



# House of Opportunity

Sr. Christina Heltsley, EdD '96, helps young immigrant families beat the odds in a world of inequality.

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Photos by Barbara Ries

**I**n a Redwood City neighborhood, blocks and gates away from multi-million dollar Atherton homes and a left turn removed from gleaming Ferrari and Maserati showrooms, families living below the poverty level make do in cars and shared garages, alternating between sleep on back seats and mattresses, and rising for shift work at low-wage jobs.

Dominican Sr. Christina Heltsley, EdD '96, walks through the impoverished streets, raises her arms, and motions how easily she could toss a stone to expanses of wealth and prosperity. As executive director of the nonprofit St. Francis Center, she despairs the inequalities and has made it her life work to erase economic divides and help poor families transition to self-sustainability.

“I personally feel called to serve the economic



As executive director of the St. Francis Center in Redwood City, Sr. Christina Heltsley, EdD '96, provides hundreds of families each month with everything from groceries to education to clothing.

poor,” she says. “It’s what I want my life energy to be about. It’s worth the cost of my day. The injustices of this world hit you like a brick. I like to solve problems, something puzzling. If someone needs housing, I enjoy being a part of getting that done. We want to help families out, but not make them dependent. We do not want to take away their will to work.”

Franciscan Sr. Monica Asman founded the St. Francis Center in 1986 as a resource and community for the poor in San Mateo County, where the estimated per capita income is \$39,000 and fair market rent rates average \$1,500 per month. The cost of living is among the highest in California and the country, far exceeding the incomes of St. Francis clients—new immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Tongan Islands, the Philippines, and the southeastern United States.

Sr. Heltsley has led the center since 1999. A former school principal in inner city Chicago, she returned to her native California to pursue doctoral studies in the USF School of Education. After USF, she worked as superintendent of Catholic schools in Monterey County. The experiences, she says, prepared her for the varied and daily challenges of St. Francis.

Among clients, it is affectionately known as “La Casita,” the little house of opportunity occupying a corner lot on streets host to tranquility and children at play by day, gang members and drug transactions by night. Amid the uncertainty, St. Francis, with its fearless nuns and staff of 86 volunteers, serves about 500 families or 2,500 people per month. Clients filter into the center for just about everything—bags of groceries donated from local markets, clothing, English lessons, GED courses, laundry facilities, a place to take a shower. Next door, 24 families live in St. Clare Apartments, purchased by the center in 1996. A leased storefront nearby on El Camino Real holds the center’s clothing store and K-5 elementary school. The center also coordinates a toy drive that not only benefits children locally but also children at an orphanage in Mexico.

“Sr. Christina is like a dream for us,” says Carolina Maza-Curry, a former St. Francis client who now works at the center. “She wants us, the helpers and volunteers, to treat people in the right way. Sometimes women go there, they’re struggling in the marriage because they have husbands or relatives who don’t treat them as human beings. At the center they look for help. You can see the sadness in their eyes, and you can see they’re going there with fear, as if they’re going to be rejected or discriminated against.”

Maza-Curry talks from experience, seamlessly using a language she did not know—save a word or two (“window, apple,” she says)—six years ago. The center arranged for her to study English with an ESL instructor, and educated her granddaughter through the fifth grade.

“I couldn’t have a conversation. I couldn’t use verbs,” she says.

“Our Christina tries to help as much as she can



**Story Time:** Sr. Susan Ostrowski teaches kindergarten at Holy Families School, part of the St. Francis Center.

with the people, especially the women and children,” Maza-Curry says. “She doesn’t make distinctions between the sexes, but I think she knows the culture, the Latino culture, is a macho culture, and she tries to protect more women and children.”

Sr. Heltsley admits that some men may initially appear skeptical of “these radical nuns liberating our women.”

“But once they know that’s not what we’re about,” Sr. Heltsley says, “men are a lot more involved—helping unload groceries, garden, paint, build.”

La Casita might need a new nickname—La Casa, dreams Sr. Heltsley—in the coming months. In 2008, St. Francis will transform its neighborhood presence and consolidate its services into a \$4.7 million, three-story building that also features “three more low-income apartments for three more families to get them out of the garage,” Sr. Heltsley says. Private donors and foundations funded the project. She targeted donors she could tell the St. Francis story, bringing them to La Casita to see clients and volunteers working together. Donors, she says, appreciate seeing what happens with their dollars.

“We have no huge overhead,” Sr. Heltsley says. “What they give us directly serves the poor.”

In her position as director, Sr. Heltsley moves comfortably between the roles of educator, counselor, manager, fundraiser, even architect and technology specialist (clients receive a card with a magnetic strip and access services monthly through an automated system). Hugging clients and volunteers, speaking to neighbors in a mix of Spanish and English, Sr. Heltsley tries to embody the center’s motto of “compassion, not judgment.” She repeats the phrase, “dignity and respect,” to explain the atmosphere she aims to create for residents and clients, volunteers and visitors, supporters and potential donors. Add environmentalist to her many titles. The new building meets the latest environment-friendly green construction standards.

“It’s important because I think nonprofits need to lead the way in greening of structures,” Sr. Heltsley says. “If we don’t who will?”

**St. Clare Apartments resembled your average** apartment building in a bad neighborhood before it became part of St. Francis. Volunteers transformed the building with fresh paint, and created a welcoming common area with picnic tables and ivy-covered trellises. “Dignity and respect” also imbues the community garden, where residents spend hours tending to cornstalks and rows of tomato, cilantro, zucchini, cucumbers, and peppers. Murals of “Our Lady of Guadalupe” protect the garden—Sr. Heltsley says the drawings are more effective than rottweilers. It’s hard to believe the space was once a public eyesore—a neglected lot of land filled with abandoned refrigerators, stripped cars, and sofas.

“Just because people don’t have money,” Sr. Heltsley reasons, “doesn’t mean they want to live in a dump.”

Sr. Heltsley neither grew up in dumps nor imagined she would be a Dominican sister working at the pulse of social inequality. Thirty years ago she was engaged to be married. She encountered the Dominican sisters, “these self-actualized women,” working in the tough streets of Chicago, and “was immediately attracted to them” and their approach to education and service.

“I studied so I could serve better,” she says.

The approach is contagious. None of the activity at St. Francis could take place without its volunteers who are fixtures around the center who share the director’s commitment. Maria Parada, a native of Chile, takes a break from a day of recycling at the center to explain why she has worked here for 18 years. Like many of her fellow volunteers, she says life has been good to her and she would like to

return the favor. The same goes for 86-year-old Sergio Buranzon, who immigrated to the United States from Italy. Buranzon has volunteered at St. Francis for 17 years “because I like to do something to help someone less fortunate than I am,” he says.

Buranzon calls Sr. Heltsley “wonderful,” and greets her three times a week with a hug before he tends to the lawns and yardwork at St. Francis.

“You wonder how one person could do it all,” says Ann Marchi, an 11-year volunteer. Marchi works in the clothing store with Mimi Nava and Monica Koch, who have worked at the center for seven and 19 years, respectively. Together, they take in bags of donations (20,000 each year), weed out the clothes that would not meet the standard of “dignity and respect,” and arrange and divide the clothing in a fashion on par with any department store complete with bilingual labels.

“We love to work with Sister,” Nava says.

“You must do something, you have to give back to a worthy cause,” adds Koch. “I have so much. I need to give something back.”

Nava, Koch, and Marchi cannot help pausing from clothes distribution to take occasional peaks at the kindergartners in the Holy Families School classroom next door. Students wear blue uniforms and gravitate toward their teacher, Sr. Susan Ostrowski. The school enrolls a cohort of 12 students and educates them from kindergarten until fifth grade. Sr. Heltsley chooses the 12 students from client families facing the greatest financial challenges.

“Scripture tells us the poor will always be among us,” she says. “We are working with the poorest of the poor.”

Students from the first cohort recently graduated and now attend Sacred Heart Nativity School and Our Lady of Grace Nativity School for Girls in San Jose. The second cohort began this year. As part of the condition of enrollment, students’ mothers must attend English classes once a week. The requirement caused a beautiful problem, Sr. Heltsley says. When kids from the first cohort graduated and moved on, their respective mothers refused to stop attending the school. After finishing ESL courses, they started working toward their GEDs.

“Now the great divider is education,” Sr. Heltsley says. “It used to be religion and race, now it’s access to the education. Once you give education, you can’t take that away.”

Sr. Heltsley has made a believer out of Maza-Curry, who echoes her mentor’s ideas about education and opportunity.

“Sr. Susan is a wonderful teacher, and Sr. Christina



always tells children to learn and to stick in their minds that they have to be ready to go to college and to university,” Maza-Curry says. “I just decided that whatever Sr. Christina told me to do with my granddaughter, I would do it. Now she is in Our Lady of Grace in San Jose.

“We still keep our culture. Sr. Christina always tells us she doesn’t want us to lose our roots, not our Spanish. (She says) at home teach Spanish. They have to keep their traditions, their Spanish, and they have to be able to go into American culture, too. They are American, too.”

#### **Another day is winding down at St. Francis.**

Sr. Heltsley sits in her office talking with a possible volunteer. Construction on the new building can be heard next door. Sr. Heltsley still has \$700,000 to raise for the building, but she does not seem worried. Miracles happen from time to time at St. Francis. In those moments when the center cannot afford to pay a utility bill or meet a need, miraculously a check arrives in the mail or money arrives from a former client.

“I’m not complacent,” she says, “but I know God is going to take care of us.” **USF**

**Becoming Bilingual:** The St. Francis Center offers English classes and GED-completion courses to its clients.

View a slideshow of scenes from the St. Francis Center at [www.usfmagazine.com](http://www.usfmagazine.com)

