

Sacred Heart Community Services:
A Woman With A Dream

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

by
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Introduction

“If we do our job, God will do God’s job, so just do it!” These were the words of the founder of Sacred Heart Community Services, Louise Benson and have been used as a motivator and motto for the organization from the very beginning.(1) Walking into the center, one recent day, it was astonishing to see how much love and respect there was pouring from every person in the facility. In this day and age it is very rare to find people willing to perform selfless acts being paid by only a simple “thank you” and a warm feeling in their hearts. However, there are over 2,000 volunteers at Sacred Heart Community Services who are more than willing to receive gratitude alone in exchange for their contributes to people in need. This nonprofit organization has had to overcome many obstacles to keep helping the unfortunate people of San Jose. SHCS would probably have been shut down long ago if it wasn’t for the strong, compassionate will of it’s founder, Louise Benson.

Louise Benson and the Founding of SHCS

Louise Benson was born February 11, 1905 in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1945, at the age of forty she moved to San Jose, California. She lived in a poverty stricken area of town at 1020 Leona Court. Robert Benson was her husband and she had one daughter named Mickey Benson. To pay the bills, Louise and Robert Benson laid out hardwood floors together. She was a very simple, tall, caring woman.(2)

Around Christmas of 1964, sixty- one- year- old Louise Benson questioned Rev. John Callanan at Holy Family Parish located in the downtown area, as to what she could do to help those in need for the holiday season. Immediately he sent her to a family that was very much in need which lived in downtown San Jose. Overjoyed with the solution she put together a basketfull of food to take over to the family. Once she arrived she realized how hungry and poor the family really was. While she was there she noticed the youngest boy of the family eyeing an orange that resided in her basket. She thought to herself: "I grew up in Kentucky. We were poor but never hungry." He quietly asked his mother if he could ask Mrs. Benson for permission to have the orange. Of course she said yes and the look of joy that overwhelmed the boy's face from being able to make his hunger subside for awhile was Louise's motive for starting what was then called Holy Family Community Service.(3)

After witnessing the scene of the young boy's desperation for food, Mrs. Benson knew that she had to contribute to the less fortunate all year round, not just at Christmas time. So she came up with a most generous solution. In 1965, Louise Benson opened her small, two-bedroom house to the needy who could travel the journey to her house. It was called Holy Family Community Services because Mrs. Benson belonged to Holy Family Parish. She ran

her operation under the simple guidelines taken from Bible scripture: "Feed the hungry, clothe the needy, welcome the stranger"- Matthew 25:35. Word of her project spread rapidly by mouth and soon her house became a "countywide warehouse and distribution center." (4) Donations were made by anyone who wished to make a difference in another person's life but most of the donations were given by Louise Benson herself. She organized her whole house like an assembly line based around serving the needs of the poor. In her basement she stored clothes and had clothes sorted in there as well. Food was inventoried and shelved in the Benson's garage. Furniture was stacked behind the garage and distributed to the people who needed it.

Louise Benson Meets Lee Lindsay

One year before Louise Benson opened Holy Family Community Services she met her best friend and partner-to-be, Lee Lindsay. Two days before Christmas of 1966, Mrs. Benson was phoned by Rev. John Callanan of Holy Family Church. He told her that he had about fifty boxes of food and people from a few different parishes in cars ready to hand out food. By coincidence she happened to get into the same car as Lee Lindsay and soon their common aspirations and hearts of gold helped them weld a tight bond and everlasting friendship. Lee Lindsay and her husband Rex Lindsay moved to San Jose in 1962. Their former home was in Richmond and that is where they started doing social work. They joined the Queen of Apostles Church after moving to San Jose and continued their work here. The former assistant priest at Queen of Apostles Church, Rev. William T. O'Keeffe once said about Mrs. Benson and Mrs. Lindsay: "No two people could have been in closer rapport. From the

beginning, they were a source of strength to each other. Their dedication to each other and to their ministry to the poor was an edification to all who knew them.”(5) In 1969 the name of the organization was changed to Sacred Heart Community Services after the Holy Family Parish had moved and Mrs. Benson joined Sacred Heart Church. Rev. John Callanan had also moved along with the church.

The Lindsay family also helped greatly in supporting the center monetarily. They contributed \$800 a month to SHCS for three years and purchased the truck from which Mrs. Benson and Mrs. Lindsay would hand out clothes, food and other items.(6) The Lindsays’ moved in 1976 to a ranch in the Mount Hamilton range. Even though it was an hour and fifteen minutes drive to the center, Lee still committed at least two times a week to help Mrs. Benson with different services.(7) In 1981, Louise Benson, Lee Lindsay, and other volunteers added another branch to the services that Sacred Heart provided. They established Martha’s Kitchen which distributes hot meals for the hungry in the Church’s Hardeman Hall. There have been many other projects that Louise has led such as a program that provided lunches to many children during summer vacation, and one which provided lunches for the elderly at Gardner Senior Center.

A New Location

Over the years, Louise Benson and Lee Lindsay were commended by many people such as churches, social workers, and of course the ones who they helped for all of their hard work for humanity. However, not everyone approved of what Mrs. Benson was doing. The residents of Leona Court had disliked her organization from the beginning because they didn’t

like how it attracted so many of the homeless and hungry people into their neighborhood. By 1983 the neighbors had threatened to file a lawsuit against her if she didn't close or resume her business elsewhere. Subsequently, the city asked her to move the base of her services elsewhere also and threatened to shut it down because of all the complaints they had received from the neighbors.

Even though it seemed to some that God had forgotten the center, he really hadn't. They were able to move into the abandoned Sacred Heart Catholic School which was located at the Church on Willow Street. The Diocese of San Jose owned this property but the pastor has the authority to decide who can occupy the property. The building was 20,000 square feet.(8) With the help of three nuns, Mary Helms, O.P., Nancy Koke, RSCJ, and Deanna von Bargen, RSCJ Louise Benson was able to fulfill her dream of adding education and job training classes to the program for the needy. The main motives for adding these things to Sacred Heart Community Services was to offer the poor an opportunity to better their situation by possibly being able to obtain a job because of what they were taught from the classes. Mrs. Benson once said, "I just try to do God's will each day. There will always be poor people in this world, people who need food and housing. I will continue to do his will each day and live one day at a time until he takes me home."(9) After decades of serving as an aid to the poor, God did take her home. Louise Benson died on May 28, 1986, at the age of eighty-one years. She died at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center, leaving behind her daughter, six grandchildren, and her dear husband Robert. The cause of her death was from complications with pneumonia. Her funeral service was held on May 29, 1986, at Sacred Heart Church. At this service she was extolled as, "The Mother Theresa of San Jose," which was absolutely correct. She had made a very significant contribution to the community with not much in return except for knowing that she was making a difference in the world.(10)

Center's Life After Death

After the death of the beloved Louise Benson there was a big issue remained: whether or not to keep Sacred Heart Community Services going forward without her. At the time Lee Lindsay was the President of The Board of Directors and she questioned the issue many times with the Board. The end result was that the need of their services to the less fortunate overruled their sorrows of the loss of their great leader, Louise Benson. After making this tough decision the Board appointed its first Executive Director. Her name was Barbara Zahner.

Barbara Zahner: First Executive Director of SHCS

Once the Board of Directors decided to keep Sacred Heart Community Services alive, they began an orderly search to find the first Executive Director of Sacred Heart Community Services. In 1987, after vigorous interviewing and searching, the end result of the search was a woman named Mrs. Barbara Zahner. Barbara Zahner was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio. She graduated from Arquette University. After college she ran her own business called "Rent a Writer." This business dealt with helping people write documents for themselves. She also taught English for about ten years before she came to SHCS. She is married to Richard Zahner and has four children whose current ages now range from twenty-two years to thirty years.

While at Sacred Heart, Mrs. Zahner has contributed more than could have ever been expected by SHCS's Board of Directors. From the moment she had been appointed Executive

Director of the services she had already started a new way of educating the public about the organization and letting them know their needs for funds and volunteers. This project was a newsletter called, "The Giving Heart." She started writing the newsletter in 1987. It is sent to different residences all over Santa Clara County. Currently, Barbara Zahner is still writing the newsletter which comes out four times a year. Another way Mrs. Zahner has educated people about the center was in 1996 when she wrote a couple of pages in a book called Reflections of the Past: An Anthology of San Jose. In those pages she wrote about some of the history of SHCS and the then current status of the center.

SHCS Kicked Out of Parish's Property

Rev. Mateo Sheedy was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Church in 1988. Soon after that the reverend notified Sacred Heart Community Services that they would have to find a new home for their center. The reason that the Diocese of San Jose gave was that the "needs of the poor outweigh the needs of the church."⁽¹¹⁾ The church needed the facility which was occupied by the organization to run its religious education classes, job training program, and leadership development classes. Barbara Zahner suspected that rent was an issue, but she didn't know for sure.⁽¹²⁾ They had been paying \$6,000 a year in rent to the Church but space in another building would go for about \$50,000.⁽¹³⁾ Since Sacred Heart Community Services is a nonprofit organization, there is not that kind of money to spend on rent. Another issue the center was facing with the move was that they needed to stay in the area because that was where most of the poor people lived. If they moved out of the neighborhood, it would be difficult for their customers to get transportation to the center. Bishop Pierre DuMaine and the Diocese offered to pay the first year rent of the new location

of SHCS because of the lack of funding. Members of Sacred Heart Parish organized prayer sessions called “justice for the poor” to pray that the center could remain on Church grounds. Also many people had been writing letters to the Bishop asking him to appeal Rev. Mateo Sheedy’s decision. Since students from Bellarmine College Preparatory and Presentation High School have been a part of the center for some time by helping out with tutoring and other services, they became very active in making petitions and writing to the Bishop as well.(14) Originally, the reverend had issued a deadline as to when the center had to be out, but after the Board appealed to the Diocese and the Bishop many times they over-ruled the deadline. On March 22, 1990, the Diocese decided to let the organization stay in its current location until a suitable location was found which was within walking distance of the Parish. In addition, the Diocese raised \$10,000 to help the center start looking for a new home.(15)

Third Location is Found

When Sacred Heart Community Services first started looking for a new place to base their program they were hoping that there might be a church with a room or be able to help them find a new location. At last, after a long search the center leased and moved into buildings at 803, 817, and 821 South First Street in 1990. These three spaces were vacant store fronts and the center also purchased another lot on Virginia Street so they could have more space which was very close to the new location. Each storefront was 6,000 square feet, giving the agency about 18,000 square feet to work with in providing for the poor.(16) Lee Lindsay, Mike Shea and Harry Lalor who had been board members since the very beginning of the center received a Community Development Block Grant, which was provided by the

City of San Jose. The grant issued them \$1.5 million to cover the majority of the funds needed for the organization to stay open.(17) Sadly, in November of 1994 Lee Lindsay retired from performing her duties at Sacred Heart Community Services. "Well, I have my life back now. But I miss Louise and the times we had together in the work of the Lord," Mrs. Lindsay said.(18)

While in their new location SHCS was faced with more problems. One problem faced was that the rent of their new location skyrocketed over the years. The rent was originally \$1,200 but then it increased to \$48,000. The one thing that still gave the workers of Sacred Heart Community Center hope was the words of the late Louise Benson : "If we do our job, God will do God's job, so just do it." So with those words in mind they were able to overcome anything that was thrown their way. The outside of the new location was literally a work of art. In 1992, students of Professor Tony May's art class at San Jose State University were assigned to do a mural, which they decided to paint on the outside of the center to make it look nicer. Another challenge that was starting to come to the surface was overcrowding. The area where overcrowding was the worst was the educational side of the services. Many children were forced to stand around just waiting for an opening in the computer lab. Along with that many students had to be turned away when they tried to get into English classes that were already too full. Preschoolers had to be put on waiting list for months until they were able to join classes. In addition to the fact that the center was suffering from overcrowding in classes, the clothing and school areas weren't doing very well either. Food had often been rejected due to the lack of space to store the items in Louise's Pantry, which was dedicated to Louise Benson. The clothes closet was also a very chaotic scene with people elbowing each other trying to look through the racks which were only four inches apart from each other.(19)

Searching for a Fourth Location

Before the fire had occurred Barbara Zahner was already trying to find and pay for a new location for Sacred Heart Community Services. The Board wanted to purchase a market at 921 South First Street but Zahner convinced the majority of them to look into greater expansion for the center. The market purchase was declined when the city of San Jose appropriated the property for Biblioteca Americana. Mrs. Zahner then discovered that a plot of land was available at First Street and Alma Street. The owner of the land was a general practitioner named Dr. Henry Zanger. His family lived on the land which had once belonged to Andrew P. Hill. The property was a 1 and 3/4 tree studded plot of land. An old Victorian style home was also on the land which was where the Zanger family used to live. After the fire Zahner was worried about their fundraising being taken away to rebuild the current facility in order to keep it open which would not leave much to go toward their purchase of the new land. She was also concerned that they weren't going to meet qualifications for \$85,000 in grants for the new building from two foundations.(22)

A Final Location

In 1998 , after much controversy between Board members of Sacred Heart Community Services and through many donations, the non-profit organization was able to purchase its current location at First and Alma Streets. Half of the funding came from two grants that the center received. The first one that was issued to them was a Community Development Block Grant by the city of San Jose for \$1.6 million.(23) Next, the gracious David Packard said he would match the first grant and also gave the center \$1.6 million.(24)

The cost of the entire project was going to be \$6.6 million, so they were short about \$3.4 million. With divine help, Sacred Heart was able to raise the rest of the money on their own through fundraising. The official address for the site is 1381 South First Street, San Jose, CA 95110. The foundation for the building was poured on March 11, 1998. The Zanger Family house that originally inhabited the plot of land was moved to Santa Clara to the address of 766 Madison Street and still resides there. Shortly after the construction of the new, state-of-the-art center had begun it was completed.

A few days after the one-year anniversary of the horrible fire that had occurred inside the organization while it was located on First Street, the brand new Sacred Heart Community Service Center opened. October 15, 1998, was definitely a glorious day for the SHCS workers and Board because of all the hardships they had endured since the start of the organization. The new building is 233,600 square feet.⁽²⁵⁾ Since they have been allowed so much room in the new facility, SHCS has been able to add new things to their program and work in a comfortable, modern environment. An organization called Habitat for Humanity is in partnership with Sacred Heart at this site and this organization has also helped raise funds to purchase the land. Habitat for Humanity helps provide homes to those in need by allowing families to build homes with materials that the agency has bought for them. Currently, there are several families that are residents of the property where the center is located. Each home houses only one family. The houses are smaller than average-sized houses, but they are big enough for the families to live in comfortably.

Tragedy Hits

As if there weren't enough problems that the organization had to deal with there was one great challenge that was still to come. On Saturday, October 11, 1997, a fire broke out at Sacred Heart Community Services. The blaze was said to have begun near the clothing closet and Louise's Pantry. The cause has never been confirmed but there is a possibility of how it might have started. It is thought that there was gas on some of the donated clothing which was in the sunlight from a window, and which may have ignited.(20) In the devastating fire, much food and clothing was destroyed and nearly 6,000 poor and homeless people were turned away that day. Over 1,000 loaves of bread that were handed out daily were burnt to the point of being inedible. "For some, I'm afraid it was their only food for the day," Barbara Zahner had said regarding the food lost in the fire.(21) One thing that wasn't affected by the fire was the learning center. Unfortunately refrigerators, copying machines, second floor operations and volunteer's offices were completely destroyed. Another tremendous blow was that all the computers that had lists of donors and businesses records were melted. Although they had some copies, some of the former information which was located in the computers was lost. Barbara Zahner told the press that she was aiming to reopen the agency in a week's time. The fire couldn't have come at a worse time either since it was right before Thanksgiving and Christmas. The organization's busiest times of the year are around these holidays.

Food Programs at the Center

Food programs have always been a part of the services of Sacred Heart since Louise Benson started it. Now the quantity and details of the food program are very abundant and well put together. Louise's Pantry is still the main artery of the food program. Food is sorted and collected here. The food is put into food boxes for families which include basic dietary needs for up to three days. It is estimated that this year 92,365 families will be served and their life bettered through nutrition by receiving these boxes of food from the center.(26) Homeless people who venture into the center are welcomed with open arms and a lunch or a well balanced snack. Also this year 52,000 homeless people are estimated to be fed through Sacred Heart .(27) The center also has a bread line which can be utilized by anyone who wishes to do so.

Education Programs at SHCS

When educational classes were added to the services they were very basic. The classes included mostly job training and basic education. Today there are still job training classes along with various other classes and programs designed to teach children, adults, and the elderly useful skills.

There is much to offer youths from newborns to high schoolers at the center. It offers a program for infants and toddlers up to three years old. Socialization is a big concept encouraged in the program, but they are also taught motor perception, pre-reading, and pre-math skills. Sacred Heart allows most of the youngest children to be visited at their home by volunteers who are active in the program. After a child exceeds three years of age they can be

promoted to the preschool that Sacred Heart runs. The children's ages range from four to five years in the preschool. At school they are taught colors, letter, shapes, and numbers on computers. Again they are also taught pre- math and reading skills as well. At the center parents are also offered parent education classes and parent support groups. These same classes are available in Spanish as well in English.

Along with actual classes at the center, there are many after-school and extra curricular activities provided. Every day after school Sacred Heart holds an after- school homework club. Many homeless and at-risk children attend the club for guidance and education. The students bring homework and work with a volunteer to finish what they have brought. Another program that the center offers is an academic summer day camp. For five days a week and four hours each day during the summer, students come to the center to refine their skills in core subjects of school. Also the children brush up on their computer skills. This program is very effective because it helps prepare students for their next grade level's work load. The Children's Computer Learning Center at Sacred Heart is the only cost free computer lab in the neighborhood. This is where young people can learn all they want to know about computers.

For the past three years another program has been in effect at Sacred Heart Community Center. Sciences is Fun! Learning Program is actually a joint program with San Jose's Children's Discovery Museum. An educator is provided by the museum that will design and teach appropriate projects for SHCS students based on their ages. In 1999, they created a gravity exhibit at the museum called the "Zoom Room." Now that it is in the museum the students work as guides and explain the exhibit to guests.

SHCS also has a program called KiCS, Kids in Community Service for high schoolers who wish to acquire community service hours. This program is offered to high schoolers

ninth through twelfth grade who want to make a difference in a child's life and at the same time gain community service hours as well. The students help by serving as role models and friends to the younger children at SHCS. These college bound students act as mentors to the younger children and inspire them to aspire to go to college themselves.

Fundraising and Volunteer Services

Since Sacred Heart is strictly a nonprofit organization, it relies on fundraising and donations to pay for bills and supplies so they can remain in business. The Board of Directors decides what the center does to get money along with other important decisions for SHCS's future. The 1999-2000 Board of Directors includes: President Neil Fanoe (CPA Ernst & Young), Vice President Emo Biagini (Biagini Properties, Inc.), Secretary Jim Gibbons (Gibbons and Associates), Treasurer Valerie Nicoletti (Comercia Bank- California), Mike Blach (Blach Construction Company), Bruce Byrd (Whole Foods Market, Campbell), Chip Evans (Stimultrants), Robert Johnston (CET), Tom Kobayashi (Computer Consultant), Howard Le Bas (IBM), Ed Lozowicki (Attorney, Coudert Brothers), Mary Miller (Presentation High School), Al Moreno (Washington Elementary School), Bill Muller (Bellarmine College Prep.) Violeta Perez (Cunningham Computer), Charolette Rogers (IntraBiotics), Kathie Sheehy (Vision Computerworks), and of course Barbara Zahner (Executive Director).

When it comes to raising the funds of Sacred Heart, there are many companies and organizations that habitually donate money to the organization. About twelve percent of the money comes from United Way.(28) Seventeen percent comes from other corporations, and another ten percent is brought in by different foundations. Organizations such as churches

and schools help bring in five percent of the center's money. Also public sources such as the city, county, and state help SHCS by bringing in about fourteen percent of its funds. At forty two percent, almost half of Sacred Heart's funds are brought in by individual donations.(29) In February 2000, SHCS added a new way to raise money. The solution was to establish a program called Memorial Contributes. Memorial Contributes is a system for people who want to contribute money each year to the center. They are put on an endowment plan which takes five percent of their endowment fund each year and gives it to SHCS. Then when the donor passes away their money and belongings are donated to the center. Five million dollars is the goal which the center is aiming to raise through the Memorial Contributes.(30) Another branch of this project is Charitable Remainder trusts(CRT). The idea of CRTs was created by Bob and Majorie Pierce.(31) Santa Clara University has helped the Pierce's establish the project. CRTs are similar to Memorial Contributes since one is giving part of one's income each year; however, there are also many bonuses to CRT other than the joy of giving. The donors are able to reduce their net worth, obtain income, and reduce their taxes that relatives will have to pay when the donor has passed on.

At Sacred Heart Community Services there is always a need for more volunteers. Areas in which volunteers are needed are Louise's Pantry and the Clothes Closet. These volunteers distribute clothes and food to people as well as sort it. Volunteers who work in the Welcome Center are hospitable people who welcome clients and donors as well as doing some office work. Housing Assistance volunteers help by serving as mentors to those who are looking for work as well as counseling those who are employed. Computer class, parenting class, and preschool class volunteers serve as helpers in such classes at the center by spreading the love in their heart by teaching somebody. English as a Second Language (ESL), which was started in 1986 by Teresa Rameriz, has volunteers that are bilingual who help people who

want to better themselves by improving their English skills. There are also volunteers in the Reading club and Homework Club who help students with their academics. In the 2005 Club, volunteers help high schoolers with homework and skills that will prepare them for college.

Conclusion

In our world of technology, violence, and self absorbency it is very rare to see a place such as Sacred Heart Community Services still in existence. The truth of it is that there really are people in this world who do care about the well being of others who may not be as fortunate as themselves. News and media tend to emphasize and mainly focus on all the disgraces to the human race which occur in today's society instead of publicizing good deeds of mankind that are living through people right here in San Jose. To think that Sacred Heart Community Services, the organization that serves thousands, and brings in millions, had begun by a holy woman with a big heart and an image in her mind of what an orange did for a hungry, little boy is motivation for anybody with a dream in their heart, and a desire to make a difference. Still to this day oranges remain in Sacred Heart food baskets that are delivered daily to people in need, to symbolize how everything began for this wonderful organization.



This is what 1020 Leona Court, Louise Benson's house looks like in the year 2000. Nearly forty years ago this site, Mrs. Benson started Holy Family Community Services which is now Sacred Heart Community services.





This was the second site of the center at 310 Edwards Avenue, which was provided by Sacred Heart Parish.





The third site of SHCS was a series of storefronts on South First Street which is shown here. At this site is where the tragic fire occurred.





At last, this is the current location which the center is run from. The large, modern building is on the corner of First and Alma Streets.



Endnotes

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Willow Glen High School
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