

Elenita Porras

By Morgan Smith

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"I go to all the most dangerous places," this calm but determined woman said to me as she maneuvered her old grey van through the streets of Juárez. It was July 28, 2010, my first trip to Juárez and I was scared.

Then Elenita Porras stopped the van and pointed up a narrow alley. I could see a sign that said Hotel Rio Escondido and took a picture with a telephoto lens.

"We're going in now. You have to see where I find all the young women who come to my program." She was referring to Reto a la Juventud, a program that she had started for young women with problems with drugs and prostitution.

Nervously I followed. We entered a dark hallway and started up the stairs. At the first landing, she stopped and said, "This is where I found Esmeralda. She was dying."

Elenita then explained that she had seen Esmeralda lying on the landing and had then continued up the stairs to where a young woman who had been in her rehabilitation program was staying. The woman scorned her, said that she would not return to Elenita's program.

"I was tired of trying to help these young women with their drug problems and prostitution but for some reason seeing Esmeralda who was dying and being scorned by this other young woman made me realize that this was my mission, trying to help young women like this. I took Esmeralda to the hospital. It was too late for her but not for others.

Now Elenita, the founder of Reto is retiring and moving to San Antonio to live with her daughter. For 49 years she maintained this program and estimates that some 1,600 young women have participated. This is an example of the kind of dedication and commitment you find in Juárez. Yes, there is still too much violence and yes, the Mexican government at all levels has failed its poorer citizens. But there are many people like Elenita who have quietly made a difference throughout the years.

It all started when a woman who worked for her asked for help with a daughter who was in jail. Elenita was married to a judge at the time and living a quiet upper middle class life. What she saw at the jail horrified her, however, and she began Reto as a way to help these young women.

She opened a center on the south side of Juárez where they could live in safety, work through their drug problems and learn basic skills like hair styling, cooking and working with computers. The goal was to make them self-sufficient.

One project was to make kitchen items like aprons as well as beautiful quilts. Each quilt had a cross in the middle. “The cross is the center of life,” Elenita said.

Some of her projects didn’t work. For example, it is very difficult to get a beautician’s license no matter how well you have been trained.

Then she was given two food carts that could be used for cooking and selling hot dogs and hamburgers. She decided to focus on hot dogs because they were easier to cook and because she could get high quality meat at Costco. She named them “Reto Dogs” and the young women would take the carts to parks and events where lots of people would congregate and sell them. It was a big success.

Not every young woman succeeded. When I first visited, I met two sisters, Claudia who was working in the kitchen and her sister who had just arrived. Claudia eventually became one of Elenita’s managers but the sister dropped out and disappeared.

In a recent essay, the columnist David Brooks bemoaned how our society has shifted from a community-based one to an individualistic one where the main focus is on yourself rather than the people around you. He says that this has led to a lack of support for “common good public policies.” Elenita’s work is an example of the opposite; her focus has always been on the common good, not herself. The same is true of most of the people I’ve worked with in Juárez over the last decade. That’s a major reason why I go there.

Now Elenita is retiring to San Antonio and her long-time assistant, Pastor Clemente Rios will take over Reto’s leadership. These struggling young women will still have shelter, counseling and the opportunity to learn a trade and become self-sufficient. The Juárez community owes Elenita a great debt of gratitude for her many years of service and for the care and love she has provided these young women.

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