children to listen

to, sing, dance, play, perform, and compose music. I love what I do and I cannot imagine myself doing anything else. The following reflection is about my own enlightenment as a music teacher during a time when I felt hopelessly inadequate in my professional abilities.

Teaching music to young children is incredibly gratifying and highly energizing, but at times it can be very discouraging and exhausting. Like all public school teachers, we have soldiered on through shrinking school budgets, higher class sizes, and dwindling resources. But, as educators, we are always ever hopeful that next year, more funding will become available to help us provide more opportunities for our students to make music.

In addition to a lack of funding and reductions in staff, our public schools have seen huge increases in the number of students who have special learning challenges, many of whom have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD. According to the CDC, since 2000, the incidence of children diagnosed

with ASD has risen from 1 in 150 children to 1 in 59 children ([Data and Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder | CDC](#)).

Children on the Autism Spectrum may experience a wide variety of special challenges which can impede their access to learning. These challenges may be cognitive, neurological, social-emotional, or sensory, or a combination thereof. Oftentimes the child with Autism is internally withdrawn from interacting or engaging with others. This makes the struggle to communicate their wants and needs effectively one of their greatest obstacles.

About five years ago, my school became home to several specialized classrooms for children with Autism diagnoses. Having worked



with students with special needs for many years, I naturally assumed that I would be able to make accommodations and modify curriculum, as I always have done, to help my new students make music. I am a music teacher, after all. Or so I thought.

I immediately found myself completely overwhelmed, struggling to plan lessons for groups of 8-10 children who were seemingly so disconnected from each other and the environment. How would I coax them out of their own isolated worlds and engage them in mine? Each student had very different sensory needs. Some were sensitive to loud sounds or specific timbres while others became agitated and overstimulated, quickly. I had to learn all of the unique ways each child learned best. I felt completely inadequate to meet

my students' needs. I was trained as a music educator, not a music therapist. Discouraged and disheartened, I feared my efforts were hopeless until one day, a lightbulb went on. As teachers, we delight in seeing a lightbulb turn on in students when they finally understand a concept which had long eluded them. But this time, it was my lightbulb, my own epiphany, that made me begin to feel hopeful that perhaps I could teach music effectively, just differently.

Sitting on the floor one day, playing the bongo drums with a little boy who spoke very few words, I noticed that he easily played a steady beat and imitated simple rhythm patterns on the drum. Before long, he and I were taking turns imitating and even improvising on the drums, as if we were having a conversation. Lightbulb! We were communicating! We were having a purposeful, two-way conversation of beat and rhythms while playing the bongos. He had allowed me into his world, at last. As I began adding simple songs and chants to our drumming, more words were uttered and spoken in the context of what we were doing in the moment. For children with Autism, improvisation and communication is probably the most common learning goal, and here we were, communicating through music.



Now I revel in the joy my students show, however fleeting, when we are connected in our music-making. The motivations and interests of each student have become the catalyst for actively engaging them. Whatever the motivator, a song, an instrument or dance, I now have a path-

way into their worlds. A pathway of hope, through music.

Stephanie teaches music in Attleboro, Massachusetts and is an adjunct instructor at Rhode Island College. She lives in North Dighton, MA with her incredibly supportive husband, Craig, and their two children, Molly and Peter Torres.

Shifting gears from *teaching* music to *using* music as a vehicle for instruction, I became less a teacher-of-music, and more a teacher-of-children, *through* music. Seeing my teaching through this new lens freed me to worry less about standards and focus more on the needs of each individual child.

A Homemade Approach to Science Education | By Dan Sudran



I started my now 28-year career as a science educator in my garage in the Mission District of San Francisco in the summer of 1991. At the time, I was an electronics technician in the Engineering Department of the City College of San Francisco. Previously in my life I had been a history major at the University of Chicago (B.A. 1966), a law school graduate and

Vista lawyer at Western Idaho Legal Aid. I was also a field organizer (fluent in Spanish) with Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers Union in Idaho and California and coordinator of the grapes, lettuce, and wine boycott in San Francisco.

This unconventional background encouraged my unconventional approach to science education. In the first place, it was probably providen-

tial that my working introduction to science was as an electronics technician. My job was really a total immersion of how things work, in terms of building and testing analog and digital electric circuits, as well as becoming comfortable with measurement instruments of all sorts which are so prevalent in physical science.



In September of 1991, only a few months after opening my garage to curious, mostly Latino immigrant, neighborhood kids, I gathered a group of friends and supporters and put together "A Draft Proposal for a Neighborhood Science Discovery Center Pilot Project – A Mission District Exploratorium." The idea was and is to take the creative hands-on approach of the San Francisco Exploratorium to a neighborhood level, following the "small is beautiful" mantra of the sixties, to make it freer and more exciting because it would be smaller, less bureaucratic, and less pretentious. We called our idea the Community Science Workshop and called ours the Mission Science Workshop.

Thanks to a large National Science Foundation grant in 1995, we were able to disseminate our idea around California to other low-income communities. Amazingly, three other workshops that we helped commu-

nities start still exist and are thriving – Fresno, Greenfield (in Salina Valley), and Watsonville, which now constitute an informal network through which we share ideas and resources and have an annual "no conference" (reflecting our distaste of conferences!) to stay coordinated and supportive of each other.

The most common words and phrases heard around our workshops are tinkering, take-it-apart, do-it-yourself, and figure it out. Our programs represent a push back against the current addiction to digital devices as we probe the 3-dimensional real world that is more revealing of the richness of scientific discoveries, opposed to masking the science in the interest of convenience, behind screens, keyboards and coding, as most digital devices do.

We have sought, above all, to make experiences available to children and youth which go beyond the o-

ten hum-drum approach to science that typified many classrooms, where alignment with promulgated statewide standards often override a more curiosity based, child centered inspirational approach. Our two most popular and unique experiences are: 1) our 30-foot gray whale skeleton, which the children themselves assemble on a portable wooden structure which we designed; and 2) boxes of fossil shale from Wyoming which contain 50-year old partially covered fish fossils in rock that is soft enough for the children themselves to uncover, clean and take home.



One of our favorite quotes to share is from a 4th grader, Isaac, who was so excited by the fossil activity that he vowed to take his fossils to heaven with him.

“When I arrived at Mission Science Workshop, I was excited what were going to do and what were going to learn about...when we got in I now knew that Mr. Dan told us that were going to break fossils to see whats in there with hammers and fish 50 million years ago. I was hammering.... and big chunks of the fossil came off. When I was done, I saw almost a whole fish’s ribs! After we were all done Mr. Dan said, “raise your hand if you want to keep your fossil.” I

raised my hand for sure because I was so excited to show my mom and dad. That was the coolest part of the field trip. I can’t believe I did it by myself and found something from so long long ago was in my rock.”

Overall, I would say that the purpose of our program is to fulfill Rachel Carson’s vision on Children and Science.:

“If I had influence with the good fairy...I should ask that her gift to each child in the world would be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life as an unailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.”

Dan was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1944 and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. Since 1991, he’s been the Founder, Executive Director and Teacher of Mission and Excelsior Science Workshops in San Francisco.



My name is Lizette Olvera and I am a first generation college graduate from an immigrant family that came to this country to be “all together.”

Contrary to other stories of people leaving their home country to have a better financial life, we had it great back home. However, my mom insisted on leaving Mexico so we could be with my brother who had left home to come to Chicago. I was raised in a household where education was valued, and I now realize that my education has been a precious gift that my parents worked really hard to give me.

When I went to college I was considered an “Undocumented Alien” because I had overstayed my tourist visa; therefore every single dollar that my education cost was paid by the hard work of my parents and for that I am forever thankful. I worked hard in school because I knew that, as a first generation “undocumented” college student, and a person of color, all odds were against me. I also needed to show my parents that I was making good use of their hard-earned money. I tried to figure

out what career path to choose, ended up selecting Bilingual Education as my major and Social Work as my minor.

I now hold the position of Education Supervisor at a campus that serves women and children affected by domestic violence and homelessness. My role is to facilitate classes and groups that will help the women live on the campus regain their confidence, self-sufficiency, and trust in their abilities. Group work is a highly recognized form of learning and support and is one of the foundations of our program. Survivors of any kind of traumatic experience who heal together in a safe and caring environment regain their dignity and self-sufficiency at a more progressive rate. Our intensive 12-week healing and recovery program includes classes and groups on self-esteem and self-care, spirituality, addiction, understanding the cycle of violence, journaling and self-reflection, financial literacy, childhood development



and positive discipline techniques, and life skills such as organizing daily family routines.

Many women who come through our program have never learned about how the cycle of violence repeats itself in abusive relationships, have never learned how to set up a bank account, do not understand how to prepare healthy meals, or been exposed to any of the information presented in our groups. It is amazing to watch them blossom as they acquire new knowledge! Through this work, I have realized that achieving the status of “educated” does not necessarily have to mean educated in a traditional school setting. I have encountered the most brave, resilient and amazing women who, although not having had the opportunity to receive a formal education, have become “enlightened” and developed skills that will help them rebuild their lives. I have had the privilege of meeting people who have com-

pletely turned their lives around because the “education” provided to them while residing at our facility has allowed them to grow in their personal development. Whether or not they decide to pursue formal education for a professional career, they will have the tools to overcome a life of poverty and violence.

I would like to conclude by quoting James Ross: “The aim of education is the development of valuable personality and spiritual individuality.” I truly believe that encouraging and empowering individuals to be the best they can be offers hope for a better and more peaceful society.

Lizette is the Education Supervisor at a housing program for survivors of domestic violence. She is also a happy mother of a very active 6 year old boy. In her free time she enjoys reading and taking nature walks. Through her career in social work she has learned to appreciate the little things in life.



When I think about how education influenced my life, I think more in terms of how it saved it.

I remember being a young kid sitting in the county jail. At the time, there was a very good possibility of me spending the rest of my life in prison. In the midst of that possibility, I did not have any future to speak of. It is very difficult as a teenager, at the age of 18, to conceptualize that your life is possibly over. How, with so many years left to live, could I possibly be done?

When I was arrested, I was still in the middle of my senior year in high school. What I was not aware of was that there was a college program in the county jail that I was in. In conversations that I was having with the high school, I learned that there was the possibility of me still graduating.

I think school, at that point, was one of the last NORMAL things I remember doing. I remember thinking that it would be nice to finish what I was already so close to completing. After all, it might just be the last thing I ever completed. I really did not know why I was doing it other than the fact that

it was SOMETHING TO DO. When I heard that I had been approved to take the class, I was still pretty indifferent about it. In my mind, I guess I was taking a class to prepare me for a future I no longer had. I would soon be meeting my instructor. That is where everything changed.

At first, I wondered why an instructor would come all the way out here to a jail, to meet his incarcerated student? This was an independent study course. There was no requirement that we had to meet. Why would someone come all the way out here to teach someone who would likely be spending the rest of their life in prison? All I could think of is why?

When I met my instructor, Allan Carter, he was an English Professor. I think I expected him to judge me. After all, I was already judging myself. But what I found was the exact opposite. He was treating me like a student.





Sr. Ascension Higuera, SH

Born: June 1, 1930

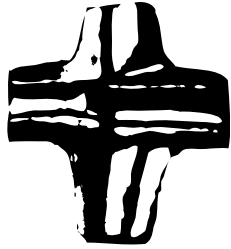
Died: June 12, 2019

Ascension was a happy person and well known for her joyous laughter. Born in the United States, she lived many years in Mexico before her family immigrated permanently to the US. She felt comfortable in her multicultural identity.

She seems never to have forgotten who she was, an immigrant in her own country, member of a poor immigrant family, and rooted in a strong Catholic faith. This was the source of her strong passions, clearly manifested in her life commitment and specifically, in her ministry. She devoted many years working with Hispanic families in Chicago before moving to California in the '70s to work with Cesar Chavez at the headquarters of the United Farmworkers in La Paz. After the boycott years, Ascension worked as a Social Worker with the Department of Social Services in San Jose. She loved working with the children who came from broken families and accompanied many of them as their fate was determined in the courts. Her compassion for them was unlimited.

She lived out her strong identity as a Helper in her deepest values of family and service with the poor. Her deep gratitude for all she received was transformed into her joyful generosity towards others. Ascension lived fully the joy of the Gospel that Pope Francis speaks of today!





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