Life...What Life?

By Victor M.

Many undocumented immigrants in the US came here as children. They accompanied their parents or another close family member. As children, they did not have the ability to make another choice themselves. They grew up in the US. It’s the country they know. Yet, choices and opportunities are limited when these young brothers and sisters become adults.

The Dream Act addresses the dilemma of individuals who crossed the border with their families before they were 12 years old. It offers a route to citizenship for these young people if they have no felonies, have served in the military, have completed high school and are attending community college, and/or given 2000 hours in community service. This proposal has NEVER passed and is up again for a vote.

Victor M., who came to the U.S. as a child, expresses what it feels like to live in the shadows. The Dream Act, would have helped him immensely. Victor has continued to live as an undocumented man in California. He was 20 when he wrote his reflection. He is now 32 years old – still pressed to the bottom layer of society with little opportunity to move forward. However, thanks to the recent passing of California Bill AB 60, Victor can now drive legally.
Kpimebome . . . Yisor . . . Diuye . . . Nuuri . . . Sieballe . . . these represent but a few of the surnames of the Sisters of Mary Immaculate in Ghana. As an ice-breaker when they came together for their first class in Spiritual Direction last August, Sister Sharon Becker invited the twenty Sister-participants to share the meaning of their names. She didn’t know the impact that telling the stories of their names would hold for them. There was silence at first, and then one after the other, words came pouring forth.

In Ghana, surnames are linked to a family story, perhaps a traumatic event, sometimes a happy memory; sometimes not. The Sisters acknowledged that some of their names carry an onus of family shame. “So from the beginning,” remembered Sister Sharon, “there was enormous trust in the room.”

“It was an act of great trust,” recalls Sister Sharon, “that they were willing to share so personally on a deeper level. I learned all of their names that day, and I didn’t forget them. Although I had been to Ghana twice before to co-plan programs, this time the trust between myself and the Sisters in Ghana deepened considerably. Sharing their names was the beginning — it was a door that they opened to me to understand their lives and culture.”

“Although a number of the Sisters have had a Scripture class in the past,” said Sister Nadine, “they were eager to learn more, scrambling to use this opportunity for learning as a way to love and praise God.”

One of the Ghanaian Sisters noted that “My experience with Sister Nadine teaching the bible was that I could connect the call of some of the prophets with my own call to religious life, especially Samuel and Jeremiah. I want to go deeper into Scripture the next time she comes.”

Having no internet access, cold water showers and the ever-present mosquito were minor issues for Sisters Sharon and Nadine who merged into the community life of the local Sisters. While there probably could hardly be a higher contrast in lifestyle between Orange County, California and rural, northern Ghana in Africa, that was not a concern for them. Sisters Sharon and Nadine were there to minister Sister-to-Sister, and they were focused on what they had come to share — how to deepen the experience of God as women religious.

The Sisters of Mary Immaculate are a diocesan community founded by the White Fathers (Missionaries of Africa) and the White Sisters (Sisters of Our Lady of Africa). They became an
independent indigenous community in 1946.

Their founding mission was to minister to the needs of women and children. Women play a key role in Ghana, where the life expectancy is 65. “The men die before the women do,” says Sister Sharon, “from disease, alcoholism, violence and motor vehicle accidents.” One of the ministries of the Sisters is to minister to the widows. Through their St. Monica Women’s Associations, the Sisters reach out to 7,000 widows in their region. The Sisters of Mary Immaculate are also educators, nurses and social workers. Actually, they respond to whatever needs are set before them.

Ministering to Orphans

The Sisters in Ghana take care of orphans. A long-held belief among many of the families in rural Ghana is that if a family member dies at or near the time of the birth of a child, then that new baby is viewed as a “curse” to the family. They take these babies to the Sisters. The Sisters take care of these infants and toddlers, nurturing them until they are nearly three years old at which time their families take them back.

The Sisters run the health centers in the Diocese of Wa as well as the secondary schools. They teach religious education and visit families. One Sister serves as secretary to the bishop; another is an accountant for the diocese. They take in teenage girls who have been forced into marriage, transported to areas distant from their homes and abused. Sister Sharon views the local Sisters as “indispensable to the Church and to the faith and evangelization in the region.”

Sister Nadine echoes the same, “I saw how the Sisters were admired there. The people admire them. The priests admire them. The bishops admire them. I admire them. For me, they epitomize the African proverb, ‘When ants unite, they can carry an elephant.’”

Although life expectancy in Ghana is typically 15 years less than in the United States, many of the Sisters live into old age. “Because the Sisters run the clinics, they have more access to health care than the general population,” says Sister Nadine. “Every one of their convents has a toilet which is not the norm in many rural households in Ghana, so sanitation is better for them. Their lives are pretty regulated. Their superiors protect them from impossible demands on their time and energy. They are also protected from the abuses women in Ghana can typically expect from men.”

“When we left, the Sisters thanked us for coming to share our spiritual resources with them, but it wasn’t one-sided giving,” reflects Sister Sharon. “They taught me to see two things very clearly: 1) the power and importance of relationships and 2) never to take anything for granted. I came home spiritually richer from walking among my African Sisters.”

Religious Beliefs of Ghanaians

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Belief</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal/Charismatic</td>
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<td>Traditional</td>
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Health Issues in Ghana

Ghanaians have a high risk of infectious diseases. The most common are:

- Bacterial and protozoal diarrhea
- Hepatitis A
- Typhoid fever
- Malaria
- Schistosomiasis
- HIV Aids
- Meningitis
- Rabies
Walking Wounded Young People Out of Poverty in Santa Ana

TALLER SAN JOSE GIVES ORANGE COUNTY’S YOUTH A SECOND CHANCE

By Elisabeth Deffner

Luz Cuevas was about to be released from jail. Her two young daughters had been taken away from her, and after release she would move into a sober living home and participate in a program that administered regular drug tests.

It was not a high point in her life—but she was striving to look forward, to make changes that could take her in a new—and better—direction.

That’s when she encountered Taller San Jose (St. Joseph Workshop). The nonprofit job-training organization was part of a job fair at the Youth Guidance Center, and it captured Cuevas’s attention right away. The downtown Santa Ana office was just down the street from the site where she had her drug tests; paid for students’ children’s daycare, and gave students a stipend while they were enrolled in the program. Best of all, TSJ’s Medical Careers Academy could help Cuevas realize a cherished dream: to work in the medical field.

“If I could prepare myself with an education, vocational training, I would be able to get a job—become something in life, not just get a job and be stuck there,” Cuevas, 24, recalls thinking.

That is precisely the goal of the program: to offer job training that will allow students to get living-wage employment in industries where there is room for growth.

“There’s dignity in all work, but these are young people starting career paths, who have families to support,” says executive director Shawna Smith. “It’s important that they earn a self-sustaining wage.”

Taller San Jose has evolved since Sister Eileen McNerney, CSJ, founded it in 1995. It was created as an educational and job-training center for high-risk youth, aged 18-28. The goal was to help students earn their high school diplomas, and to offer them an opportunity to learn a trade and earn some money in a woodshop. In 2002, Taller opened the Construction Academy to offer training for careers in that field. The success of that academy led to the 2006 launch of the Office Careers Academy, followed by the 2008 launch of the Medical Careers Academy. (TSJ also offers an Administrator and Billing Clerk Academy for young people interested in working in the medical field, without having to administer injections or draw blood.)

“I found a new passion in construction, definitely,” says Marquez, who recently completed an electrical and plumbing training course.

“Every day you wake up, you wonder, ‘What am I going to do next?’ It’s just exciting coming to work, and I never had that experience. I actually enjoy getting up in the mornings and getting to the job.”

Jose Marquez, who graduated from TSJ’s Construction Academy in June, works for Hope Builders—a major change from his previous work in a warehouse. He didn’t enjoy the work, and there was no room for growth.

“I knew this was what I wanted. I didn’t want to be living in poverty all my life; I didn’t want to socialize with the same people. I wanted something better for me.”

-Luz Cuevas

The board is focusing on how to expand services to meet that need.

Throughout the program, they focus on responsibility, being on time, and being professional. That’s part of the reason TSJ pays participants a stipend—so that they consider Taller San Jose an employer, and learn to behave appropriately.

One of those potential employers is Hope Builders, a nonprofit corporation owned by Taller San Jose that offers graduates of the Construction Academy an opportunity to gain on-the-job experience in a general contracting company. Now entering its third year, Hope Builders is a fully self-supporting business that employs anywhere from 12 to 20 at any given time—about half of them Taller San Jose graduates.

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“I could visualize that, and I aimed for that goal. They [Taller San Jose] teach you not just how to have that goal, but the steps to get to that goal. That’s what’s gotten me to where I am now.”

The old oak tree on the Motherhouse grounds was cut down over a decade ago to make way for the building of Regina Residence.

This old oak was rumored to have grown from an acorn on Madame Modjeska's property in the 1890s. The rings of this magnificent tree told the story of its history — long periods of drought, fierce Santa Ana winds, drenching winter rains and rarely a near freezing cold snap. Our lives can tell us similar stories.

In Ghana, Sister Sharon Becker invited the Sisters of Mary Immaculate to consider the decades of their lives and to reflect on key experiences that they remembered. She also asked them to try to remember the image of God that they had during each decade and how God was present to them when they were in need.

You are invited to reflect on the decades of your life by —

- Choosing one ring of this tree to represent an important decade of your life.
- Recalling one or two important events that happened to you during those years.
- Reflecting on what your image of God was at that time in your life.
- Remembering how God responded to you when you were in need, and who was in your life to help you through rough patches.
- Recalling what grace you needed most during that decade.
- Noting what your image of God is today and how and why it has changed over time.
- Naming what grace you stand most in need of at this time of your life.
A Planned Gift Creates a Future of Hope

Last year Faith called me about options for her retirement. She had grown up in Massachusetts where she had known the Sisters of St. Joseph. Now, her husband was deceased and she had no children. She asked if we Sisters in Orange had a retirement home for women. We didn’t, so I helped her explore possibilities and we sometimes talked about being raised “Irish”. Having never met, we exchanged Christmas and Easter greetings. I included her on our Bridges mailing list.

A few weeks ago I learned that Faith had died and had shared a significant percentage of her savings with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. She had faith in the Sisters, she once said. She trusted us.

Through careful long-term planning, Faith made a lasting difference in the Corporal and Spiritual works of Mercy that we Sisters do in the name of Jesus. As you consider your personal and financial needs, if you, too, would like to include the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange in your will or trust, please contact Carol Hunold at (714) 744-3121.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange have a Facebook page too. We share photos, resources, upcoming events, announcements and daily life. You can easily keep up with us between issues of Bridges. Visit our Facebook page at facebook.com/sistersofstjoseph. “Like us” to see our latest news.

For more depth, you can sign up for our e-newsletter, Connections. It’s delivered to your e-mail of choice a few times per year between issues of Bridges. Visit our website at csjorange.org/contact-us to subscribe. You can unsubscribe at any time.