



ARISE community women participating in the annual International Women's Day march.

ARISE Adelante empowers women, youth, and children in immigrant colonias

BY BETH GRIFFIN

In the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, Hidalgo County is one of the most impoverished areas of the United States. Hardscrabble cities and towns dot the landscape, and thousands of people live in colonias, informal communities on unincorporated land outside city limits.

Typically, the colonias have limited infrastructure such as electricity, septic or sewer systems, and paved roads, and their residents live well below federal poverty levels.

In 1987 late Mercy Sister Gerrie Naughton began making daily bicycle trips to Las Milpas Colonia from the border community of Pharr. She met new Mexican immigrants living in substandard housing on unlit, unpaved streets with poor drainage and no grocery store access. The women she encountered had grown up believing they had little to offer society. They had no secondary education, most were unemployed, and few spoke English. As she made house-to-house visits, Sr. Gerrie realized the women had the gifts to solve their problems and transform

their lives and communities. Sr. Gerrie's insight was the seed from which she and her Sisters of Mercy colleagues founded ARISE Adelante, an organization that now provides direct service, leadership training, and community organizing in the immigrant community. It has a particular focus on women, youth, and children and promotes personal development and empowerment. ARISE has received local and national funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD).

Lourdes Flores, president of ARISE, says the group adheres to Sr. Gerrie's vision of shared leadership and teamwork to accomplish its considerable goals. "We are neighbors to one another and work in relationship," she says.

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Through the CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD

across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends:

From its inception 50 years ago, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has embodied the Gospel mandate to serve Christ in the guise of the poor. We identify and fund groups that reflect the tenets of Catholic social teaching. Our partner organizations promote respect for the life and dignity of all people, especially those in the most trying circumstances.

ARISE Adelante, profiled in this issue, is one such group. Its staff and volunteers work in the Rio Grande Valley in an area of Texas recognized as the second-poorest census tract in the entire country. ARISE serves people living in conditions that are difficult for most of us to reconcile with our impression of America as a land of plenty.

Families live in colonias, unincorporated areas of a county with little to no electricity, running water, or other essential services. By any measure, the poverty is extreme. Most of the residents are immigrants who are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Their circumstances are challenging, but they have built cohesive communities in the colonias. ARISE is a considerable part of the life of the community.

Founded by women religious, ARISE is still sponsored and staffed by several congregations of sisters. Catholic parishes and schools support ARISE. The group's bold devotion to the people it serves and its persistent belief that the women of the colonias could become leaders and advocates for their neighbors is Catholic social teaching in action.

Every program developed by ARISE starts with an issue identified by the community. All are based on a model of identifying and training local leaders to articulate and advance a common agenda.

At this time, the community engagement component of ARISE is in high gear. It provides voters information and education about issues, encourages citizens to vote, and ensures that all residents of the colonias are counted in the 2020 Census. These efforts reflect and track the advice given by the Catholic bishops in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the teaching document the bishops issue every four years on the political responsibility of Catholics.

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship affirms Church teaching on the dignity of every person and urges Catholics to work

for justice and serve the common good with joy and hope. It ties the right to life to other human rights. It reminds us of the universally binding moral imperative to respond to our neighbors' needs for food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work. Drawing from the Gospels and from the historical and contemporary teachings of the Church, the document states, "The Church's obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith" (no. 9).

ARISE is helping the people of the Rio Grande Valley participate in processes that promote their rights and dignity as human beings.

As we bask in the afterglow of the Easter season, please know we appreciate your prayers and support for the people we serve.

Gratefully,

RALPH McCLOUD, Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development

The full text of the 2019 document *FORMING CONSCIENCES FOR FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP* is available in English and Spanish at <https://tinyurl.com/bvq2ddh>



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ARISE has no formal membership, but Lourdes says 5,000 very low-income people are part of the community. Four ARISE centers are now strategically located throughout Hidalgo County.

The organization tackles community-identified issues in education, environment and health, housing and infrastructure, immigration, civic engagement, leadership and spiritual development, and youth engagement. Among its victories spanning three decades, ARISE counts the successful lobbying of government officials for infrastructure improvements, schools, and services.

As its foundation, ARISE leans on guiding principles that reflect biblical teaching and a practical approach to community interaction. The first principle restates Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to bring glad tidings to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

"Our work is for the people, with the people, and by the people," she says.

The door-to-door visits also help ARISE identify women who are dedicated to the community and interested in serving others. They are recruited to train with ARISE to be animators and leaders in the community.

"It all starts with small home visits and grows through introductions of friends and neighbors," Lourdes says.

The civic engagement campaign has been a major focus for ARISE during the past 11 years. "Many people are eligible to vote, but they need information about the process and the logistics. Our awareness efforts help people understand why it's important to vote and what exactly they are electing people to do for them," Ramona says.

"Our priority is educating our community on the issues," Lourdes explains. "We want candidates to hear about our agenda. We educate



Julia Reyna giving her testimony at the Annual Immigrant Day vigil.



ARISE community women participating in the annual International Women's Day march.

From its beginning, the organization has also adhered to its second principle, Lourdes says: "ARISE does not do for the people what the people can do for themselves."

She continues, "Sr. Gerrie dreamed of starting something that would teach leadership, empower women, and enable them to take on roles and projects. She hoped ARISE would eventually be run by women in the community who perhaps at the outset did not feel comfortable with public speaking and issue organizing."

And that is how it works. ARISE community organizer Ramona Casas says, "We are in neighborhoods in more vulnerable rural areas of the county. Through our personal contact, going door to door, we know individuals and their families and can help develop programs that the community identifies as a need."

women to speak for the community; we accompany them and provide the tools. Everyone can bring some expertise."

"But we also bring solutions to the table and not just complaints. We want solutions that will last and be sustainable," she says.

"We are also connecting the voter registration and Get Out the Vote campaigns with the census this year," Lourdes adds. "It's important for people to understand the way the census impacts legislative representation and the money that flows from the federal government to the state and local communities."

ARISE uses its detailed knowledge of the colonias to access hard-to-count areas, including unconventional housing and neighborhoods that are not on the master maps used for the census.



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Lourdes says there is resistance to the census even without a proposed, but not accepted, question about legal status. "There is a fear that information could be shared. We focus on helping people understand its importance and that it is confidential," she says. "People know ARISE. We help them read the questionnaire but do not fill it out for them."

Ramona says ARISE has also encouraged community members to apply to become census canvassers. There was an undercount in the 2010 Census in part because the canvassers were not local people.

"It's important to know the culture and what times are the best for outreach," she says. "Also, since the last census, some rural colonias in Hidalgo County have been subdivided as residential areas, so the assigned addresses do not all match

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the house numbers." Local canvassers are familiar with the changes, she says.

ARISE's program reflects the emphasis that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops places on the responsibilities of citizens. Every four years, the Catholic bishops issue a teaching document on the political responsibility of Catholics. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* guides all who seek to exercise their rights and duties as citizens. As in the past, the current document urges Catholics to form their consciences, apply a consistent moral framework to issues facing the nation and the world, and shape their choices in elections in the light of Catholic social teaching.

The document says, "In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation" (no. 13).



ARISE youth leaders during their annual summer leadership retreat, working on a presentation of their annual projects.

"As Catholics, we bring the richness of our faith to the public square. We draw from both faith and reason as we seek to affirm the dignity of the human person and the common good of all," the bishops say in the introduction.

"What faith teaches about the dignity of the human person, about the sacredness of every human life, and about humanity's strengths and weaknesses helps us see more clearly the same truths that also come to us through the gift of human reason. At the center of these truths is respect for the dignity of every person. This is the core of Catholic moral and social teaching. Because we are people of both faith and reason, it is appropriate and necessary for us to bring this essential truth about human life and dignity to the public square," the bishops say (no. 10).

Lourdes explains how ARISE answers these calls. "ARISE provides an opportunity for all people to be who they are," she says. "People suffer humiliation for different reasons, or constant fear, or feelings that they don't belong or are not good enough. That message affects the community."

"We always want to embrace human dignity in our community, and we provide all of our programs equally to anyone who comes," she says.

ARISE grant writer and candidate with the Sisters of Mercy, Amy Westphal, says the charism of the founding Sisters of Mercy



Lucia Salazar (ARISE staff) doing an introduction of ARISE values to the Civic Engagement participants.

includes hospitality. "They see hospitality as being cordial in a way that renews and invigorates. That is the way we, at ARISE, empower one another," she says.

ARISE is located in the Diocese of Brownsville in Texas. It is a cosponsored ministry of the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of Houston. Volunteers and staff are drawn from local parishes, religious orders, and Catholic high schools and colleges. The group has a longstanding relationship with the Mexican American Catholic College in San Antonio as an education resource. ✚