

Priest's presence in Cameron Park brings blessings

By MEL HUFF
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BROWNSVILLE, Sept. 12, 2002 – Posters illustrated with photographs of indigenous children line the wall next to the door of the small office of Father Mike Seifert, SM. "Felices."

Beyond them hangs a stole embroidered with birds and corn plants. A copy of "La Palabra de Dios Se Hizo Indio" -- "The Word of God Was Made an Indian" -- leans on a bookshelf near a boom box where a Beethoven sonata plays.

Seifert is a priest at San Felipe de Jesus Catholic Church in Cameron Park, an unincorporated island of poverty in Brownsville's affluent new North End. According to the U.S. Census 2000, each of the colonia's nearly 6,000 residents survives on an average of \$4,103 a year.

The "SM" after Seifert's name stands for Society of Mary, the religious order of Marists.

The image that best expresses the order's spirituality, he says, is Mary at the foot of the cross, at the site of her son's execution. That image evokes "all the agony that happens to someone who has to be a part of that, and at the same time there's some kind of hope that this is not the end of the story.

The Marist enterprise is about being prophetic," he says, "but it's also a call to be hopeful in the face of some pretty contrary evidence."

For Seifert, the call to be hopeful in Cameron Park has frequently revolved around health services. Shortly after he arrived in 1996, a visiting Ursuline sister suggested the church start a parish nurse program. She quickly discovered that health care for indigents was "horrible," he said.

He clicks on a file in his computer and brings up a photograph of a young mother with a radiant daughter standing by her side. The mother had been feeling terrible for weeks, Seifert said, and finally went to a local clinic, got sick with a fever, went to the hospital, was sent back, went to another clinic and dropped dead in the street of a bowel obstruction as she was walking home.

Currently there are no secondary or tertiary health care services for the indigent in the Rio Grande Valley. That means if you are poor and need chemotherapy or a hernia operation, you get on the bus and go to the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

The mother who dropped dead in the street became the inspiration for forming a coalition that involves doctors who will provide some services, Catholic hospitals around the state and the United Farm Workers, which has offered to donate land for a subspecialty clinic. Seifert is one of the organizers.

When he graduated from high school in Birmingham, Ala., Seifert knew that he wanted to do something with his life, but he wasn't sure what. He decided to try seminary.

"And boy, it did not last at all," he said. "The seminary I went to had nothing to do with the world, so I left."

Later, while he was working in a residential treatment center for street children in New Orleans, he met a Marist priest who not only had befriended the street people, but also chaired the board of the city's arts commission and taught at a local university.

"That to me is the ideal," Seifert says. "You create a space in your own life where the great things of the human spirit come together thought and then some kind of pragmatic action.

"It's kind of like a garden," he explains. "You plant a garden, you eat something. You plant a garden for the colors. And you plant a garden because the birds come."

When Seifert arrived at San Felipe de Jesus six years ago, the roads were dirt. Now Cameron Park has paved roads, a sheriff's substation and \$7.2 million in state funds for storm drains. The next project, he says, is street lighting.

Seifert attributes the changes in the colonia to the tireless work of animadoras del voto, or block captains, who have gone door to door registering residents and encouraging them to vote.

"When we came out here, we went to (County Judge) Gilbert Hinojosa and said, 'What do we have to do to get the roads paved? And he said, 'Three hundred votes and things will start happening.'

"About 300 people voted in the 1996 election, but the turnaround was this past vote when we got up to about 870. About 80 percent of our list voted," he said.

Seifert comes from a large family -- he's the oldest of seven children. That's where his passion for getting people together and making connections comes from. His model is comunidades de base -- base communities.

"I went door to door," he said when asked how he started the colonia's 10 base communities. "You do a session three nights in a row, meeting and introducing (people) to the method of how you do a little Bible reflection and later on some prayer techniques. Finally -- and this is where it really works -- let's do something together -- we're going to go to county court next week."

Then the community reflects on what the action was like. Seifert says base communities are important because they make the practice of faith part of people's lives. That's what all ministers want, he notes, but "in actual fact, it's hard, really, because we have TV and long workdays."

One of the reasons Seifert was drawn to working with the poor was because "poor people will get together."

In Cameron Park, "Everyone is involved. It's inclusive by nature," he observes. "Women are the pillar of the Hispanic community."

Children and the elderly are included. "Everybody has their place," he said. "It's not uncommon to see three generations sitting together." That pleases Seifert.

It was while he was trying to set up a health clinic in the Bronx 15 years ago that he had a moment of revelation that eventually brought him to the border. He overheard a sister who was working on the clinic project speaking with an elderly woman in Spanish.

"I get the light bulb and I said, 'If I'm going to be a Catholic priest in the United States, I need to learn Spanish.'"

He was 32 at the time. Now he's 47. So he went to Mexico, and in the next two years, as he puts it, "I actually became 'American' -- not a citizen of the United States, but I realized this incredible wealth that is in these two continents."

After working with indigenous communities in Oaxaca for 2 years, he came to the Valley, first Harlingen, then La Joya and now Cameron Park.

"We're not coming here to bring beauty pretend to do that," he says. "We don't come here because it's poor, but because it's where the beauty is. And you set up home."

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