

The Westside of San Antonio, 1930s-1950s: A Glimpse into Catholic Social Action and Community

By Donna Morales Guerra



Father Tranchese and community, before the Alazan-Apache Courts were built, distributing food at no cost to community, circa 1936

"Father Tranchese has set up a grocery depot

for starving Mexican families, whose wages were suddenly cut off when the pecan shelling industry refused to raise wages to meet the minimum set by the Wages and Hours bill. Evolved by the priest, supported by Catholic Charity throughout the city, and operated on a no-cost basis, this food depot is undoubtedly saving from starvation many of the poor families living in this 'West side' slum area, in which the new Mexican housing site is planned. Father Tranchese is a member of the San Antonio Housing Board and an ardent and enthusiastic worker for the USHA [United States Housing Act]." — from back of photo

On the Westside of the San Antonio of the 1930s-1950s, residents struggled against the insistent, toxic grip of poverty—the kind that makes people sick, hungry, and robs them of dignity. The depression years devastated the entire country. Conditions of poverty, though not as widespread or severe, linger still in the Westside of San Antonio, with the evidence of ongoing structural impoverishment, racism, and discrimination. The poverty in the Westside was brought to the nation's attention when in the 1960s preceding Hemisfair 1968, Charles Kuralt and the CBS television network included it in the 1968 television documentary report entitled "Hunger in America." This photo essay provides a glimpse of the part played in the 1930s-50s by Catholic social action, which improved conditions, and provided hope for the community.



Father Carmelo Tranchese, SJ at church rectory, 1941

"In cooperation with the late Rev. Carmen Tranchese, S.J. — known as the Father of the Federal Housing Program in San Antonio — and at his request, our Sisters opened a

much needed social center—the Guadalupe Community Center—in the heart of a large Mexican population on the West Side of San Antonio.

The depression and its immediate aftermath had played havoc in the lives of these desperately poor Mexicans. Father Tranchese, who had succeeded in having a large area of the most disreputable slums cleared and replaced by the Federal Housing units, appealed to Rev. Mother for Sisters to help him with drastically needed social work in his parish."

— Vita, Sr. Mary Victory Lewis

Father Carmelo Antonio Tranchese, S.J. (1880-1956, born in Italy), served from 1932-1953 as Jesuit parish priest at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, 1321 El Paso Street, in the heart of the Mexican colonias. Father Carmelo—or as he was known, "El Padrecito"—and the Jesuits exemplified Catholic social action. Tranchese was beloved for his efforts to affirm the dignity of the Mexicanos of his parish and of the entire community; his support for the expressive traditions of Mexicano culture; his spiritual nourishment; and for his sociopolitical activity that was responsible in great part for building the Alazan-Apache Courts and establishing the Guadalupe Community Center. Indeed, he was an immigrant in the aid of many immigrants.



Sr. Mary Victory Lewis, CCVI (1887-1968), at the Guadalupe Community Center with children at mealtime, 1942. She was Director of the GCC for 14 years.

"Someday I hope to be able to write about the many...enriching experiences that occurred during my 14 years at Guadalupe Community Center. During these years I received the title of 'the fighting Sister for the West Side poor'...as in a number of instances these poor people were gravely exploited.

As I worked for the poor I saw much anguish and suffering in their lives, yet, I was happy in being able to bring to them some solace and aid. When I entered the Sisters of Charity in 1911, I had hoped to be assigned to just such work." — Vita, Sr. Mary Victory Lewis



Alberto Juárez and Kino Rodríguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, basketball, 1941



Our Lady of Guadalupe chorus musicians.

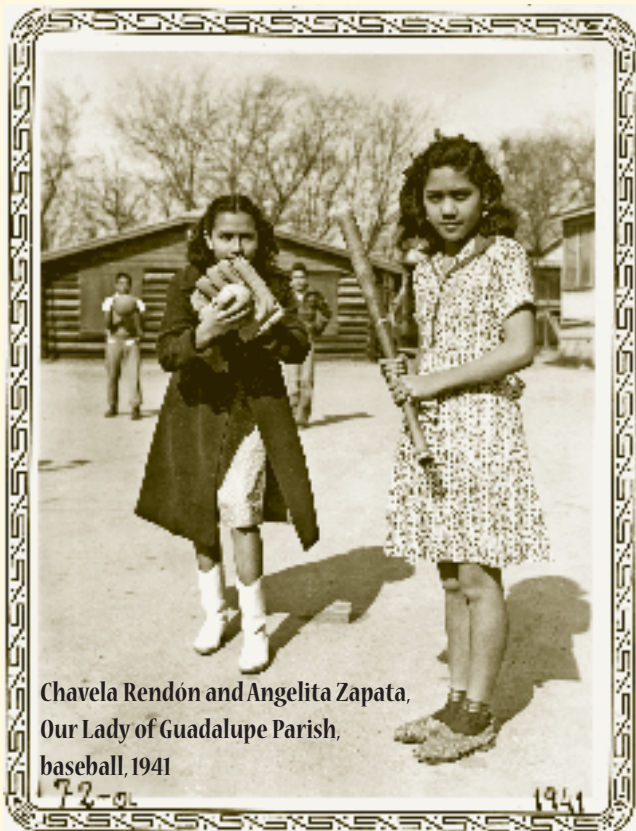
Standing: Lucy Celestino, Prof. Manuel López, Trini Herrera; **Seated:** Damiana López, Father Nicolas Femenia, SJ, Magdalena Dominguez Garza; **Seated on step:** Josefina Rivas



Gathering of Our Lady of Guadalupe School graduates

Mary Ramírez, Alicia Garza, Janice Celestino, Carlota Bazán, Mr. Enriquez, 1941

The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word (CCVI, San Antonio) had been teaching at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish school since 1912. In 1942, Father Tranchese spearheaded the creation of the Guadalupe Community Center (GCC), and requested that one of the congregation's sisters, Sr. Mary Victory Lewis, CCVI (1887-1968) be appointed as its first Director. Sr. Mary Victory was one of the first registered dietitians in Texas, with multiple higher education degrees in nursing and extensive work in nursing education. She also possessed a zeal for public health, so that her many skills and qualities made her a favorable choice for Director of the GCC.



Chavela Rendón and Angelita Zapata,
Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish,
baseball, 1941



Health clinic, GCC, December 1950



Guadalupe Community Center, new building, circa 1954

"Rev. Mother came to our rescue by having built on to the old two-story residence a roughly constructed dining room that was used for 14 years for an all purpose room--lunch room, club and recreation room, dance hall, class room and nursery school activities. For two years three hundred children, who were most needy, came from the nearby public schools for a substantial hot meal.

When economic conditions improved we closed the lunch room and centered our attention on clinic service, recreational work; arts and crafts, sewing and English classes and an all day nursery school for children whose mothers had found employment. We made every effort to help these people to help themselves--which is the quintessence of good social work." -- Vita, Sr. Mary Victory Lewis

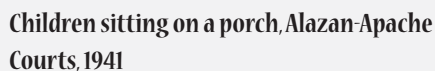


The GCC in 2016, actively operated by Catholic Charities

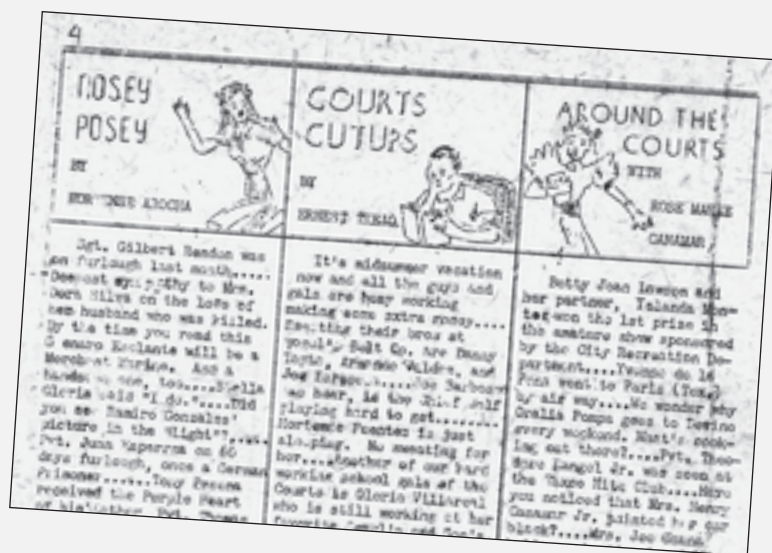
The men and women religious congregations of the Jesuit priests of the Society of Jesus and the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, along with other local congregations, have been vital to the efforts for social justice on the West side. Their mandate has been to manifest the love and care, spiritual and temporal, of Jesus Christ among the most vulnerable, as well as to provide means for community self-empowerment. The Alazan-Apache Courts housing project and the Guadalupe Community Center on 1801 W. Durango Street are two locations created with these intentions.



GCC newsletter, December 1950



"Of the three hundred deaths seventy-eight deaths from tuberculosis in 1934, sixty-nine percent were Mexicans. This situation comprised San Antonio's major health problem in 1887; it comprises San Antonio's major health problem today. It is the illegitimate progeny of...greed on the part of the corral owners, ignorance on the part of the corral denizens, indifference on the part of the general public. How long must this blot remain? When will an enlightened and outraged public opinion rise up and demand relief?" — "A Century of Medicine in San Antonio: The Story of Medicine in Bexar County Texas," by Dr. Patrick Ireland Nixon, 1936



Here are several excerpts from the July 1945 issue, that illustrate the kinds of information shared. Disease control, city programs, and almost always news from the Guadalupe Community Center and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish activities. There are also social pages, where the comings and goings of the residents are mentioned, usually with some humor. There is advertising for neighborhood businesses at the end of each issue. The newsletter is an important glimpse into the community life of the Westside.

