

Colorado volunteer, in Texas Baptist church, is Woman of the Year

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ARVADA, Colo.—Rebel Rodriguez, who runs a food bank for a Texas Baptist church located in a Denver suburb, is her community's Woman of the Year.

Rodriguez, director of The Rising Church's longstanding food-distribution program, is receiving the Arvada Chamber of Commerce's Woman of the Year award the first week of April.

Recipients are recognized "for their amazing community involvement, generosity and overall impact on Arvada," the Chamber of Commerce reported in announcing Rodriguez as this year's winner.

The Rising Church and its food bank are located in the Olde Town section of Arvada, what Pastor Steve Byers calls "an urban oasis in the suburbs" not too far northeast of downtown Denver. The small congregation is affiliated with both the Colorado Baptist Convention and the Baptist General Convention of Texas.



The Rising Church in Arvada, Colo., operates a food bank and robust ministry to homeless people. The congregation is affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. (Photo courtesy of Steve Byers) The Arvada Chamber of Commerce chose Rodriguez for the city's service award after receiving her nomination from some of the homeless people who benefit from and participate in The Rising Church's food ministry.

For love of community

"I started crying when they told me" about the award, she said. "I didn't know I was in the running. I love Arvada, so I'm very honored to represent the city where I raised my kids, where I work, and where I praise and worship God."

Rodriguez is the Gloria Pruessner Food Bank's third director, started by its namesake and then led by former church member Paul Wynn.

In fact, the food bank attracted Rodriguez to the church, she said.

"About five or six years ago—I have been at The Rising 5 years in March—I was in-between churches and wanted to find a church in my community. I prayed to the Lord, asking, 'Where can I serve in my community?'

"I tend to gravitate to those folks who the world would cross the street to

avoid. They seem to be a magnet to me. And so I got to know some of the homeless guys while walking my dog.”

Through her new friends, Rodriguez learned about The Rising’s food bank and found an answer to her prayers.

No-brainer

“I started attending The Rising and volunteered for the food bank,” she said. “Paul needed help, and I had a truck and experience hauling heavy loads. It was a no-brainer for me.”

Byers credits Rodriguez with ramping up the food bank’s effectiveness, in large part by involving some of the recipients in operating the production. “Rebel got a lot of the homeless people to help,” he said.

“The guys asked if we needed help, and I don’t turn down help,” she explained. “Five years later, and they still help out. They maybe needed an opportunity to help, and they needed someone to say, ‘Yes’ to them.”

Through their strong relationship, Rodriguez and the food bank’s homeless clients get other tasks done around the church.

“They help me clean the church,” she reported. “They do food. They’ve very helpful. And it’s not just me. The whole church has gotten to know them. They help some of the older guys in the church with odd jobs.”

Good fit

That’s a good fit for both the homeless and the church, Byers added, noting the church reflects the character and composition of its community.

“We’re not Southern transplants anymore,” he explained. “We call ourselves a church for people who don’t go to church.”

Mostly, that means new Christians and people, like the homeless community, who don't quite fit anywhere else.

Arvada is the base for a homeless community in part because Denver has sought to remove the homeless from its inner city and also because Arvada is close in and old enough to feel urban itself.

"We're the only agency besides the police that works with the homeless," Byers said. "We do a lot of (homeless) triage, trying to get them some help. It's not just stereotypical—alcoholics, substance abusers and vets. The ones we get heartbroken over are the developmentally disabled. We've got three on the property now."

On a recent Sunday, three homeless men and a homeless family participated in The Rising's worship service. The church allows homeless people to sleep on its property, and on especially cold, windy or snowy nights, it opens the building to provide shelter.

Rodriguez is the perfect leader of the feeding ministry, he added. Most obvious is her compassion for and natural relationship with homeless people. But also, "she's one of those people with boundless energy," he said. "She leads our children on Sunday. She cleans the building, goes to children's camp, runs the Vacation Bible School."

All that energy and commitment—multiplied in numerous volunteer positions outside of church—provided ample reason for Rodriguez to be chosen Woman of the Year, Byers affirmed.

About that Texas connection ...

An issue that probably had no bearing on Rodriguez's selection is she's a native Texan in a Texas Baptist church.

She grew up in Amarillo, where her parents have retired.

And The Rising Church has been affiliated with the BGCT since the early 2000s, the pastor said.

Byers comes by the Texas relationship naturally. He moved to the Lone Star State in 1981 to work for American Airlines. While in Texas, he was licensed and ordained to the gospel ministry by First Baptist Church in Arlington and attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

After living in Virginia awhile, he moved to Colorado 18 years ago, and the church has found a natural relationship to two state conventions.

“We’re a Colorado Baptist church and do the Southern Baptist Convention through that,” he said. “But Texas Baptists is where we fit better. We kind of need more connections. We’re out here all alone.”

In fact, The Rising Church would like to partner with Texas Baptist congregations and can offer an array of missions/ministry opportunities—from the food bank, to the homeless ministry, building construction, Vacation Bible School and more.

“There are a lot of things to do around here,” Byers said.

To learn more about mission opportunities, contact Byers directly by emailing steve@arvadarising.com or calling (303) 422-1174.