

MEET EACH NEED WITH DIGNITY



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FORMER WELFARE RECIPIENT BECOMES VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR AT VALLEY'S LARGEST POVERTY AGENCY

PACOIMA, Calif. –When Maria “Lulu” Carrion’s husband was killed in a car crash in 2000, she was devastated. She had three young children and was pregnant with her fourth, no job experience, and no income to pay her mortgage. Carrion ended up selling her home, moving back in with her parents, and calling the Los Angeles County welfare office to figure out what to do next. The County’s Welfare-to-Work program sent her to MEND – Meet Each Need with Dignity to get some on-the-job training as a volunteer. Thus began an eleven-year volunteer “career” with MEND that ultimately led to Carrion being given the agency’s highest recognition, Volunteer of the Year. Along the way, Lulu remarried and because she no longer needs to work, she volunteers most days of the week in the MEND food and clothing departments.

“I think volunteering is important for me because I get to give back to the community,” Carrion said. “I especially like helping the homeless. You hear their stories and you can’t help but want to help them more. It also makes you thankful for what you have, regardless of how little or simple it is.”

In February each year, MEND asks its staff of 24 for their suggestions on who should be honored with Volunteer of the Year for the previous year. The employees have found that selecting one out of the more than 3,200 volunteers who work with MEND each year is a tough challenge. The following criteria are considered: Someone who is committed to the MEND philosophy to “Meet Each Need with Dignity”; who treats recipients, other volunteers, and staff with dignity and courtesy; has made a significant contribution to several programs; and shows a willingness to help out wherever necessary. After considering a number of candidates, the staff unanimously agreed that Lulu Carrion more than met each of these requirements

“The impact that Lulu and all of our volunteers have made in MEND programs is priceless,” said Lupe Martin, Volunteer Services Director. “People are always amazed at what a small staff and an army of volunteers can do for a community. They wonder how we do it. I think the magic is in the positive feeling volunteers get from giving back, and if you’ve never experienced it, to some degree the feeling is hard to explain. Even the

ones who may not have elected to be here voluntarily-- such as high school students with community service requirements for graduation, or those issued community service by the courts --leave wanting to come back and do more.”

Martin noted that if it weren't for volunteers like Lulu Carrion, the organization would not be able to serve as many as 32,000 people each month. In fact, each month volunteers from a broad range of backgrounds and income levels donate close to 13,000 hours. High school and college students come to fulfill required community service or internship hours; professionals lend their expertise in the medical, dental and vision clinics, as well as on finance, marketing, web development and fundraising projects; and job trainees get meaningful work experience in a variety of career fields. MEND volunteers include retirees, residents from the surrounding community, and some who are previous and current recipients of MEND's services who want to give back.

MEND-Meet Each Need with Dignity, the San Fernando Valley's oldest and largest food bank and poverty agency honored its Volunteer of the Year Lulu Carrion and many other current and past volunteers on Saturday, March 26th, during the organization's annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner and 40th Anniversary celebration.

For more information on MEND, its programs or how to become a volunteer, please visit www.mendpoverty.org.

About MEND

Forty years ago, MEND --Meet Each Need with Dignity -- opened its doors in an effort to transform the lives of the neediest residents of the San Fernando Valley - poor children and their struggling families. Starting as a small group of volunteers working from a garage, MEND has grown into one of the leanest-operating non-profit organizations in existence. An average of 95% of the annual support and donations received by MEND, now the largest poverty agency in the Valley, provides emergency food; clothing, medical, vision and dental care; job skills training; English as a Second Language classes; an after school program for neighborhood children, and a Christmas program.