

# Project Vida

## Daily Care with a Long-term Vision



BY RHONDA MAWHOOD LEE



Photos courtesy of Project Vida

Project Vida Early Childhood Development Center

When Project Vida (“Project Life”) was established in South Central El Paso, Texas, in 1990, the community it served faced myriad challenges. At the time, El Paso was the fourth-poorest city in the country, and the marks of poverty were particularly visible in the South Central neighborhood—overcrowded housing, a majority of adults with less than a ninth-grade education channeled into low-paying jobs, a lack of medical services, a low proportion of pregnant women receiving prenatal care and a high incidence of low-birthweight babies.<sup>1</sup>

A coalition of community partners, including Presbyterian ministries, got together to address these needs, and a community congress voted on which projects to initiate. A family medicine clinic was an early priority, followed by English classes, citizenship courses and low-income rental housing.

Finally, in 1995, the Project Vida Demonstration Day Care (now the Project Vida Early Childhood Development Center) was established. A year

later, Presbyterian Women’s Birthday Offering gave the center a grant of \$170,000.

Project Vida’s day care center began as an intentional experiment in empowerment. In a neighborhood that had a 2,000-family waiting list for child care spaces, and where the people waiting for those spots faced many financial and logistical difficulties, the center was intended to show the positive effects excellent care could have. This was accomplished in three ways:

- through the day care center itself, which provided professional care for children while training volunteers to offer care in their own homes;
- educational opportunities for other adults who wished to work as home daycare providers; and
- training and support for parents to avoid abuse and neglect.

The roots of Project Vida go back a decade before the day care was established, to another recipient of a Birthday

Offering grant: a network of “*serviglesias*,” full-service churches with daycare, clinics, community kitchens and community organizing centers, established through joint border ministries of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 1986, several *serviglesias* across the U.S.-Mexican border received a total of \$487,300 from the Offering.<sup>2</sup> By the 1990s, the *serviglesia* network included Project Vida.

Almost three decades later, Project Vida’s day care initiative has had a tremendous impact. Project Vida’s Early Childhood Development Center offers day care and Pre-K services for newborns to five-year-olds, whose parents pay fees on a sliding scale according to their income. All their teachers have at least an associate’s degree in the field of child development; children are immersed in both English and Spanish; and breakfast, lunch and snacks are provided.<sup>3</sup>

In the years since receiving the Birthday Offering gift, Project Vida has

added after-school enrichment for children and youth, ages 6 to 18. Participants receive assistance with homework, and participate in enrichment activities like internet instruction, structured play, arts and crafts, and field trips. In response to community-identified needs, a college readiness program has been established to prepare first-generation students for post-secondary education, and microenterprise technical assistance and support is available for budding entrepreneurs among youth participants. Project Vida youth also have the opportunity to participate in community service projects. These enrichment services are offered at no cost, and just as importantly, without regard to immigration status. In this way, Project Vida provides a safe space in a border area where their families' lack of documents can be a source of tremendous stress for children and youth.<sup>4</sup>

Looking back on Project Vida 20 years after it received the Birthday Offering, co-founder and Presbyterian pastor Bill Schlesinger noted, "Kids who started with us in the neighborhood . . . have gotten their master's degrees and . . . are now executives in other non-profits. It's

amazing watching people see a different world and be able to take responsibility for it."

Alba Lopez is one example of the impact Project Vida can have on a life and the world. Alba received after-school tutoring at Project Vida. She said, "I would do the after-school reading programs when I was a child. They incentivized you to further your reading and better your English skills. One of the things they used as an incentive was during Christmas they would give reading units and with those units you could choose gifts for your family members. As a child, to be able to give something to your mom, your dad, to your sisters, that was amazing for me to do."

After graduating from high school, Alba volunteered at Project Vida. She eventually earned a master's degree from the University of Texas at El Paso, and served as Project Vida's business manager. Of her commitment to working in the non-profit sector Alba said, "It's all in the sense of serving and of wanting to help others and providing opportunities for others like . . . Project Vida did for me."<sup>5</sup>

Alba values the Project Vida Early Childhood Development Center so much, she enrolled her own children there.<sup>6</sup> Already, at least two generations of El Paso residents have been blessed by this Birthday Offering, with more surely to follow.

Rhonda Mawhood Lee is an Episcopal priest and the author of *Seek and You Will Find: Discovering a Practice of Prayer* (Forward Movement, 2021).

### Notes

1. Catherine Stewart Vaughn, *Messages of Reconciliation and Hope: 75 Years of Birthday Offerings 1922-1997* (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1997), 207.
2. Vaughn, 140-142.
3. "Early Childhood Development Center," Project Vida; [pvida.net/early-childhood-development](http://pvida.net/early-childhood-development).
4. "After-school Enrichment & Youth Development Program," Project Vida; [pvida.net/after-school-enrichment-1](http://pvida.net/after-school-enrichment-1).
5. Victor R. Martinez, "Project Vida: 25 years and going strong," *El Paso Times*, September 25, 2016; [elpasotimes.com/story/news/local/2016/09/25/project-vida-25-years-and-going-strong/90747150/](http://elpasotimes.com/story/news/local/2016/09/25/project-vida-25-years-and-going-strong/90747150/).
6. Ibid.

## Birthday Offering *of Presbyterian Women* Ofrenda del Cumpleaños *de mujeres presbiterianas* 년 장로교 여성 생일 헌금



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