

Some Recollections of Carol Putnam in Indiantown

When I first made contact with Fr. Frank O'Loughlin, the pastor of Holy Cross in Indiantown to whom Carol and I had been directed for employment in a parish that served Farmworkers, he said one job that was immediately available was director of a day care that was to be opened for the farmworker children. We decided that job would be Carol's.

So one of my first vivid memories was of Carol perched at the top of a ladder scraping the dirt of ages from the walls of the empty warehouse that was to house the day care. As I recall, she didn't discuss it with anyone. She just knew nothing could happen in the space unless it was first cleaned so she took it upon herself to do so.

When we had been there a few months, she was in an automobile accident. When we went to see her in the ER she greeted us with a smile and a Mark Twain quotation: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." She did, however, need several weeks of recuperation and thanks to one of our parishioners was able to stay in a lovely condo in a neighboring town. In fact, as I recall, the accident was followed not long after by another serious illness the nature of which I don't remember.

Our first years were adventurous ones and we enjoyed spending time with our parishioners' families and getting to know life in rural Florida, living literally on "the wrong side of the railroad tracks"—just where we wanted to be—a very poor community among the mostly African American (and a few Mexican or Guatemalan) farmworkers.

I don't remember at what point Fr. Frank (as he was known to everyone) decided he wanted to start a school for the Farmworker children but I think it must have been the early 80s when the Guatemalan people began to pour into town. (They were refugees from the civil war in Guatemala and we provided all the services we could think of for them, including how to react if they were picked up by the immigration authorities) Carol had (of course) done a good job with the day care, and was an obvious choice for principle of his dream school.

The parishioners, under the direction of one of the parish pillars who was a contractor, built the first building on Saturdays when they were free of their other jobs, and it served first as a parish hall, then as the classroom for the Kindergarten of Hope Rural School. The plan was to grow the school as the children progressed upward and it was a huge success and a source of great pride for the people of Indiantown from the beginning.

You would do much better to hear about the history of the school from others better acquainted with it (Several RSCJ besides myself were in Indiantown with Carol but we were engaged in other ministries) Thanks partly to Carol's contacts up north she was able successfully to raise funds for the little school but the unfortunate progress of employment for her was that she became, increasingly, a grant writer and fundraiser and spent less and less time with the children and in the school. That was a loss on both sides of the equation,

although the Sinsinawa Dominican sisters who came one by one to work both in the school and at the Service Center were fabulous successors to the RSCJ.

Another huge and life changing project in which Carol was involved was the creation of a housing community for farmworker families. Attractive homes were built and other elements of a community provided on a large piece of property just outside of town. I'll wager her experience in Boston with the creation of Casa del Sol was a good background for that work. It was connected with the school in that the hope was that if the families had a good place to live they might settle out of the migrant stream and their children could have a more stable education. Many families did.

Carol and I left Indiantown within a few months of one another and she went to California where she continued working with farmworker women, among other things creating a housecleaning service in which she participated with the other women.