

# In Common

The grammar  
of gratitude.



# The grammar of gratitude.

Every night 150 adults—primarily immigrants building better lives for their families—learn English at Las Casas. Participants are deeply grateful, but waiting lists are long here at one of the Bay Area’s few English as a Second Language adult ed programs.

What will it take for Las Casas, the Dominican Sisters’ program in Oakland, to meet the growing demand?

BY GAIL TYSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY DREW KELLY



3  
ADULTS  
LEARN ENGLISH  
AT LAS CASAS IN 2002

2,000  
"ALUMNI"  
LEARN ENGLISH  
AT LAS CASAS BY 2014

**INSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

**Sister Ann Ronin taught three students English once a week. Twelve years later, her Las Casas outreach serves 250 students a year, providing 12,000 hours of instruction three nights a week in the nine-month ESL program staffed by volunteers.**

LEFT TO RIGHT: Volunteer Henny Hoogenbosch with students; Maritza; Sister Barbara Lerner with Juan Bernardo Ramos; Brother Antonio Gregory, OFM.



**When these students say Teacher, they speak with reverence.**

They come from days filled with hard work—construction, painting, house-cleaning—to study at Las Casas, the English language program at St. Elizabeth High School in Oakland. They arrive fluent in native tongues ranging from Spanish to Arabic and K’iche’. They show up determined “to make a better life for themselves and their children,” says Sister Barbara Lerner, OP, who greets everyone at the door and, increasingly, must turn people away.

In the extremely diverse Bay Area, the demand for Las Casas classes has grown exponentially as other English as a Second Language programs have decreased. Since June 2010, the Oakland Unified School District has offered no adult ESL classes, the result of budget cuts that slashed funds for adult education by 85%. Sister Ann Ronin began Las Casas in 2002 with three students, and by fall 2013, enrollment averages 125-150

students per night. By mid-March 2014, 81 applicants were wait-listed.

“We turn away people every night,” Sister Barbara says. “I have to say, ‘Come back in August.’”

**Learning at every level**

Three nights a week from September to May, 20 volunteer teachers spread across seven classrooms. Retirees, graduate students and professionals, they include Phyliss Martinez, a UC Berkeley School of Law program administrator who also spends five to 20 hours per week as Las Casas’ co-director.

A tall, energetic woman with a mop of gray curls, she began teaching at Las Casas in August 2011. Shortly afterward Sister Ann’s health declined rapidly; when she died that November, the leadership passed to Sister Barbara. “The Dominican Sisters made a commitment to continue the program as the congregation’s ministry. We keep streamlining and improving it,” Sister Barbara says.

On a cool March night in the beginners’ class, young men and

women from Guatemala, El Salvador and México work in small groups, identifying coins and bills and counting money. Franciscan Sister Marisa McDonald, OSF, a kindly woman with a radiant smile who serves as the program’s assistant director, gently but firmly encourages her students to move up to more challenging levels. She treasures the students’ success stories. “One construction worker told us, ‘Now I can talk to the people I work with,’” she says. “Imagine how isolating it was for him before.”

At the intermediate level, the students’ speaking ability and listening comprehension is advanced enough for teachers to incorporate reading and writing. In Martinez’s higher-level reading and writing classroom this evening, 14 men and 10 women enter quietly and get right to work. “Write at least two sentences,” she calls out. “And if you’re really fast, give me some more.” She moves up and down the aisles, teaching one-to-one with steadiness that inspires

confidence in the most tentative learners.

The class includes Maritza, a single working mother with two daughters. At first her four-year-old would cry when Maritza left for Las Casas. “She would cling to me,” Maritza remembers. “She’d say, ‘Mommy, don’t leave, stay here and hold me.’ I felt awful, but told her, ‘I have to learn.’” When Martinez heard the story, she told Maritza to bring her daughter to class, where she settled the child with paper and crayons during the 90-minute class session. When Maritza leaves for Las Casas now, her daughter says, “OK, Mommy, you go to school!”

Down the hall, Brother Antonio Gregory—a Franciscan friar who is pursuing a master’s degree in linguistics—strides around a classroom of advanced students. Lithe in a shamrock T-shirt and bright green pants, he is keenly aware when his students struggle with the baffling grammatical exceptions so common in English. “Let’s go over it again then,” he says, and elicits smiles when he

**Passionate advocate**

When Phyliss Martinez returned to St. Elizabeth Elementary School 44 years after graduation, she followed a crowd into the cafeteria, where Las Casas first started.

“The room was jam-packed. Students were sitting on the window sills,” she says. “I was captivated.”

Two and a half years later, Phyliss’ passion for Las Casas still burns bright. It reflects the ardor of 16th-century Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who fought for the rights of indigenous peoples of the Americas, and of Dominican Sister Ann Ronin, whose passion for volunteering lives on in the program she founded.

“People have made a commitment to be here,” Martinez says. “And being here takes all of us to a different place.”

exclaims, "OK, that's the easy part!"

Success spurs these learners on. Bernardo, a painting crew supervisor, says, "I need English to communicate with our customers." He shyly displays a translation program on his cell phone, explaining, "On the train, I look up words in the ads that are all around me."

Like Bernardo, many students beg for more Las Casas classes. "One and a half hours goes by so fast," Bernardo says. "If I came for two or three hours, I would make progress more quickly."

Elementary has educated students since 1893 and in the high school since 1921. "I have made it part of my mission," says Martin Procaccio, the high school's president and principal, "to be part of the fabric of this community."

"Las Casas is also a launching point for teachers who want to acquire skills and certification hours in teaching ESL," Martinez says. The need for ESL teachers has risen nationwide. The number of individuals with limited English proficiency grew by 80% between

**"We turn away people every night. I have to say, 'Come back in August.'"**

— SISTER BARBARA LARNER, OP

**Language as launch pad**

Las Casas benefits not only students and their employers, but also the students' families. "If you can train parents to be better educational providers," program co-director Martinez says, "you prime children to succeed."

Research backs her up: "By age three," writes Tina Rosenberg in *The New York Times*, "a poor child would have heard 30 million fewer words in his home environment than a child from a professional family."

At Las Casas, parents learn their way out of desperate cycles of poverty and language deficits that can persist for generations. Their growing ease with English also empowers their children to do well in school.

Another major beneficiary is the neighborhood, where St. Elizabeth

1990 and 2010, and it now represents 9% of the country's population. And the Pew Research Center projects the arrival of 67 million new immigrants between 2005 and 2050.

For now, Las Casas welcomes as many English learners as it can. The students cherish the privilege of learning. They appreciate the Dominican Sisters' commitment to maintain the program. Above all, they are deeply grateful for their teachers, whose patience and skill give the students the opportunity to make a better life. 

**START THE DIALOG**

Ask questions and share your thoughts with author Gail Tyson at [dgmtyson@bellsouth.net](mailto:dgmtyson@bellsouth.net).

**Get involved**

1

**Donate and make a difference**

Provide resources for our wishlist.

**Laptop computers with CD slots for students**  
need: 8 cost: \$600 each

**Portable classroom projectors**  
need: 4 cost: \$400 each

**Teacher stipends and materials reimbursements**  
need: 20 cost: \$150 each

**New student binders with calendar, materials**  
need: 200 cost: \$8 each

Donate online  
[msjdominicans.org](http://msjdominicans.org)



2

**Volunteer**

Serve as a classroom teacher, mentor, tutor or website designer.

Share your skills at  
[development@msjdominicans.org](mailto:development@msjdominicans.org)



QUESTIONS?  
Contact Sister Francis Clare Fischer, OP, at 510. 933.6310 or [clare.e.fischer@gmail.com](mailto:clare.e.fischer@gmail.com)



**A SAINT IN OUR DAY**  
Chef Bruno Serato teams with St. Catherine's Academy to serve free meals to motel kids.

ST. CATHERINE'S ACADEMY

**The patron saint of motel kids.**

To Sister Johnellen Turner, OP, chef and CNN Hero Bruno Serato is "a saint in our day."

Sister Johnellen, the president of St. Catherine's Academy—a MSJ Dominican-sponsored school in Anaheim—has partnered with the philanthropic chef for years, serving

dinner to low-income and homeless children who live in motels.

Feeding boys' hunger to learn unites this duo. Dinner menus now include SCA student mentors, playmates and tutors who hang out and help out in after-school programs. In January SCA enrolled

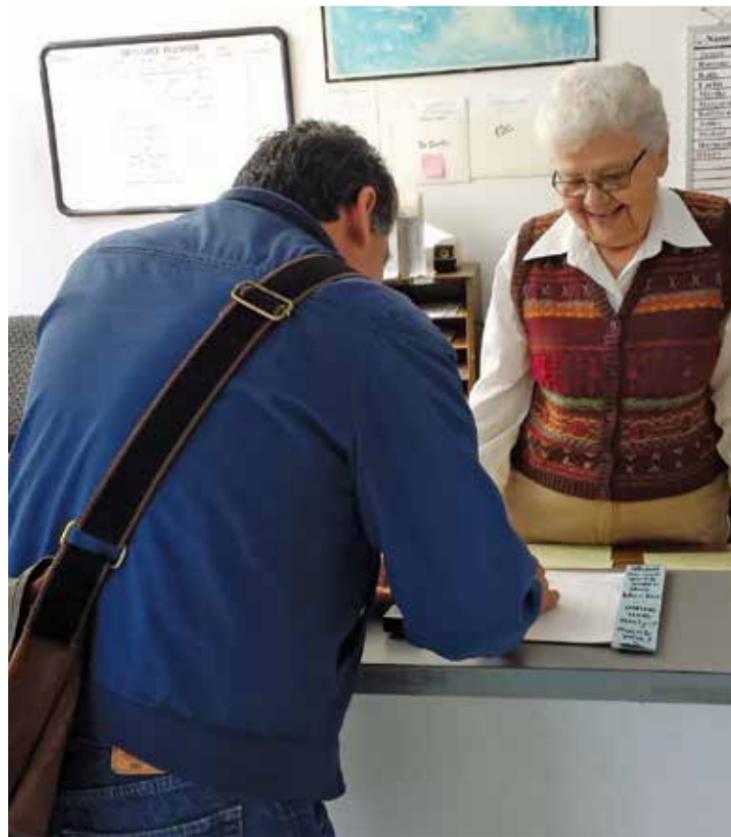
two motel boys who, she says, "have been so successful." The initiative, a highlight of SCA's 125th anniversary, is powered by love.

"For Bruno, it's all about the kids," Turner says. "He's a man of God, one of the holiest men I've ever met. I'm grateful that we are friends." 

CURRENT PROJECTS

# Building together.

We're teaming with partner organizations to improve communities far and wide. Here are some highlights.



## STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO

Sister Martha Garcia, OP, knows San Francisco's streets and many of the 900 people annually served by the Bar Association's Homeless Advocacy Project. Securing legal and social services for homeless or mentally ill clients has been her ministry for more than 15 years. Speaking Spanish and English, she's a passionate advocate for those without a voice.

"I saw so many people on the streets without basic resources. I knew I had to do something," she says. "Yet I am the one blessed by clients who are 'planted by the Lord to show His glory.' (Isaiah 61:3)"



## Spirituality

### YOUNG ADULT FOCUS GROUPS

Young adults across the country discussed their faith and spiritual journeys during nine focus groups held in April.

With private grant funds, the Dominican Sisters hosted groups in San Francisco, Oakland, Tucson and St. Louis. Analysis of these discussions and an online survey will shape Motherhouse programs designed for busy adults and professionals looking to nourish their spiritual life.

### NEW DYNAMIC DOMINICANS CLUB

Sister Mary Catherine Antczak and Sister Dulce Aguilar Rodriguez started a Dominican Club at Santa Teresita School

in Los Angeles. Every other month, third- to sixth-graders meet to learn about—and celebrate—a Dominican saint. Discussions bring the saints to life with lessons for today.

### LOVE AND LEADERSHIP

Sister Ramona Bascom received the Courageous Love Award from the Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Church committee. The award recognized her leadership in the International Women of Peace, an interfaith coalition that promotes peace and justice in the Tri-Cities.



## Education

### SCHOOL WINS NON-PROFIT AWARD

St. Catherine's Academy won the Anaheim Chamber of Commerce 2013 Non-Profit of the Year Award in recognition of "exceptional achievements in building the community."

President Sister Johnellen Turner highlighted this and other milestones at the 125th Anniversary Celebration, a grand

reunion in March that gathered alumni, parents, teachers and friends on the eight-acre boys' campus in Anaheim. Diocese of Orange Bishop Kevin Vann welcomed Archbishop George Niederauer, SCA alum, who presided at the liturgy.

### iPADS TRANSFORM SCIENCE CLASSES

A Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose Foundation grant combined with ICA Gala donations has transformed biology and chemistry classes at Immaculate Conception Academy, a Cristo Rey campus in San Francisco.

Students now use 32 iPads to solve problems, post homework in virtual portfolios and access instructional videos online. Academic and technology skills prepare ICA graduates to succeed in the online courses offered on college campuses.

### RELIGIOUS LIFE DEMYSTIFIED

Principal Steve Rummel, of St. Simon School in Los Altos, called Vocation Awareness Day "a faith-filled event," praising third grade teacher Sister Jane Marie Estoesta's leadership.

She brought four priests, three sisters and three brothers from different congregations to the school. A Q&A session allowed students to learn about their ministries, hobbies and how each discovered his or her vocation.



## Social Outreach

### WALK-A-THON SUPPORTS DOMINICAN SISTERS

Students from four Los Angeles-area schools sponsored a walk-a-thon to support the Motherhouse's ASEB memory care project as part of Dominican Day.

The annual Dominican Day, hosted by San Gabriel Mission High School in February, brings prayer and action together. Students from Santa Teresita, Sacred Heart, San Gabriel Mission and St. Ignatius of Loyola learned about their schools' Dominican identity.



## Motherhouse

### CIVIC GROUP WORKSHOPS

Attorney Jean Holsten, director of dialogue and outreach in Sacramento's Bread of Life Center, led a Contemplative Dialogue series at the Motherhouse and in Southern California.

Participants learned communication stances that bridge divides and foster dialogue. Continuing education units were available for social and mental health professionals.

Jean delivers mindful leadership workshops to civic, religious and governmental groups in the U.S. and Canada.

### WELLNESS CULTURE

Wellness Coordinator Lynette Gullings, RN, works with sisters making important health care decisions and leads efforts to create a culture of wellness at the Motherhouse. She is an employee of Elder Care Alliance, a professional network committed to holistic wellness among older adults.

### PUMA PROJECT PROTECTS HABITAT

The Santa Cruz Land Trust's Puma Project team contacted Sustainability Coordinator Sister Barbara Hagel to potentially partner in efforts to create a safe passage for endangered cats to cross Highway 17 via underground tunnels.

The Sisters' Marywood property in the Santa Cruz Mountains is within the project zone.

### SOUL FOOD

For 20 years Sister Florence Cumbelich has directed sisters and volunteers who annually prepare 1,400 Dominican holiday fruitcakes.

She also serves in the kitchen of Fremont's Tri-City Free Breakfast program, with recently arrived Sister Imelda Loch from Germany. The sisters help prepare 125-160 meals a week so that low-income children, elders and the working poor can enjoy a hot meal.

## Join us



### Volunteer

Work as a community gardener, or technology tutor. Or for our ASEB memory care program.

Share your skills development@msjdominicans.org



### Connect with the Spirit

Participate in monthly Taizé prayer services, Sunday liturgy or retreats.

See our events calendar msjdominicans.org



### Support our schools

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Please designate Catholic education.

REFLECTION

# Bless our Mother Earth.

Hope is the bridge we stand on, calling for God's grace to heal our broken present.

Señora (Lady) of Latin America, Look upon your daughters and sons with love!

Pour your Son's Spirit upon your people who live under unjust systems that cause pain and force their migration.

Help us avoid all evil until the coming of new heavens and new earth.

Bless our Mother Earth and protect her from senseless plunder by those whose hearts have lost their way.

Señora, Mother of True God Through Whom We Live, give us reason to hope through the glorious resurrection of your Beloved Son.

Amen!

— *Hermana María Isabel Hernández Rea, OP*

Comunidad de San Martín de Porres, Chiapas, México

DOMINICAN DIALOGUE



## Conversation with a sister.

**Sister Mary Yun, OP, what drew you to social work as an expression of your Dominican vocation?**

My father died of cancer when I was eight, and my family and I immigrated to the U.S. when I was

12. I studied psychology and sociology in college to understand how difficult life events have

affected me. After graduation, I worked as a case manager, assisting Korean single moms, and decided to get my master's degree in social work.

I was also "discerning" to become a sister and lived with the Dominican Sisters as a "pre-candidate" while

studying at UCLA. That year I fell in love with religious life and social work!

**How do you use your social work training?**

I have worked in various Catholic schools and counseling agencies providing services. I'll be licensed as a clinical social worker when I pass state exams, and I am open to God's call for my next ministry venture. Like Mother Pia, I want to serve "the young, the poor and the vulnerable" but in a social work setting. I've found some people feel more comfortable sharing their struggles with a sister rather than a mental health professional.

I'm inspired by people's stories and God's work in their lives. My desire is for them to experience God's love as I have experienced it.

*"The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness."*

— POPE FRANCIS, December 2013

GOOD BOOKS



**Sister Ramona Bascom shares a favorite book**

**HAMMARSKJÖLD: A LIFE** by Roger Lipsey

I just finished Lipsey's biography about Dag Hammarskjöld, United Nations Secretary General (1953-61). The

Swedish world leader and diplomat was also a man of deep faith as revealed in his journal *Markings*.

Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously, John F. Kennedy

called him "the greatest statesman of our century." I'm inspired by great, holy leaders like Hammarskjöld—especially today.

New sisters

Know someone who might be interested in becoming a sister? Contact us at [vocations@msjdominicans.org](mailto:vocations@msjdominicans.org)



NEWS



## Serving inmates.

Sister Catherine Marie Bazar, OP, walks the Twin Towers, home to 4,500 male inmates. More than 3,200 of them are mentally ill, making this the largest U.S. mental health facility.

Sister Giulii Zobelein, OP, works with 18- to 60-year-olds, most of whom were exposed as children to abuse, abandonment, crime, alcohol, drugs and gangs.

In their roles as chaplains in the Los Angeles Archdiocesan Office of Restorative Justice program, the sisters visit, listen and pray with inmates. If

there's a stressful incident, officials contact a chaplain to calm the inmate down before authorities take over, a practice prison deputies appreciate.

"I've hugged addicts, thieves, pimps and murderers, held hands with AIDS victims, and blessed the mentally ill. It's important for me to be where Jesus would be, not because of what I do but because of what they do for me," Sister Catherine Marie says. "They're my daily 'Eucharist,' and I never come home tired—except from walking to 108

units and three clinic floors."

For Sister Giulii the prison ministry works in both directions.

"Most of my inmates have requested a chaplain. In jail they have a chance to get closer to God and think about turning their lives around, which can be hard when they get out," she says. "We talk about what they're up against. I give them a blessing with oil on their hands before they leave, and they love that. My inmates minister to me with their faith in God and their sincerity."



### Stellar seller

Sister Regena Ross, the technology chair at St. Elizabeth Elementary School in Oakland, is an "eBay Top Rated Seller." Dominican "treasures" available online support the Sisters' ministries, and buyers love her customer service!

### Books for Chiapas

**Fluency is only part of the Spanish curriculum at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy. Sister Mary Therese Perez's La Vanguardia Spanish club raised \$500 for books for Mayan women in Chiapas, México, where Sister Helena Im works with women who are eager to learn Spanish and preserve their cultural Tsotsil language. Now these women have books, and FSHA students know the joy of making a difference.**

### Senior advocate

**Sister Patricia Marie Walsh serves on the City of Fremont Senior Citizens Commission, which monitors legislation, promotes understanding of seniors' needs and highlights services available in the Fremont Multi-Service Senior Center.**



### AACU award

Sister Mary Peter Traviss received the President's Distinguished Service Award at the American Association of Colleges and Universities banquet in Washington, D.C. Recognized for exceptional service to Catholic higher education, Sister Mary Peter, a University of San Francisco professor emerita, promotes academic excellence and Dominican identity across the sisters' network of 22 affiliated Catholic schools.

MESSAGE FROM SISTER GLORIA



Pentecost—bold awakening moments are all around us! We experience Pentecost in wonderful new partners and dear friends. We find new life in a celebratory groundbreaking for our sisters' residence, community center and Siena renovations for daytime memory care that our partner ASEB (Alzheimer Services of the East Bay) will operate.

Our Pentecost joy welcomes candidate Chuc Vu and Sister

Dulce Aguilar Rodríguez, preparing to make her perpetual profession. Both women join us, embracing Mother Pia's mission to serve the young, the poor and the vulnerable—a call that finds new meaning and challenge in the words and witness of Pope Francis.

A bold awakening is also realized in this first issue of *In Common*. May these pages create a bridge that expands our mission, gives birth to new relationships and opens our hearts to serve. How blessed and grateful we are for you and the Pentecost moments we share!

MEET A SISTER



### Sister Dulce Sarai Aguilar Rodríguez writes

"I am a sister in temporary profession, a Cal State

**University Los Angeles student and a volunteer at Santa Teresita School, where I have the privilege of preparing three older children for First Holy Communion. I find my energy and nurture my vocation through personal and communal prayer, and through my relationships with my Dominican Sisters and others."**



PREACHING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

As chaplain at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center in San Jose, Sister Donna María Moses, OP, coordinates multi-faith spiritual care with local churches, temples, synagogues and mosques. She loves being a "spiritual companion" who listens and walks with patients and families "when they are most vulnerable."

IN MEMORIAM

Let us celebrate the lives of these dedicated, spirited women. We hold them in our hearts.

- Sister Mary Joan Doran
- Sister Eucharía Heidt
- Sister Mary Bertha Rehers
- Sister Ellen Mary (Mary Amabilis) Cunningham
- Sister Jean Matthew Smith
- Sister Dorothy Casper

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www.msjdominicans.org



PHOTOGRAPH BY DREW KELLY

AMIEL THURSTON,  
DEPUTY  
FIRE MARSHAL

## Prepared to lead— and serve.

Whether he's racing to put out a blaze or preparing a fire prevention plan, Fremont's Deputy Fire Marshal Amiel Thurston feels guided by the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose. They began shaping his way

of thinking and serving in 1975, when he entered St. Elizabeth Elementary School in Oakland, as a sixth-grader.

"Sister Mary Ann Pargett and Sister Celeste Botello worked very hard with me," he recalls. "There

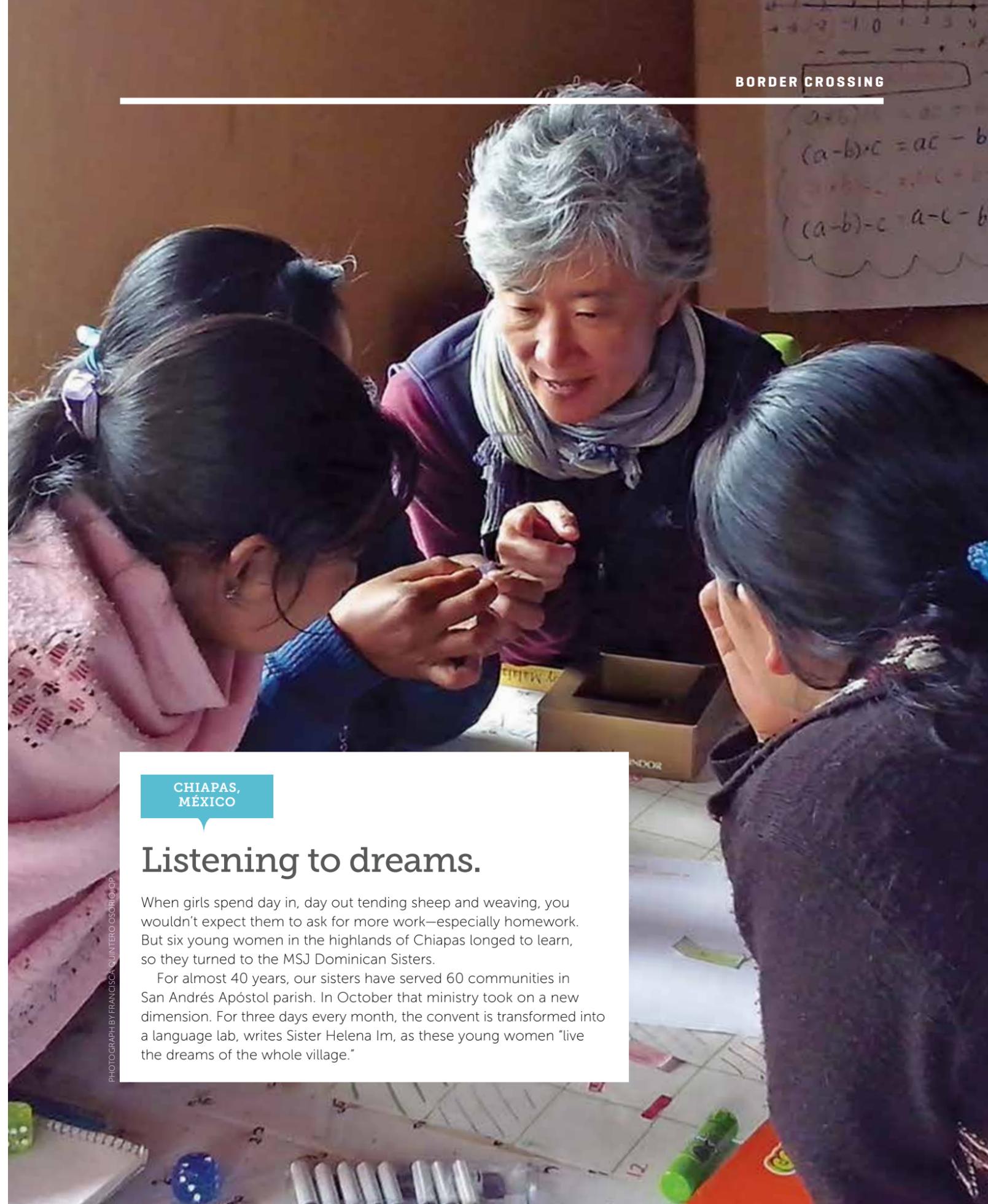
was something special about the care and compassion they gave me, and I used my education as a springboard to go to St. Mary's College High School in Berkeley."

After graduating from St. Mary's, he worked his way up in banking to a supervisory level, then decided to pursue a career in the fire service. When the Fremont Fire Department hired him in 1991, he discovered that several of his colleagues were St. Elizabeth graduates.

"The school instilled qualities in me that they recognized—a sense of public service and a servant's attitude," Thurston says. Those virtues helped him rise through the ranks from firefighter to deputy marshal. St. Elizabeth's diversity also prepared him for a calling that is different every day. "The kind of open-mindedness the sisters taught has resonated throughout my career," he says. "Every position has involved the ability to share ideas and treat people with respect—lessons that go back to St. Elizabeth."

Today, as he works with the design team for the renovation of the Dominican Motherhouse campus, he is still learning from the sisters.

"What I find most remarkable is the magnitude of their commitment," he says. "It takes special people to sacrifice on a daily basis to serve the community. The sisters know how to take care of each other, and who they do everything for." 



PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCISCA QUINTERO OSORIO-OP

CHIAPAS,  
MÉXICO

## Listening to dreams.

When girls spend day in, day out tending sheep and weaving, you wouldn't expect them to ask for more work—especially homework. But six young women in the highlands of Chiapas longed to learn, so they turned to the MSJ Dominican Sisters.

For almost 40 years, our sisters have served 60 communities in San Andrés Apóstol parish. In October that ministry took on a new dimension. For three days every month, the convent is transformed into a language lab, writes Sister Helena Im, as these young women "live the dreams of the whole village."



**Dominican Sisters**  
OF MISSION SAN JOSE

43326 MISSION BLVD.  
FREMONT, CA 94539-5829



## Groundbreaking

The Dominican Sisters and partners broke ground on a new residence and Community Center in March.

Siena building renovations will support Fremont's first dementia-specific daytime program for adults, veterans and sisters.

More than 99 percent of the demolished St. Joseph Priory materials were recycled.

**View our progress online**  
[www.msjdominicans.org](http://www.msjdominicans.org)

## MOTHERHOUSE PARTNERS

- ASEB, *Berkeley*
- City of Fremont Senior Center, *Fremont*
- Elder Care Alliance, *Alameda*
- Fremont Bank Foundation, *Fremont*
- Mission San Jose Chamber of Commerce, *Fremont*
- On Lok Lifeways, *San Francisco*

**Learn about our ministries**

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## IN COMMON

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*Cover photo of Sister Barbara Lerner  
and Mar Ramirez by John Dolan.*

## Environmental Benefits Statement

Since 2010 the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose have saved the following resources by using recycled paper and printing in a green certified facility for the production and printing of this piece and other projects.

 52 fully grown trees

 22,805 gallons of water

 37,026,000 BTU's of energy

 2,457 pounds of solid waste

 4,837 pounds of greenhouse gases