

# 'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

## Women Religious in Transition: A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

Part VI of a Series

By Karen M. Franz

Two long, warped boards form a walkway to the Casteneda house. Crossing gingerly, Sister Beverly Baker, Jeff and I entered the family's bright kitchen.

Almost mechanically, Senora Casteneda rolled out dough, frequently turning to the grill behind her to check on the cooking tortillas. When she had finished, some 30 minutes later, the sidebar was piled high with the golden-flecked disks. She makes that many every night, her son informed us.

We waited in the kitchen for the other parents and teachers to arrive. The door opened and four teachers entered, but still no parents. After a few more minutes, Sister Beverly decided to visit the other families in the camp to remind them of the meeting.

As I stood there awkwardly with Jeff, who was loaded down with camera gear, I began to feel that we were in the way. Obviously Senora Casteneda sensed our discomfort and several times repeated a Spanish word I finally recognized as "be seated." So we walked past the children watching "Wheel of Fortune" on a small color television and entered an open space. We sat alone in folding chairs arranged in a too-large circle around a card table. Jeff seemed concerned as he looked up at the bare bulb mounted on a ceiling beam. What would the photos be like?

It had rained all day and was damp in the concrete-block house, even though we were sitting next to the furnace. We had nothing to do but look around at the ceiling beams that served as closet rods and the curtains that closed off bedroom cubicles. I felt like a peeping-Tom who had made his way into the family's bedroom. Actually, that was the case. Senor Casteneda slept at the other end of the room, oblivious to the noisy television.

Three of the teachers joined us in the circle, and the Castenedas' 12-year-old daughter sat down to entertain the "guests." She told us about her home town of Saltillo, north of Mexico City. She prefers school in the United States to her school in Saltillo, perhaps because she has been coming north with her parents and 10 siblings each summer since she was a small child.

We chatted with the teachers for a while, learning one is the principal of the summer day school for migrant children. Another teacher tutors migrant kids who attend Brockport schools, and the third is a teacher in the Brockport school system. Clara, a tutor who was born in Colombia, was talking with other Casteneda children.

Sister Beverly returned with Tony, a native Venezuelan who also tutors children. She sat down with us and explained that all of the parent-teacher meetings are at the Casteneda home, because it is the only dwelling on the Martin camp that can accommodate even a small gathering. This house is unique, she told us. It has a sink and running water because it was once the house of the farm's crew chief. The Castenedas merit this special house because each year they come to the camp early in the spring and leave late in the fall. For their responsibility and hard work, the farm owner also added the bedroom cubicles. Other families, however, must shower and wash dishes in a common area.

A man entered with two small boys, but it was clear that no one else was coming. It was already after 8 p.m., and some families were just getting their dishes done. Bedtime was not far off, and they needed sleep for tomorrow's work.

Sister Beverly served the cake and juice she had brought, and after a little while it was clear that there would be no parent-teacher meeting. Sister explained that seemed foolish to have a formal session with only a couple of parents there, but at least those few had met their children's teachers. I had written virtually



Sister Beverly stands in one of the migrant camps where many of her young students live.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

nothing in my notebook, and Jeff, sensing that a camera would be too obtrusive in that setting, had taken no pictures.

As we prepared to leave, Senora Casteneda offered everyone *tortillas con frijoles*. I felt odd about taking the family's food, but Senora was adamant. She would be insulted, Tony said, if we did not eat. So we sampled the simple but tasty food that is the staple for this family and the many others who harvest the crops on farms all around New York state.

And then we left, tripping over the few Spanish words we knew. "Gracias, a Dios."

Sister Beverly had seemed disappointed by the lack of turnout, though not surprised. Work with the migrants is often disappointing, she had told us several days earlier, because their work, financial circumstances and culture can conflict with the education of their children.

Essentially, however, that conflict is the *raison d'être* of the Migrant Education Program Sister Beverly coordinates at the State University of New York College at Brockport. The program helps the children of migrant farmers with instruction in English, reading and math, as well as bilingual instruction and English as a second language. The students in the federally funded program are between the ages of five and 20.

The program's ultimate goal is to help migrant children earn high school diplomas or equivalency certificates so they can function in the United States and improve their economic status. The students, many of whom return to Mission, Texas, or various parts of Mexico for the winter, are also encouraged to go on to college or to trade schools.

If the students in the migrant education program become migrants themselves, they can expect annual earnings of about \$6,000. If they do not finish high school but find jobs off the migrant farms, they may earn up to \$9,000, Sister Beverly says. If they complete high school they may be able to draw higher earnings, and a college diploma can bring them into the \$20,000-plus range. The students are reminded that finishing high school will pay off down the road. "When you are really poor, you respond to money," Sister adds.

But money is not the sole motivator used to encourage kids to persevere. "For people to live a better life, education is important. It frees them and makes them more independent," she says. "We try to

help them to become more independent, to make decisions for their own lives."

That however, is not an easy task. One student she helped to graduate from Cardinal Mooney High School started at St. Edward's University in Texas this fall. But after only a few weeks had passed, he missed his family, still in Brockport. "It's very difficult (for them) to break away," says Sister Beverly. "They don't have a support system."

The young college man wanted to drop out and told Sister that he was only going to college for her. "I don't have the psychological energy within myself to hold up all these people," Sister Beverly laments. "I have to generate that (energy) in them."

"Maybe our aspirations are so high that when we can't reach them with the students, it's discouraging," she explains, adding that nobody in that young man's family had even attended high school before.

The migrant education program's night school and tutorial program operates all year, with a day school in the summer. The program is federally funded because New York will not pay for programs for children who are officially enrolled in schools in other states or in Mexico.

Most migrant families leave their native towns and cities in the South before the school year ends in the spring and return to them well after the fall semester has begun. The goal of the summer day school, which had 110 students this summer, is to "close some of the gaps between where these kids are in a public school district and where they should be," Sister Beverly says.

Other students in the program come from migrant families that have resettled in the Brockport area. These students, who attend Brockport schools, often have difficulty keeping up with their classmates. Under the guidelines for federal funding, the program may continue to aid resettled migrant youths for five years.

"We are seen as a support system for these children," Sister Beverly says. "The teachers in the public school system don't know what to do with them."

Some of the women religious we have spoken with in this series had waited many years for the opportunities post-Vatican II renewal would offer them. Sister Beverly Baker was not among that expectant crowd. Despite her unusual

ministry, it seems that Sister Beverly would have been content with the traditional ministries sisters exercised before the tumult of renewal. In fact, she came to the Migrant Education Program through an unusual set of circumstances.

Having entered the Sisters of St. Joseph at the age of 17, Sister Beverly went directly into elementary education in the Catholic school system. For 13 years, she served as a second-grade teacher at Auburn's Mount Carmel School, and was content with the challenges teaching offered.

But, as the '60s drew to a close, Catholic schools began to experience financial difficulties, and Mount Carmel was closed.

"When Mount Carmel closed, we (its teachers) were forced to leave and to choose among the high schools," she says. "I wouldn't have made a change I wasn't encouraged to make. I was the victim of the closing of Catholic schools."

She then moved to DeSales High School in Geneva. The faculty at Mount Carmel had had a good balance of male and female teachers, and the school's young students were well-disciplined. DeSales faculty, however, was composed of women only, and Sister Beverly found that the teen-aged boys didn't respect the authority of the women. "It was not highly disciplined," she says.

At the end of that year, Sister took a one-year sabbatical. Toward the end of that sabbatical, in 1971, she received a SUNY assistantship to coordinate Brockport's work-study program, and in 1973 was hired to establish the migrant education program at SUNY Brockport.

Just as Sister Beverly was adjusting to her new role in education, her order was embarking on various changes inspired by renewal. In 1969, she recalls, the sisters adopted "experimental dress," and in 1970, they changed their names from those of their patrons to their own given names.

"It was a difficult time to live through," Sister Beverly told me, recalling that one time when she went to speak to a priest, he refused to look at her, even at her face. "It's as if you're naked," she remembers him saying.

Although Sister Beverly still lives in a convent, her congregation allocates a certain amount of money to that facility.

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