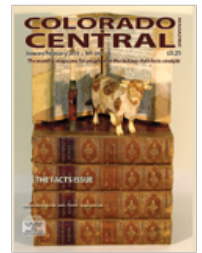


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La Puente: A Bridge between charity and commerce

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Article by Marcia Darnell

Helping the poor – January 2000 – Colorado Central Magazine

IN MOST CITIES, the homeless shelter is the bastard child of the middle class — hidden from sight, the object of pity and scorn, never really a part of the family. In Alamosa, however, the shelter is a conglomerate of businesses, programs and educational efforts that's a major part of the city's character.

La Puente ("the bridge" in English) has expanded from a bed-and-meals facility into a more self-sufficient, long-reaching enterprise that just opened its fifth money-making business.

Lance Cheslock has been La Puente's director since 1989.

"We started (these businesses) because we're in a very poor area, where it was quite difficult to raise the funds to meet the service needs," he says. "We just kind of got exasperated at one point and said, 'if we can't get the contributions we need to meet the needs of folks, let's take this into our own hands and see what we can do to shape our own destiny.'"

La Puente's first effort, Rainbow's End, opened in March 1994. The thrift store sells goods donated by the community and applies the proceeds to La Puente's programs. Cheslock believes the business also fulfills the agency's service mission.

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“A thrift store kind of automatically has a goal of providing low-cost clothing and basic necessities to the low-income community,” he says. “If you go in and see who patronizes the store, you’ll see that a lot of them are low-income members of the community, people who’ve been served by the shelter before getting back on their feet, people who are on a very limited income. We get between 75 and 120 customers a day.”

The store also has a voucher room, where people who can’t pay for items can get working clothes or necessary goods for free. La Puente gives about \$15,000 worth (thrift-store prices, that is) of goods every year. Many of these recipients work off their debt in La Puente’s businesses.

“Wherever possible we also like to pay them,” says Cheslock. “We also want to provide a quality job experience, not just pushing a broom, or just being a warm body in the area. So we’re in the process of developing some job-readiness training for these folks.”

La Puente Home soon formed a spin-off, La Puente Enterprises, to raise funds for La Puente Home and provide job experience for people who are in transition from hopelessness to self-sufficiency.

Next came the sale of third world crafts through a Mennonite program called 10,000 Villages, which works to create cottage industries in those countries as a form of economic development. The artists split the profit with the “first world” non-profit that sells their goods.

“That allows us to send seven to ten thousand dollars a year to third world countries,” says Cheslock, “and to also have a little piece of our mission be outside of our own Valley.”

The third business was the Over the Rainbow apartments, which are — you guessed it — above Rainbow’s End. The 12 units provide low-cost transitional housing to people moving out of the shelter. This also provides a little income to La Puente. The apartments were made livable by volunteers and donations of goods and services.

Around the corner from Rainbow’s End is Milagros Coffeehouse, on the surface a cappuccino-and-quiche kind of hangout, but really a wide-reaching enterprise which draws in people from all demographics of the community. In addition to coffees and prime baked goods, salads and sandwiches, Milagros sells the high-end items that come to Rainbow’s End — the stuff latte drinkers would buy. Milagros serves as a forum for musicians, poets, book signings and other cultural events. It also sells local authors’ and artists’ works.

Cheslock says that Milagros’ unforeseen benefit has been education of the community. People learn about La Puente and its programs from Milagros, an enlightening side to that morning cinnamon bun.

“We’re also showing the community that we use donations,” he says. “That funds aren’t going to high staff salaries, but to enable us to help more people.”

A second Rainbow’s End opened Nov. 20 in Monte Vista. Over 170 customers were there the first day, indicating another success for La Puente.

TO RUN THIS burgeoning concern, La Puente has 26 staff members, about one-third of whom are VISTA volunteers, VIDA volunteers, and Mennonite volunteers, who receive stipends from other organizations. This keeps La Puente’s overhead low.

La Puente helps 900 to 1,000 people per year through its various programs. The shelter served 35,000 meals last year, on a food budget of \$6,000 to \$8,000. (A lot of food was donated.)

Adelante, a program which builds family self-sufficiency, served 23 families last year. The San Luis Valley network of 10 food banks gave out over 9,000 three-day packages of food. Various other forms of outreach serve another 2,000 people. La Puente also ponies up \$35,000 in rental and utility



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assistance or other emergency intervention.

“It may not seem significant, but we look to these enterprises to support 25 to 30 percent of our mission,” says Cheslock. The businesses now comprise 25 to 30 percent of the agency’s budget; their net profits supply the shelter with 15 to 16 percent of its funds.

Even that’s impressive for a shelter that normally depends on donations and government funds. It’s also a way of “walking the walk” for programs that encourage independence in their clients.

“If we can get to the point where a third of our budget is supplied through our own enterprising,” says Cheslock, “that’s our own way of self-help and dignity that is reflective of how we offer the services to the people we’re helping.”

Cheslock has received queries from other agencies in Colorado about building businesses to serve both agency clients and the communities they live in. Will La Puente become a model for other human services agencies?

“I don’t see myself putting energy into that,” says Cheslock, “but if people want the information, I’m freely sharing that.”

People who want that information may contact La Puente at (719) 589-5909 or write to P.O. Box 1235, Alamosa, CO 81101.

Marcia Darnell lives and writes in the San Luis Valley.

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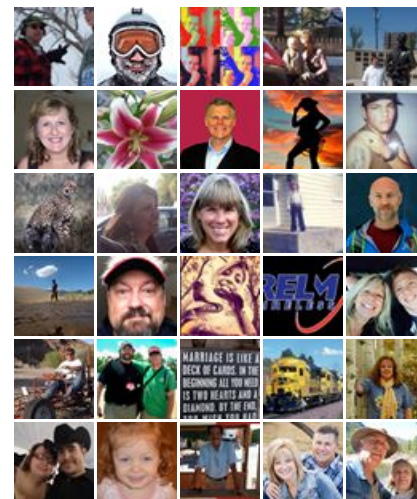
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