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A Farewell from Gil Villagran after 32 Years of Social Work

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There is a French proverb, “The more it changes, the more it remains the same,” which comes to mind as I write this farewell after three decades of social work. In 1972 I graduated with a BA in philosophy. Finding no job announcements for a philosopher, I applied to be a social worker with the county, and found my vocation.

After three months as General Assistance EW, I was promoted to Social Worker in Basic Services, dealing with poverty, slumlords, police abuse, deportations (at that time the county hospital would report undocumented patients to the INS).

However, at the Department of Social Services, as it was called then, we took care of human needs as best we could. It was possible to get Director’s Exemptions with justification, for aid to families with special needs such as seriously disabled children (often due to toxic pesticides in migrant camp drinking water). It was possible to obtain County Supplemental Assistance funds for a $1,000 down payment for a family to purchase a home if it would provide stability, or a car to take a child to medical appointments at Stanford Hospital.

We really did poverty-reducing social work in those days, as well as therapeutic in-home counseling social work since the community mental health clinics were still a few years away. However, in 1972 a second rate Hollywood actor was elected governor, with a philosophy that “government could not possibly do anybody any good.” It is curious that those who state they do not believe in government spend so much effort to get elected in order to dismantle much of the public infrastructure which serves human needs. Of course these “less government is best” ideologues think that big government is ok for sports complexes, corporate subsidies, tax breaks for millionaires, and cost-plus contracts for defense contractors; but promote less government for families struggling with low wages, outsourced jobs, stolen pensions, and victims of corporate toxic dumping.

In 1972 our nation was fighting an undeclared war based upon a lie: the so-called Gulf of Tonkin attack that never occurred. Today we are fighting another war based upon the Weapons of Mass Destruction (yet to be found), against our former ally even after he used chemical warfare on his Kurdish population.

The more it changes... we now have a third-rate actor as governor, with a similar ideology to take care of campaign contributors before we take care of people in need (of IHSS, higher education, driver safety, local government).

Yet through 32 years our Agency enabled me to practice social work with many different groups of clients, including:

Poor people of all ethnicities, disabled children and adults, families beaten and despondent by their circumstances.

Chilean refugees, where I and others co-developed with Father Cuchulain Moriarty of Sacred Heart Church, a service program for housing, ESL classes, employment services, and treatment
for victims of torture and imprisonment perpetrated by their own military, encouraged by the Nixon-Kissinger White House.

Child Protective Services (as it was called then), where I sharpened my assessment and treatment skills with great supervisors, mentors and colleagues, including Ken Borelli, Vince Lopez, Nancy Wiener, Priscilla Merek, Dick Evans, Bob Melton, Lorraine Moore, Bob Hale and Brad Norman.

It did not take too many years of working in Emergency Response, to realize that waiting for child abuse reports to come in is not enough. The damage has already been done: the child has already been abused, neglected, molested! I estimate that in 12 years of ER work I responded to about 5,000 cases, and interviewed at least 500 children who had been molested by fathers, stepfathers, mothers’ boyfriends, relatives, priests and ministers, a probation officer, coaches, and even another social worker!

Seeking to ensure that families received preventive and more effective services, I began to teach parenting classes at The Grail in East San Jose, and in the evenings at the Northside (Gardner) Health Clinic.

As a member of El Comite (the Committee on Services to the Spanish Speaking) since 1972, I worked with many other Latino and non-Latino advocates for better services for all clients, and a major goal was to ensure that cases were coded for bilingual needs (in Spanish and all other languages including American sign), we worked with Agency Director Fred Gillette for a bilingual pay differential, the second in the state.

The term cultural competency had not been coined yet, but that is what we were pioneering, in 1990 when we made the case to Agency Director Dick O’Neil to work with us to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to address the high disproportion of Latino children in foster care. As chair of El Comite for the next two years, with Sally Salinas as our strategic planner, we developed the Five Year Plan which is now part of Agency lore. Soon after, the Coalition for Effective Services was developed to encourage cooperation by the various ethnic/cultural advocacy groups in the agency. A result of this cooperation was the development of similar plans for African-American and Asian-Pacific Islander clients of our Agency. These three plans were then followed by similar efforts on behalf of American Indian, Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual and Transgender, and People with Disabilities committees. These seeds for cultural competence brought forth the Council for Cultural Excellence and the work that has followed, including trainings for all staff on how to treat staff and clients with respect, dignity and competence.

In 1990 I applied for a Management Intern position to work in the Office of the Director, with Kathy Gallagher, Director of Governmental Relations and Planning. This was a great experience, where I wrote proposals, fact sheets, legislative advocacy letters, and represented the agency on countywide councils and committees. My major assignment was to prepare the Agency’s Family Preservation Pilot Proposal to the State Department of Social Services, to enable the Agency to spend one million dollars per year for two years of foster care funds to reduce the need for foster care. Our county was one of 18 funded in the state.

Zonia Sandoval Waldon was selected to manage our new Family Preservation Program, and I was assigned to work with her to coordinate a new program that I designed and for which I
obtained state funding at the end of my internship, the Nuestra Casa Youth Leadership Gang Prevention Program for teen youth in foster care. These funds enabled us to start the first of our Family Resource Centers and our Youth Leadership program at the same time. Twelve years later, it is heartwarming to see that the centers and the programs have been highly successful, receiving continuous funding and awards, but most important of all: have made a positive difference in the lives of youth and their families!

I describe this to praise the people that I have worked with, who have given me so much of their knowledge, their skills, their wisdom, their compassion, and indeed, of themselves, to serve our common vocation in this place we call the Social Services Agency. A place where we work, but even more so, a place where we have lived so many days of our lives together, to help people in very difficult situations.

There are so many people who have been my mentors, colleagues and friends, that I could never name everyone who has a special place in my heart. Most of you know who you are even if I do not name you on these pages. But I must name some with whom I worked closely for so many years, (some are gone from the Agency or from this life). These include: Enrique Rodriguez, Zonia Sandoval Waldon, Kathy Gallagher, Bernice Von Bargen, Dick O'Neil, Jodie Martin Harris, Lynn Nudelman, Cathy de Leon, Vercila Chacon, Chris Ruiz, Daniel Esparza, Efrain Lugo, Vanna Forester and Steve Walker, Molly Jo Crummett, Mary Berrettini (Thompkins), Belinda Quesada-Ramsey, Elise Spleiss, Dana McQuary, Susan Averett Lee, Yvonne Moore, Chris Peck, Connie Vega, Jorge Gonzalez, Enrique Angulo, and many, many others....

So what have I learned after 32 years of doing social work? Life in Santa Clara County gets harder for those left on the wrong side of Silicon Valley's burst high tech bubble, of downsizing and outsourcing, of cutbacks in wages and services, of corporate criminality, and of government in an age of exploding deficits.

Yet our Agency remains, for the most part, a safe haven, a place of assistance, and a place where even "the least among us" are welcome into our doors for assistance. And it is our work that becomes the measure of our humanity: that we treat our clients with dignity, with quality services, and with compassion. That is our work, and by our work we should be known.

I wish you all well in carrying on this work of compassion!

I will not be far from our Agency and profession, as I will be teaching at the College of Social Work at San Jose State University, where my email is: gvillagr@email.sjsu.edu

Farewell to all!

Gil Villagrán