

A FRIENDSHIP BUILT OFF SERVICE

“Maria trades in the currency of service. In exchange for her support, all she asks is for you to support others. That represents her legacy in a nutshell; her leadership is defined by her dedication to service.”

– Antonio Tijerino, CEO, Hispanic Heritage Foundation

Antonio “Tony” Tijerino first encountered Mary’s Center in the late 1990s while working as the Director of Public Relations for the Fannie Mae Foundation. At the time, Mary’s Center’s work focused on improving lives by creating access to healthcare, education, and social services for Latinos fleeing violence and poverty. As a proud Nicaraguan immigrant who settled in the Washington, DC region at the age of six, he understood the trials and tribulations of the immigrant experience. He also saw the increased need for trusted organizations like Mary’s Center dedicated to fighting for the advancement of the Latinx community.

“Back then, Mary’s Center was a fairly new organization with one location in the Adams Morgan neighborhood,” recalled Tony. “I was drawn to Mary’s Center’s spirit of service, which emanated from its CEO, Maria Gomez. For her, Mary’s Center was not a job. It was not a business. It was about serving people. Her love for our community had an immediate influence on me.”



Tony Tijerino (far right) is an integral part of the Mary’s Center community. For years, he has overseen Mary’s Center’s Participant Holiday Party with his Hispanic Heritage Foundation team.

Now, over 20 years later, Tony and Maria have developed a lifelong friendship underscored by a shared commitment to volunteerism, advocacy, and a tireless effort to do good.

Soon after his introduction to Mary’s Center, Tony became the president and CEO of the Hispanic Heritage Foundation (HHF), a national nonprofit focused on strengthening Latinos through education, workforce and leadership development, and cultural awareness. In his role, Tony serves as an outspoken national advocate for advancing the Latinx community.

In addition to his national work, he has prioritized serving his local community through Mary’s Center. “On the national level, we are dealing with issues that can get messy. You feel helpless when you’re constantly fighting against hateful rhetoric or harmful policies,” said Tony. “But Mary’s Center offers a place of belonging where people can care with direct action, purpose, and impact. It gives people like me the opportunity to not feel helpless by taking action.”

From overseeing Mary’s Center’s Participant Holiday Party with the HHF team to frequently donating in-kind items with his wife and children, Tony has been an integral part of the Mary’s Center family. He has worked hand-in-hand with Maria in addressing urgent demands within the Latino community. When asked about his most memorable moment with Maria, Tony candidly responded, “The calls in the middle of the night – worried. We would call each other saying ‘We can’t stand for this policy. How do we do a better job of letting people on the border know Mary’s Center will welcome them when they get to the DC area?’ If there was a need for an emergency meeting or a rally on Pennsylvania Avenue, Maria would be the first to meet me there.”

According to Tony, a significant aspect of Mary’s Center’s impact has been Maria’s leadership. “Mary’s Center is an extension of Maria. Maria leads with humility and service – it’s not polluted in any way by ego or any other ulterior motive.” Tony laughed as he said, “I’ve given her every award I can give. She couldn’t care less about each one, including going up on stage at the Kennedy Center and on national television for the Hispanic Heritage Awards. That night, she said to me, ‘You know, hermano, how is this going to help Mary’s Center? How is this going to help our community?’ I will miss her dearly, but I know she will continue advocating for our community. **I also know that she leaves behind a strong foundation of selflessness, authenticity, and honesty, which radiates from every staff member at Mary’s Center.**”

Give Through Your Workplace Today

We are grateful to the many Mary’s Center donors who support us through workplace giving campaigns. You can contribute to Mary’s Center through payroll deductions. We are proud partners of the following:

- United Way National Capital Area - #8263
- Combined Federal Campaign (for federal employees) - #66350



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Celebrating a Legacy of Resilience

MARY'S CENTER GALA

THURSDAY | OCTOBER 14 | 6:30 - 8:30 PM

RSVP BY **OCTOBER 1, 2021**

This unique celebration takes place from the comfort of your own home—or anywhere you choose! #McGala

7:00 PM Log-in
7:00 PM Silent Auction Program & Award

www.MarysCenter.org/Gala

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FALL 2021



Celebrating the Legacy of
MARIA S. GOMEZ

I AM GRATEFUL FOR YOU

PARTING MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT & CEO

Dear Friends,

I cannot help but reflect on our past and feel a sense of immense gratitude as I come to the end of my tenure at Mary's Center this December. I am grateful that with a little faith and a lot of smart individuals, we were able to build a solid institution with amazing health outcomes, while delivering services with empathy, the first and major ingredient to recovery.

We accomplished this by building on the strength and assets of our community and understanding our participants' vibrant cultures and reasons for coming to Mary's Center.

This beacon of hope was created through a shared sense of duty to the community and an unbreakable belief that every individual, regardless of their race, ethnicity, immigration status, or ability to pay, is entitled to a dignified, healthy life. We strongly believe that everyone deserves access to the opportunities needed to learn and move up the economic ladder. We believe this because it is just, and because of the transformation we see in the families we serve.

Now, 33 years later, thousands of lives have been transformed

Our small basement clinic has grown to a multi-site community health center serving approximately 60,000 participants each year. We have grown from providing solely maternal and newborn care to offering a full range of services for the whole family. From detecting cancer at an early stage and preventing the development of chronic diseases to providing essential dental, behavioral health, and social support services, we could not have achieved such incredible impact without your trust and generosity. For that, I am perpetually grateful to you.

Despite our triumphs and successes these past three decades, the challenge remains

We must continue to be fearless in the task ahead by working together to break through the barriers that hold back our community. It is our responsibility to never give up, to never forget where we came from, and to never turn our backs on the least fortunate among us. When we support our fellow neighbors, life is richer, communities are stronger, and our future is brighter and safer.

Finally, I could not be prouder to have served our community alongside such generous individuals like you. Thank you again for inspiring me every day with your selfless acts of kindness. I will forever cherish your friendship, volunteerism, and belief in our mission. With your support, I know Mary's Center will continue to innovate, grow, save lives, and strengthen communities, one person at a time.

In solidarity,

Maria S. Gomez, RN, MPH
President and CEO



A MESSAGE FROM THE MARY'S CENTER BOARD OF DIRECTORS

We are eternally grateful to Maria for her decades of inspiring leadership and her extraordinary commitment to building healthier futures for all community members. During her early career as a nurse and throughout her 33-year tenure as President and CEO of Mary's Center, Maria has been an incredible advocate and champion for underserved communities.

To honor Maria's lived experiences, passion for nursing, and dedication to helping others move up the economic ladder, we, the Board of Directors, have established the Friends of Maria Fund. With this special fund, we have created the Maria S. Gomez Scholarship for Nursing, a program designed to help Mary's Center's entry-level staff who wish to pursue a degree in nursing.

We invite you to celebrate Maria's legacy at Mary's Center by making a gift in her honor to the Friends of Maria Fund. You can support this special fund using the enclosed envelope, in which you can also send Maria a farewell message, or by visiting www.maryscenter.org/friendsofmaria.

ADMIRATION ABOUND FOR MARY'S CENTER'S CEO



Maria (left) and Monica (right) always love celebrating Mary's Center at our Annual Gala.

In 1998, after earning a master's in public health on the West Coast, Monica L. Villalta came to DC seeking a job. Monica learned about Mary's Center through a friend, and then began volunteering in an administrative role to support Maria Gomez. She was excited to contribute to an organization that made a direct impact on the health of the local community.

"I'll never forget my first day," recalled Monica, who was initially intimidated to work with the CEO. "At the time, Maria's office was a small room behind the reception area with a nice desk against the wall and round table fit for two." Monica smiled as she shared her initial experience and said, "As I went to sit at the table, Maria stopped me. She moved her computer to the small table and insisted that I take her desk. I was shocked. There I am thinking Maria is the leader of this institution, and I'm only a volunteer. But she said to me, 'You have to have the resources to do your job.' And that's how we started working." That day, awestruck by her boss's humility and selflessness as a leader, Monica's admiration for Maria began.

Soon after she started as a volunteer, Monica was hired as a Mary's Center employee and would eventually be promoted to Director of Programs. Although she departed Mary's Center for a new opportunity in 2002, she continued supporting Mary's Center as a volunteer and donor. "I support because I have trust in the quality of the care," said Monica. "Maria wants the same quality of care for Mary's Center's participants that she would want and expect for herself and her family."

Monica also admires the opportunities for employment growth offered at Mary's Center. In addition to being a major employer of doctors, dentists, social workers, therapists, and nurses in the metropolitan area, Mary's Center gives opportunities to those without certifications. Hard-working individuals who can give back to the community in other ways. Monica said, "Maria created roles that did not require certifications but maximized employees' skills and provided experiences to help the employees grow in their careers. There are roles for individuals who are not social workers, but they had the opportunity to provide social support to families by becoming

For over two decades, Monica has been a staunch Mary's Center advocate by encouraging others to give and get involved. For her, "the learning experience and satisfaction from getting engaged has been phenomenal." Get involved today. Learn about Mary's Center volunteer opportunities by emailing Laura Hernandez at volunteer@maryscenter.org or calling 202-420-7014.

“Maria wants the same quality of care for Mary's Center's participants that she would want and expect for herself and her family.”

outreach workers, educators, and family support workers.”

Often, these positions are filled by immigrants and local working-class individuals. "These employees have a place where they can be hired, gain experience, and have the opportunity to grow, which isn't something that would necessarily be offered in larger institutions." What makes this approach special is that it aligns with Mary's Center's vision to help individuals attain economic independence.

For the 23 years Monica has been connected with Mary's Center, her admiration and respect for Maria has continued to grow. She especially values Maria's "compromiso con la comunidad," which means her commitment to the community. This commitment is an inspiration to Monica, who remains committed to giving back and supporting local charities.

Even though it is hard to envision Mary's Center without Maria, Monica said she is confident Mary's Center's strong foundation and dedicated Board, staff, and supporters will enable the organization to continue to flourish.

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH COMMUNITY NURSING MEET ELVIA SORTO, BSN, RN

As a young girl growing up in El Salvador, Elvia Sorto was passionate about caring for others. Her childhood dream was to become a pediatrician to provide care for children. Although during her youth she experienced many life changes, including immigrating to the United States, her desire to work in a medical setting and help patients never wavered.

Elvia recalls the stressful times spent contemplating her future, including the daunting task of learning English. During this period, she learned about the field of nursing and was especially excited by pediatric nursing. After welcoming her daughter Natalie in 2007, Elvia began school to become a medical assistant (MA), the first step in her journey to becoming a nurse. After graduating, Elvia applied for a position at Mary's Center. She was soon hired as an MA and settled into her role with the help of her supervisor, Vivian Cativo, Nurse Manager, who would become an important mentor for Elvia.

After a few months of working at Mary's Center, Elvia was ready for the next step - nursing school. She joined an accelerated accredited program at Chamberlain University, made possible by a partial scholarship awarded through the Citi Foundation Progress Makers Fund, designed to support MAs pursuing a nursing degree. During this time, Elvia maintained an onerous schedule, working six days a week as an MA, and taking classes that required countless hours of studying. On top of all this, she was caring for her daughter. Even though balancing her duties was a challenge, Elvia always felt supported by her supervisor. "Without Vivian, I would not be where I am today. Her flexibility and encouragement played a huge role in my journey."

Elvia was surrounded by many who believed in her, including her greatest advocate, her daughter. "Natalie was saying, 'My mom is a nurse' even before I got my degree," said Elvia. After three years of rigorous study and long workdays, Elvia received her degree in April 2020; shortly after, she became a Clinical Nurse Coordinator at Mary's Center. While it was unnerving to start her nursing career during the onset of the pandemic, she was confident she could make a difference.

“From the start, 13 years ago, I saw Elvia's potential and dedication. She was always eager to learn new things, and now she has achieved her goal of becoming a registered nurse and has in turn motivated so many other co-workers and participants to pursue their education.”

Vivian Cativo, RN,
Nurse Manager

Elvia is grateful to be a part of the Mary's Center family, which Maria made possible when she established the clinic over 30 years ago. "I love that I can help people directly and see the changes I am making in their lives," Elvia shared. "The core of what Maria founded inspired me to pursue nursing. Maria changed countless lives and brought attention to community health that did not exist."

Elvia's dedication and passion for caring for her patients is an inspiration to us all. To support aspiring nurses at Mary's Center, we encourage you to make a gift to the Friends of Maria Fund. Learn more or donate by visiting www.maryscenter.org/friendsofmaria.



Elvia Sorto, BSN, RN, working in the clinic to provide countless individuals with the long-awaited COVID-19 vaccine.

Community-level care is the essence of Mary's Center, and also Elvia.

Elvia's favorite part of working at Mary's Center is "seeing patients who have known me forever. Now, as a nurse, I have the privilege to guide and educate them on how to monitor their own health needs." She is excited to grow her career and hopes to one day become a midwife or nurse practitioner. In the meantime, she is enjoying a break from school and is hopeful her story will inspire others.