

A Cornerstone of Mission in Tampa

UNITED METHODIST WOMEN-SUPPORTED CORNERSTONE
FAMILY MINISTRIES HELPS FAMILIES
STRUGGLING WITH POVERTY IN TAMPA, FLORIDA. by **JIM WEST**

Cathy Stone grew up very poor. By the time she was 14, her family had moved 12 times, each time because they were evicted.

Her parents came from New York. They had lost a couple of children, the

last during the winter, and her dad decided to move as far south as possible. The car broke down in Marathon in the Florida Keys.

“When I was in second grade, my school teacher was Ruth Laurie, a

United Methodist woman, and the United Methodist church was right next to my elementary school,” Ms. Stone said. “She probably saw things I didn’t realize about myself as a child—that I was dirty, that I was hungry.



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Children play at Cornerstone Family Ministries’ Rosa Valdez Early Childhood Learning Center, a United Methodist Women-related national mission institution in Tampa, Florida.

Girls play with Legos at Just for Tots Learning Academy, one of 130 child care centers affiliated with Cornerstone Family Ministries.



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“Ruth Laurie was precious. She would take leftovers from the lunchroom every day—it was part of her United Methodist Women’s work—and she would bring them over to the church, and they would feed the homeless there. And she would let me go with her. Eventually she would have her friends come and pick me up wherever I lived. I never missed church. I was at church every time the doors were open.

“That one woman changed my life,” Ms. Stone said.

Ms. Stone’s life has led her to Cornerstone Family Ministries, a United Methodist Women-supported center in Tampa, Florida, where she is now the executive director, helping new generations of families struggling with the same issues of poverty.

Immigrant roots

The origin of Cornerstone goes back to 1892. Tampa was full of immigrants working in the cigar industry, many of them Cubans and Italians. The immigrants’ children were not allowed to attend public schools, so they often were left unattended or brought along to the factories with their families.

A local woman, Rosa Valdez, and a wealthy northern visitor, Eliza Wolff, started a school for the children. For support, Ms. Wolff appealed to the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of The Methodist Episcopal Church South, one of the forerunners of United Methodist Women. She knew the organization was sending missionaries around the world, and she let members know their help was needed in Tampa as well.

That was the beginning of what is now the Rosa Valdez Center, an early learning center serving children from birth to age 5.

“The intention was always for those children to have a safe place to have their physical needs met, so their parents could go to work and make a better life,” Ms. Stone said. “Those needs haven’t changed at all in 120 years. This neighborhood is still one of the poorest in our community—and with one of the highest crime rates.”

Many of the parents in the community are single moms. A lot of them work fast food or hospitality jobs, or in child care, health care and other minimum wage occupations.

But while the needs haven’t changed over the years, Cornerstone’s approach to meeting those needs has.

Public health nutritionist Cassandra Hector trains child care center staff, parents and children on healthy eating at Cornerstone Family Ministries in Tampa, Florida.

“We were only touching 100 children, and not even touching them very deeply,” Ms. Stone said. After re-evaluating their work, Cornerstone settled on what she called “three buckets” that the center’s mission is evolving around.

Bucket 1: The Rosa Valdez Early Childhood Learning Center

The Rosa Valdez center, reinvented as the Children’s Early Learning Connection, is not just as a child care center, but, rather, it has become an incubator of innovative child care and a model that shares its best practices with other child care centers in the area.

“Early childhood education is about the kind of things that make people healthy in society,” Ms. Stone said. “Children learn how to stand in line with each other and keep their hands to themselves. It’s all about the social, emotional inputs that children get in early childhood. It’s about identifying developmental delays early so that they don’t become big issues.”

The center’s philosophy focuses on the overall well-being of the child, Ms. Stone says. “We make sure we call parents to find out how their children are doing—and not just when they’re absent. We fight like dogs to keep their funding in place [and] get them connected to speech therapy or whatever they need,” she said.

Cornerstone has worked hard to develop programs that will make a difference for their children—all of whom come from families living below the poverty level. One example is voluntary pre-kindergarten to vacation Bible school, VPK to VBS.

In Florida pre-kindergarten is free for 4-year-olds. Children can come to voluntary pre-kindergarten at the center, but



when the school year is over their parents don’t have money to continue sending them to child care. Consequently, the children often end up spending the summer hanging out with older children who do not challenge them academically, and they lose much of what they had learned during the school year, Ms. Stone said.

“It does good for the students if they can stay in child care all summer and go fresh to school in the fall, but most centers can’t afford that,” Ms. Stone

said. “So we’re piloting a program where we will have a different church each week bring a group of volunteers to do the vacation Bible school program that they’re already doing in their church, and we’ll be able to allow those children to stay the summer for free.”

As the Rosa Valdez center works out the kinks in the VPK to VBS program, it has shared the plan with the 130 centers in Cornerstone’s child care nutrition network. Most of the centers

Maribel Melgar, right, a teacher at Rosa Valdez Early Childhood Learning Center, is studying for a college degree. Her daughter, Cassandra Melgar, 19, volunteers at Rosa Valdez.



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liked the idea. “They said, ‘We don’t care that they’re learning about Jesus as long as they continue to learn math,’” Ms. Stone said.

Another innovation is that in 2013, Rosa Valdez became a lab school for teaching teachers as well as children. This meant that every teacher had to have a college degree, which is not normally a requirement for child care workers. “But we wanted to have interns who would be learning from seasoned professionals. And in order for colleges to work with us, our teachers had to be able to supervise those interns,” Ms. Stone said.

Center teachers who did not have degrees were allowed to stay, but they had to go back to school. Maribel Melgar, who teaches infants and one-year-olds, was one of them. She is now taking classes at Rasmussen College and expects to graduate next year.

Bucket 2: Children’s Nutrition Connection

Cornerstone’s Children’s Nutrition Connection helps other child care centers provide nutritious meals and nutrition instruction for 28,000 children over a five-county area.

Cornerstone sponsors 130 child care centers in and around Tampa, helping them plan, serve and get reimbursement for meals served to low-income children under the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Child Care Food Program. By centralizing this work, Cornerstone can provide technical assistance, training and nutrition advice, freeing up the centers to concentrate on the kids. This “bucket” has evolved from what was mostly an administrative program to more of an educational network.

Angie Dyson is the program director for Cornerstone’s Children’s Nu-

trition Connection. Before joining the program, many centers could only afford to provide snacks. The parents would pack a lunch, which often consisted of inexpensive—and unhealthy—foods, like potato chips. Once a center is a part of the program, staff get a better idea of what the children are really eating and can help them develop better habits.

“What we actually see is that the children are learning healthy eating,” Ms. Dyson said. “They’re eating foods that maybe they’re not exposed to at home. We encourage our centers to do fresh fruits and vegetables, not the fruit juice, not the sweet, sugary drinks.”

Many of the centers are located in “food deserts,” neighborhoods that may have small stores that sell candy or sandwiches but no place where area residents can purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Ms. Dyson said part of the mission is just teaching children the basics. To illustrate her point, she shared an encounter with a child about food.

“‘Where does the corn come from?’ I asked the child. ‘From the can,’ was the reply. Children in the program learn where food really comes from, what it looks like in its natural state, and how fun and OK it is to eat vegetables,” Ms. Dyson said.

The Children’s Nutrition Connection now employs a public health nutritionist, Cassandra Hector, who helps the staffs of the centers to understand what makes a healthy menu. She also teaches classes about healthy eating for parents of children enrolled at the centers.

Alberto Cruz and his wife Elena run one of the centers in Cornerstone’s network: the Just for Tots Learning Academy in Drew Park, one of Tampa’s poorest neighborhoods. Mr. Cruz taught in a medical school in Cuba be-

fore coming to Florida in 1995. Instead of staying in medicine, he went to a community college to study early childhood education. “I love these young ages more now than teaching in the university,” he said. “At these ages, the child is learning very fast, and you are also teaching the rules as a citizen. You are teaching the future of the nation.”

Bucket 3: Children’s Faith Connection

The faith connection is the third “bucket” of Cornerstone’s mission. As with Cornerstone’s voluntary pre-kindergarten to vacation Bible school program, the Children’s Faith Connection gives local churches the opportunity to contribute and participate in the lives of young children.

United Methodist Women and local churches are a key part of this work. “United Methodist Women have given us the place and the platform for doing this work,” Ms. Stone said. “They give us financial resources, they give us volunteers—and certainly the inspiration. They’re very focused on women and children and poverty, so that gives us an inroad into almost every United Methodist church.”

Cornerstone’s plan is to make use of the many churches all around the child care centers in its nutrition program network. Ways that church members can help include fundraising through Cornerstone’s annual Wonder Walk, volunteering to read to children or to clean or maintain properties, hosting a summer food program and being a local church for the children to attend.

“There are lots of United Methodist churches that are closing in neighborhoods where they’re needed most,” Ms. Stone said. “Let’s let them be the heroes



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Children play on the jungle gym at Cornerstone Family Ministries’ Rosa Valdez Early Childhood Learning Center.

in this. Let’s let them be the host sites, and let’s encourage those larger churches to come to them and pour resources into them. The kids can’t go to the big United Methodist church five miles away. They have to have a place in their community.”

In turn, Cornerstone can also be a help to the church, Ms. Stone said.

“Some churches don’t have United Methodist Women’s units any more, but we have inroads into those churches and can tell the United Methodist Women story in a different way,” she said.

Ms. Stone said Cornerstone is not solely United Methodist, but its deep-

est roots are within the denomination.

“We’ve become a connector. That’s our big mission around those three areas: nutrition, early childhood education and connecting the local church to children who are poor,” she said. “It’s fun work, and we’ve got a really great team. We’re very small and very overworked sometimes, but at the end of the day we put our head on the pillow, and we feel that we did a pretty good day’s work with God’s help.”



Jim West is an editorial photographer and writer based in Detroit, Michigan, and a frequent contributor to **response**.