

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Self-Help Enterprises housing honors longtime Goshen advocate

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Nonprofit developer dedicates community center in honor of former Self-Help board member, labor organizer and community advocate Graciela Martinez

GOSHEN – The community of Goshen wouldn't be what it is today without Self-Help Enterprises but the nonprofit developer wouldn't be what it is today without Goshen's Graciela Martinez.

The late leading lady for Goshen was honored last Friday during the grand opening of the second and final phase of Self-Help's Sequoia Commons affordable rental community. The event also served to commemorate the legacy of long-time community advocate Graciela Martinez by naming the community center in her honor. In addition to serving many years as a Self-Help Enterprise board member, Graciela spent a lifetime advocating on behalf of farmworkers and low-income people of the San Joaquin Valley. She died on Aug. 1, 2020, at age 75.

"Today marks the completion of another essential affordable rental housing project and honoring the legacy of our beloved friend and former board member Graciela Martinez," Self-Help CEO Tom Collishaw said. "She was widely recognized for her leadership in the Goshen community, and we are proud to name the Graciela Martinez Community Center at Sequoia Commons after her. She was not only a valued and trusted leader on our board of directors, but she was literally in 'the room where it happened' when Self-Help Enterprises was born."

Francisca Graciela Martinez Cavazos was born the daughter of a farmworker and mason along the border in Harlingen, Texas on Jan. 29, 1945. The family moved to Visalia where she graduated from Redwood High School. As a youth, Graciela worked as a farmworker alongside her mom on weekends and school breaks. She recalled seeing women sexually harassed and abused in the fields. Correcting injustices like these became her life's work.

Right after high school, Graciela started working at the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the Quaker roots of Self-Help Enterprises. Collishaw said Graciela liked to say she was "in the delivery room" when Self-Help Enterprises (SHE) was born building three homes in 1962 not far from its latest housing project in Sequoia Commons.

"She was there and typed up the original corporate documents," Collishaw said.

Since then, SHE has helped more than 6,300 families to build their own homes, rehabilitated over 6,700 unsafe homes, developed over 1,900 units of affordable rental housing, and has provided technical assistance for reliable access to safe drinking water and sanitary sewer infrastructures to more than 327 small communities. Since that first self help housing project nearly 60 years ago, Graciela's work to put Goshen on the map helped facilitate the community getting its first health clinic, national retailer, fast food chain and coffee shop.

"Mom whole-heartedly embraced the community of Goshen, and cared deeply about the town, its residents and their wellbeing," Graciela's son Richard Herron said. "She knew that community

activation was necessary to make positive changes. My Mom brought the community together and championed positive change for the community of Goshen.”

Supervisor Eddie Valero, who represents Goshen and northern Visalia as part of District 4, delivered a poetic speech about Graciela’s contributions to farmworkers and farmworking communities like her home of Goshen. The supervisor called her a “guardian of justice,” “a true visionary,” and an “authentic trailblazer in leadership.” Valero went on to say she carried herself with strength and kindness and was driven by love for her family, her community and others in general.

“The works we see locally are visions born from her tenacity craving for betterment of people and places and opportunity to see more for communities like Goshen,” Valero said. “And we know there is so much more to do still.”

Graciela went on to serve as a tireless advocate for farmworker housing in Tulare County and the surrounding area during her 21 years on Self-Help’s board of directors. The position afforded her the opportunity to march with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Ala., went on strike with United Farmworker leader Dolores Huerta, and worked in the legal department for UFW under labor champion Cesar Chavez. After getting married and moving to Washington, D.C., Graciela went to work at NASA in the Telemetry Division and as a secretary at Georgetown University where she learned to do legal research before returning to Visalia to start a family in 1966.

“Graciela was a pivotal partner in Goshen’s progress,” Valero said. “She cared deeply about justice for the community and loved people abundantly. Graciela’s vision and mission continue because she trained up people who pour out love for Goshen!”

In 1997, Graciela returned to AFSC where she started a low-power FM radio station. Several years later, she became first female director of AFSC’s Proyecto Campesino where she led local efforts to push for comprehensive immigration reform.

“She was a champion of Latinx, a voice for the dignity of farmworkers, an ambassador for our organization, and an inspiration for those who worked in the fields,” Collishaw said. “In short, she was our hero.”

Herron said his mother was strict but fair. He told a story of when he was 8 years old and his mom had bought him a brand new pair of brand name sneakers. One morning when he couldn’t find his shoes, his mother the labor organizer scolded him and sent him to school with no shoes at all.

“She taught me a hard lesson in organizing,” Herron said.

The event concluded with a ribbon cutting and photos in front of the Graciela Martinez Community Center. Herron was joined at the dedication ceremony by a host of family members including his sister Hannah, who did the honors at the ribbon cutting, sister Rosita Campos and the family of sister Jennifer Angel. Graciela died of cancer on Aug. 1, 2020 in Goshen, Calif. Graciela is survived by her four children: Hannah, Jennifer, Richard, and Rosita. She is survived by four children, 12 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

The community center is just one part of the Sequoia Commons II project. Located at 31161 Florence Ave. in Goshen, the project will provide affordable housing to 60 families in one, two, and three-bedroom units, each complete with an energy-efficient dishwasher, gas stove, refrigerator, and washer and dryer hookups. Residents will share project amenities including a basketball half court, open space, playground area, and a 3,072 square foot community center with kitchen and computer lab. The community center will be the epicenter for SHE’s robust program of on-site resident

services, including exercise, nutrition and health education, financial planning and literacy, ESL, computer classes, and other services based on the needs of the residents.

The project is funded by Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, a Multifamily Housing Program (MHP) Loan from the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), and Infill Infrastructure Grant funds also from HCD. Monthly net rents, ranging from \$364 to \$842, are based on unit size and resident incomes. The project was made possible by equity from Red Stone Equity Partners and a construction loan from Pacific Western Bank.

In the first phase of Sequoia Commons, SHE allocated 6 units as permanent supportive housing (PSH) for households experiencing homelessness. SHE is committing an additional 12 units and is working with Mental Health Systems and the Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance to receive referrals to fill the additional PSH units. Some families or individuals will come from Eden House, SHE's transitional/bridge housing community in Visalia.

Sequoia Commons II is the fourth affordable rental community built by Self-Help Enterprises in Goshen and is among the 42 affordable apartment rental communities serving over 1,900 families throughout the San Joaquin Valley. The design team consists of Mogavero Architects and 4Creeks Civil Engineering, Ashwood Construction as the General Contractor and solar PV installation by Spectrum Energy Development Inc.