

CommonCall: No more dumpster diving

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“Mama, can we go see what the kids had for lunch?”

Yamile Rocha-Calles couldn't believe her ears.

As a Parent Teacher Organization officer and president of the site-based decision-making committee at James Bowie Elementary School in Dallas, she spends plenty of time on campus.

So, she had noticed a woman and her preschool daughter, mostly because they—and the third-grader they dropped off each morning and met each afternoon—wore the same dingy clothes in layers every day, regardless of the weather.

One day, she overheard the preschooler ask, “Mama, can we go see what the kids had for lunch?”

She saw the woman and child walk toward the parking lot and approach a dumpster. Then, the mother lifted her daughter into the garbage bin to look for food.

“My heart sunk,” Rocha-Calles said. “I realized they had nothing to eat.”

Prompted to action

She told personnel in the school office what she saw and asked what help the school could offer. She learned about some resources but remained unsatisfied with the answer she received.

“Mama, can we go see what the kids had for lunch?”

“Those words changed my world,” Rocha-Calles said. “That little girl broke my heart. I had to do something. ... It was like God told me, ‘You have to do this.’”

So, she asked friends—in person and on Facebook—for ideas about how to respond.

“There just had to be some way for that mother to get food for her children other than digging in the trash,” she said.

She found the answer when she talked to Marsha Mills, director of Mission Oak Cliff, a ministry of Cliff Temple Baptist Church in Dallas, who offered to help start a food pantry at the school.

Rocha-Calles knew to contact Mills, because she had benefited from Mission Oak Cliff personally when injuries from a random drive-by shooting left her hospitalized and disabled for an extended period.

Mission Oak Cliff helps neighbors in need



Marsha Mills became director of Mission Oak Cliff 12 years ago.

Since 1948, Mission Oak Cliff has operated a food pantry for neighbors in need—first at a former fire station and more recently inside the church building.

The ministry also offers a clothing closet and a variety of classes to help break the cycle of poverty—high school-equivalency, English-as-a-Second-Language, citizenship, job-readiness, computer literacy and nutrition.

Mills became director of Mission Oak Cliff 12 years ago after a 27-year career in public education, including 24 years spent teaching at Margaret B. Henderson Elementary School, three miles from Cliff Temple.

“I knew and loved the community and the people, and I felt like teaching was my ministry,” she said. Nonetheless, she began to feel restless.

“It was as if God said: ‘Yes, it is a ministry. But it’s no longer your ministry,’” she said. “I asked for guidance. Unfortunately, he had given up writing on walls a long time ago. I stepped away from teaching, not knowing where I was going.”

As a member at Cliff Temple, she was familiar with Mission Oak Cliff and “peripherally involved” with its ministry.

“I knew nothing about social ministry,” she confessed. Even so, three weeks after she retired from the Dallas school district, she accepted the director’s position at Mission Oak Cliff.

Community gained a sense of ownership

On Labor Day weekend 2005, not long after Mills went to work with Mission Oak Cliff, the ministry’s building burned. Subsequent investigation revealed a client with a history of mental illness set the fire after stealing copper wiring from the facility.

“After the fire, people came out of their apartments and from all over the community in response. They said: ‘You helped us when we needed it. We want to help you,’” Mills recalled. “That was the turning point. That’s when the people in the community gained a sense of ownership.”

Mission Oak Cliff relocated into the church's facility, but Mills and the committee with whom she worked felt a growing need to move beyond the church's walls.

"I went to a Christian Community Development Association meeting that opened my eyes," she said. "I began to see the difference between charity and community development. It's not just us doing things for people. It's empowering the community and helping families gain stability and independence.

'We decided to take the show on the road'

"We realized we needed to get the ministry into the community. This building looks intimidating. It looks like a fortress or a castle to people in the neighborhood. ... That's when we decided to take the show on the road."

Cliff Temple already had established a relationship with neighborhood schools. So, when Hector Garcia Middle School received requests from families asking for help with groceries, a school official contacted the church.

Mission Oak Cliff started a satellite food pantry on the school campus. The ministry kept the pantry stocked with nonperishable food, and the school let students and their families know about its availability.

When Josey Benavidez became community liaison at Garcia, the food pantry already was in place, and she appreciated the impact it made on the lives of students. However, she recognized another need.

Discovery new needs, proposing new solutions

"We have a lot of homeless students," Benavidez said, noting the families who lack a permanent address often do not receive the safety-net benefits available to others who live in poverty.

In particular, she recognized many students who received meals on school days lacked food each weekend. At Garcia, more than 93 percent of students are eligible for the free- or reduced-lunch program.

Mission Oak Cliff helped her develop a backpack food program. Homeless students receive a backpack filled with ready-to-eat food each Friday, and they return the backpack each Monday.

“The first week, one student wouldn’t let go of the backpack on Monday until he was promised it would be refilled on Friday,” Mills said.

At W.H. Adamson High School, the counselor’s office realized the need for groceries among students’ families outstripped the ability of the school’s alumni association to supply it. The school’s community liaison contacted Mission Oak Cliff, and the ministry helped launch a satellite food pantry at the school.

“Because the community knows we care, they know where to go when there’s a need,” Mills said.

Starting a satellite food pantry at Bowie Elementary

So, when Rocha-Calles told Mills about the mother and child she saw digging through the dumpster at Bowie Elementary, Mills drew on previous experience at Garcia and Adamson to explain exactly how to start a satellite food pantry at the school.



Yamile Rocha-Calles worked with Mission Oak Cliff to establish a satellite food pantry at James Bowie Elementary School in Dallas. (Photo / Ken Camp)

The school designated an unused classroom as the pantry site. Mission Oak Cliff keeps its shelves stocked. Counselors and principals control access to the locked room, but they make it as easy as possible for families to help themselves to the groceries.

“Teachers are our first point of contact,” Rocha-Calles said. “They are the ones who see the children every day. Homeless children don’t want to be seen by the principal. They don’t want to stand out. But we let all the children and their families know about the pantry.”

In addition to satellite food pantries at Bowie, Garcia and Adamson, Mission Oak Cliff also has responded to requests from Justin F. Kimball High School and John Leslie Patton Jr. Academic Center.

“I don’t know where this is going to end,” Mills said. “Having the satellite food pantries hasn’t lessened the number who come to us (at the church facility). In fact, it’s enhanced the ministry. We have more who come here now.”

Last year, Mission Oak Cliff served about 13,000 people, representing close to 4,000 families. Each family accessed the on-site food pantry about four times on average.

Some parents whose children received food from the satellite food pantry enrolled in ESL, GED or other classes at the church. Some who have benefited from Mission Oak Cliff have returned to volunteer there. Some have started worshipping regularly at Cliff Temple.

“The word is out: “It’s a safe place. You can go there,”” Mills said.

Years ago, when the neighborhood changed and other churches relocated, Cliff Temple chose to stay and minister, she noted.

“This church is committed to the community,” she said. “And for the most part, the community protects us. We’ve never had a problem with graffiti here, even though there are gangs all around.

“The people in this community know. It’s their place.”

This is part of an ongoing series about how Christians respond to hunger and poverty. Substantive coverage of significant issues facing Texas Baptists is made possible in part by a grant from the Prichard Family Foundation.

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