

*From the Los Angeles Times*

**TIMES HOLIDAY CAMPAIGN**

# **Nonprofit aids families living in poverty**

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December 22, 2007

The 9-year-olds were smiling broadly as they raced through past lessons and their favorite books.

Kari Vides commented that her friend Daniel Ruiz "gets math problems really fast" and then pointed to a wall where student-rendered posters geographically positioned her charter school, which is tucked behind a McDonald's on East 7th Street in downtown Los Angeles.

"We live in the Milky Way, we live on planet Earth, we live on the continent of North America and in the state of California. We live in the city of Los Angeles," Kari said, pointing to student representations of each.

What the self-proclaimed future scientist didn't mention was that within the city, Kari was downtown; more specifically, on skid row.

It's not surprising that Kari didn't mention the teeming streets outside the charter school operated by Para Los Niños, said Giselle Acevedo, the nonprofit group's president and chief executive, because "the school is designed to be an oasis."

"Every child has the right to be safe," Acevedo said, tiptoeing through a group of youngsters taking their afternoon nap at the school. "This has to be a safe environment, because they're not coming from a safe environment."

The organization got its start in 1980 as a result of the efforts of Tanya Tull, a local community activist who now runs Beyond Shelter, a group that advocates for the homeless.

She read a newspaper article about the plight of children living on skid row and organized a group to purchase an abandoned downtown factory. Eventually they turned it into an alternative school.

Para Los Niños is one of Southern California's most successful nonprofits serving families living in poverty.

The organization has at least 24 sites in Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties, including the kindergarten-through-fifth-grade charter school, dozens of early childhood development and after-school programs, and family resource centers that offer mental-health counseling and job services, among others.

All told, Para Los Niños serves at least 5,000 families each year, including children and young adults ranging from 6 weeks to 21 years old. The typical family profile is a single mother with three or four children.

Acevedo said Para Los Niños works because it uses a comprehensive approach to youth education that targets the entire family, not just the parents or the children.

She said it is nearly impossible for youth to succeed in the mayhem of skid row and when their parents are often living day-to-day.

Acevedo said that most children at Para Los Niños come from working families but that their low incomes leave them with little or no opportunity for the basic services available to middle-class residents.

Part of the organization's function is to offer parents help in finding housing, medical care and social services.

She said that without the proper services, poverty-stricken families -- and especially their children -- cannot compete for the best jobs and education available to those with higher incomes.

"If you just give a kid the basics, they'll just learn the basics. But we cannot afford to give these kids the basics. . . . These kids here will take the same SATs as the kids in West Los Angeles," Acevedo said. "These are the same services that middle- and upper-class folks already have access to."

The organization, with a \$21-million annual budget and 350 paid employees, is funded through a combination of government and private grants and donations.

It is in the midst of a campaign to build a charter middle school and expand its early childhood development services.

The idea is to intervene in children's lives early, Acevedo said, and then stick with them through years of growth and progress.

The Los Angeles Times' Holiday Campaign gave \$15,000 to Para Los Niños this year.

Recently, the school invited labor leader and human rights activist Dolores Huerta to pay a visit. The children had been learning about her struggles for farm workers' rights in the grape fields of Southern California.

After Huerta gave a short speech, the students presented her with a booklet including their own thoughts about how she had inspired them.

"One day I would like to be a leader just like you," one student said.

"Thank you for helping the farm workers. Because of you, I want to also be a helping hand," said another.

Sitting in a chair in front of the youths, Huerta smiled as each read their remarks. Then she stood up and firmly asked the students: "Do you know what a boycott is?"

The annual Holiday Campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund, a fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which this year will match every dollar raised at 50 cents on the dollar.

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