NEIGHBORWORKS

Leadership spotlight: Olivia Gomez knows her community – and leads it

October 1, 2026
By: Madelyn Lazorchak

Olivia Gomez grew up in Planada, a small community of about 4,000 people in California's Central Valley. Her parents picked tomatoes, peaches and figs, and she lived first in a camp for farm workers. When Self-Help Enterprises, a NeighborWorks network organization in Visalia, opened Bear Creek Housing for farm workers, she and her family moved there. Four years later, she remembers helping her parents as they built a home of their own, also through a Self-Help program. The program allowed Gomez's family and eight others to work alongside contractors, putting sweat equity into their homes side by side.

Olivia and her siblings would go to the house and help clean. They nailed together their own step stools. "It was also a learning process for us children to be there with our parents, building this house from scratch," she said.

Building together created a bond between the families. "To this day, the majority of them are our neighbors still," said Olivia, who shares the home they built with her mother. "And, you know, we don't feel as neighbors, we feel as a family."

After graduating high school, Gomez left her community to go to school in New York. She was part of the Focolare Movement, a spiritual community that promotes unity and serves the needs of others. Serving led her back to California, where she earned her undergraduate degree in communications and worked for a Fresno news affiliate.

Working in Fresno gave her a better understanding of Planada, she said. “I remember the time when I was growing up and my parents were working in the fields, and how these other agencies would come and provide resources,” she said. “It made me want to give back to my community as well.”

She returned to Planada and began working with the school district, connecting families to resources. When something happens that impacts her community – like a natural disaster – she makes sure her community has resources as well.

“When I went to do home visits, when I talked to different parents and saw the different needs that they had, it took me back to when I was growing up and the needs my family had. So, I just felt it was important for me to give back and understand how it becomes a ripple effect when you help one family.”

Her service led Self-Help Enterprises to nominate Gomez for a Dorothy Richardson Award for Resident Leadership.

Dorothy Mae Richardson

In the 1960s, Richardson’s neighborhood in the North Side of Pittsburgh was facing disinvestment and decay. Richardson and her neighbors came together to find a solution. They brought residents, bankers, and community and state leaders to the same table, working out a plan to repair and rebuild homes. That work became the foundation for Neighborhood Housing Services of Pittsburgh and, ultimately, the model that NeighborWorks America adopted and spread nationwide.

Richardson’s leadership drove home this point: Residents know their communities best, both the challenges they face and the solutions that can strengthen them.

The first flood

When a flood hit Planada in 2018, it impacted the students Olivia worked with as community liaison for Planada Elementary School District.

“I was trying to advocate for the families and for the community,” Olivia said. But county officials weren’t seeing the same things Olivia was seeing: A river running right through the town. “I insisted and insisted and insisted.”

The county's chief executive talked to her. "He said, 'I see you want the best for your community and just to let you know, the next time there's a disaster, you can self-declare as mayor to bring in the resources that you need.'"

Two years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, that's exactly what she did. "I felt deep inside I would have to do something," she said. She made the declaration and brought in resources. Though she was worried about catching COVID herself, she said, she figured it could happen while she was at home "or I could be out there helping people."

The second flood

In January of 2023, when it was clear a second major flood would hit Planada after days of rain, the community started asking Olivia first thing: "Olivia! What are you going to do?

Olivia drove around her small community, making sure the creeks were still in their banks. "They always tell me I am the eyes and the community because I live here," she said.

When she saw a wave of water, she knew that there were only a few hours to protect some of the houses. By 4 p.m. that afternoon, Olivia and other residents were filling up sandbags.

Some houses were spared, including those in Olivia's neighborhood. But others had to be evacuated. Olivia called the county sheriff. "We need help in Planada," she said.

The sheriff asked her to come to the emergency center to help with the planning. "I already had trucks set up in the community, ready to pump the water out of the areas that the water was still standing," she said. She talked to the power company about getting the power back on to alleviate pressure at the sewer plant. She helped figure out where generators were needed.

She also visited the shelters, talking with residents and finding out what they needed. Many homes were not safe to return to, she said, so longer-term housing became paramount.

Because she knew the community, Olivia also knew that some farm worker housing, subsidized by the USDA and run by the Merced County Housing Authority, was vacant in the winter months. She asked the USDA for approval and received it. Forty-five families moved in for four months while their flooded homes were repaired. Meanwhile, Olivia worked to help the families get more of what they needed.

Assessing the needs

Araceli Martinez, who has known Olivia since elementary school, came over to help. "She knew that I was always willing to help people in our community. And she's active in our community, a community leader all year."

The two surveyed the neighborhoods to find out what the impacted families needed most. Then, they set about getting those items and delivering them. “It was like a mini Costco of all of the items,” Martinez said.

She described Olivia as an effective leader and a fair one. “Anything that you can think of that happens in the community, Olivia knows about,” Martinez said. “She has that in her heart to just be a person that helps. She makes it about what needs to get done.”

During the flooding, she said, members of the community knew where the water was. But they didn’t know what to do next. Olivia did.

“Olivia Gomez is a homegrown leader in Planada,” said Tom Collishaw, president and CEO of Self-Help Enterprises. “Her empathetic representation of the needs in her community is relentless and effective.”

In nominating Olivia for the Dorothy Richardson Award, Self-Help Enterprises talked about her as a bridge between neighbors, public agencies and nonprofit partners – bringing everyone to the table as Richardson once did.

“Her leadership during and after the 2023 flooding demonstrated her ability to mobilize resources, advocate at the state and federal level, and turn urgent needs into coordinated action,” her nomination said. “She leads with lived experience, persistence, and a clear vision for a safer, stronger Planada.”

$20 million

Planada residents had lost property. They’d lost paychecks. They’d lost household possessions. According to a study from the UC Merced Community and Labor Center, four out of five community members experienced some sort of flood-related loss, ranging from mold issues to unpaid bills to loss of a car or truck.

Olivia advocated with state legislators for flood recovery. In the end, the state allotted $20 million for Planada both to help families and to support repairs and flood mitigation efforts. That part is key, too, Olivia said: She wants to prevent future floods.

Months after the flood, the community is still not fully recovered. But it’s on its way.

Helping people, Olivia said, “just comes easy. If you see someone who needs help, why not help them? Why not be there for them?”

Her religion teaches that a united world is possible. “You might not think so because of the wars, the disasters, the political divide. But in reality, it’s possible if you learn to work together. We're one family, you know, one big happy family here in Planada,

“We are all connected.”

As part of America250, the bipartisan initiative to engage every American in the 250th anniversary of the United States, NeighborWorks is sharing the stories of people who build their communities and make them stronger. No one exemplifies that more than resident leaders.