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Ministry



Sr. Milagros Federico assists a student in a sewing class at Give Me a Chance, a nonprofit operated by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul that empowers low-income women and children. (Courtesy of Give Me a Chance/Marissa Konkol)



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Housed in a small brick building, the Give Me a Chance office in Ogden, Utah, might look modest — but four days a week, it bustles with activity.

In the cozy downstairs space, kids pore over tablets and books in the nonprofit's afterschool program. In an upstairs classroom, women type at a bank of computers in a workplace skills class.

Outside on the tree-lined street, homeless individuals are met with a kind word and a sack lunch. And an assortment of community members drift through the agency's meticulously kept garden for a moment of peace.

Operated by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul for more than 10 years, Give Me a Chance addresses a wide spectrum of needs in Ogden, a town with a 12% poverty rate where many struggle to afford essentials.

Above all, the nonprofit provides a welcoming, inclusive environment for women and children to improve their lives.

"This is a neighborhood that's taken a turn for the worst, especially after the pandemic," said Sr. Martha Garcia, 82, the nonprofit's executive director. "This is a place where all are welcome."



The garden at Give Me a Chance in Ogden, Utah, offers a quiet escape for community members. (Courtesy of Give Me a Chance/Marissa Konkol)

Give Me a Chance sprouted from humble beginnings in 2010, when Sr. Maria Nguyen rented a 100-year-old building in the heart of town to give sewing classes for low-income women.

As more needs became clear, the agency's offerings multiplied. Today, Give Me a Chance offers several weekly programs for women and children in need, serving about 40 clients per year, on top of providing additional community services.

Several driven staff members and a roster of volunteers keep the nonprofit humming, now that Nguyen has been reassigned.

"The sisters here before us planted the seeds," said Garcia, who has operated the agency for roughly four years. "Our whole entire agency works together for our [community]."

Stitching a better life

As director of the nonprofit's sewing and quilting program — with beginner and advanced classes offered at no cost to participants — Sr. Milagros Federico observes an uplifting transformation among the low-income women she teaches.

"Some say, 'I've never touched a [sewing] machine before,'" said Federico, 75, who previously taught math and science in her career as an educator. "I say, 'As long as you're interested, there's no problem.' "

Often supplying her students with donated sewing machines, she helps women advance from the basics of threading and cleaning machines to making their own patterns and crafting dresses.

Many use these skills to stitch clothing for their families, while others sell their handiwork to boost their household income.

For some who lack immigration documents, learning to sew allows them to "get employment as contract workers, no questions asked," added Federico, who herself immigrated from the Philippines to the U.S. more than 40 years ago.



The nonprofit Give Me a Chance, operated by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, provides numerous programs for low-income women, including sewing and quilting classes. (Courtesy of Give Me a Chance/Marissa Konkol)

Her students benefit the most simply by bonding with each other, Federico said.

Often "laughing and talking" as they practice in class, she said, they even support each other during times of crisis. For those struggling with health issues, the close-knit class gives them something to anticipate each week.

"They form a camaraderie," Federico said, adding that her students also quilt blankets for charities, with the help of a professional quilter who volunteers there. "Having something to do for themselves and something to do for other people, that's important for so many people."

All of this proved true for Michelle, 58, who has lived in Ogden most of her life. Since a friend recommended she take the sewing class, Michelle — who preferred not to reveal her last name to protect her identity — has learned new sewing techniques, befriended her classmates and discovered a new sense of purpose.

"Give Me A Chance has impacted my life in many ways, like making friends, working as a group, being responsible for group projects and meeting deadlines," Michelle said. "Having a common place where I can meet with friends and learn new skills is priceless to me."



Women take an English as a second language class at Give Me a Chance, a nonprofit operated by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Ogden, Utah. (Courtesy of Give Me a Chance/Marissa Konkol)

Expanding its original mission to empower low-income women, Give Me a Chance provides several additional workplace skills classes at no cost to women.

These include English as a second language classes — at high demand among the town's 30% Hispanic population — as well as computer literacy classes.

Another class focuses on retail sales and customer service, teaching skills such as marketing, merchandising, cash register operation and handling money.

"It helps women's economy," Garcia said. "So many of our women graduates have gone on to good jobs."

Some women even apply their new skills to working in the nonprofit's DeMarillac Store.

Named for St. Louise de Marillac, who co-founded the Daughters of Charity in 1633 with St. Vincent de Paul, the store sits just half a block away from the Give Me a Chance office.

Inside the store, hangers boast glittering prom dresses, lacy bridal gowns and elegant attire for first Communions and confirmations. The store sells this glamorous formal wear at a nominal cost to women who couldn't otherwise afford such finery for anticipated special events.

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"[Most teenagers] would not go to their proms or their dances if they weren't able to get a nice dress," Garcia noted, adding that the store purchases gowns with donated funds. "[Dressing up] is something that you do with pride when you're a teenage girl."

If a woman can't afford a gown over $25, the store gives her the dress for free, she added.

"A girl can try on a dress, and if she likes it, we'll do the alterations right there while she has the dress on," Garcia said. "Sometimes women say, 'We have a wedding on Saturday,' and it's Thursday. And they can get it."

With the store's pay scale determined by employees' economic need, the seamstresses are hailed as masters of their craft.

"We're the most well-known in our area [for alterations]," Garcia said. "[The seamstresses] are very dedicated to where they work."

Shaping youth and community

The nonprofit also offers an afterschool program that supports at-risk students struggling academically, said program coordinator Sr. Marie-Rachelle Cruz.

"Most of the children we serve come from low-income, single-income households and unemployed parents," said Cruz, who has a bachelor's degree in business administration. "Our goal is to assist the children to be caught up with their schoolwork and perform in their respective grade level."



Students take music classes as part of the afterschool program at Give Me a Chance in Ogden, Utah. (Courtesy of Give Me a Chance/Marissa Konkol)

Serving roughly 15 students ages 4-16, the program provides tutoring with retired teachers and various professionals who volunteer their time. With grant-funded tablets for each youth, students can practice reading, conduct science experiments and enjoy enrichment activities, such as learning to build a gyroscope with a retired pilot.

"We are blessed to have such amazing, dedicated, kind and committed tutors and volunteers," said Cruz, 53, herself educated by the Daughters of Charity at Santa Isabel College in the Philippines before immigrating to the U.S. in 1988.

The afterschool program also includes weekly music classes, with students learning violin, piano or guitar.

"The children are able to use their creativity and the right side of the brain," Cruz said. "After being in school for a day, the children are usually interested in learning and practicing with their musical instruments."

Many students attend the afterschool program for years, Cruz said, allowing the staff to witness how their efforts shape youths' development.

"Two children in particular, one in 9th grade and one in 10th grade, have grown from timid, aloof, noncommunicative children to obtaining 105% on their math tests and being socially interactive, musically inclined teenagers," she said.

And when the winter snow melts, the Give Me a Chance garden becomes a paradise.

Complete with a tiered fountain, gazebo and playground, the sprawling outdoor space offers a bounty of flowers, a winding brook and pond, and benches to sit and admire it all.



Operated by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, the nonprofit Give Me a Chance includes a playground for children who attend the agency's afterschool program. (Courtesy of Give Me a Chance/Marissa Konkol)

When Nguyen first came across the building years ago, the adjacent land "was nothing but piles of dirt," Garcia said. With the help of generous donations, the sister pursued her vision to transform it.

Today, the garden offers community members a beautiful setting for respite, Garcia said.

"It's like an oasis in the midst of darkness," she said, adding that the number of homeless in the area has increased after the pandemic, which the nonprofit aids with free sack lunches and water. "[Many people visit] to sit and walk around. Some just sit and pray, some just sit and think."

Children from the afterschool program even plant fruit and vegetables in the garden each spring, then bring home what they've grown.

"They love it," Garcia said.

With the community's support, she knows the nonprofit will serve many for years to come.

"We are totally imbued with the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul and with the teachings of Jesus Christ," Garcia said. "If we don't have that, we're not who we're supposed to be."