

Mentoring on the margins: A ministry to public schools

by [Amy L. Sherman](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

As a sixth grader, Hazel Gonzalez was constantly in trouble. A member of two gangs, she was in the principal's office daily. Known for shooting off her mouth, she was headed toward a future of shooting off guns. "I was always rebelling because I was mad at the world," Gonzalez explains. "I didn't come from a 'Betty Crocker' family home."

Gonzalez embodied the kind of kid Betty Alvarez Ham wanted to reach when she walked into a public school in Oxnard, California, in 1992 seeking to be a liaison between the city's churches and schools. She asked the principal at Ventura High School who the "pain-in-the-ass kids" were, and suggested he let her meet with them weekly for group rap sessions. Having grown up in east L.A., Ham knew the realities many urban Latino kids face: poverty, drugs, violence, parents—like Gonzalez's—in and out of jail. Skeptical but open to anything that might be helpful, the principal agreed. So the first Latina Leadership Group was born.

Within a few months, noticeable changes unfolded among the eight girls who participated. Their demeanor and behavior improved; their school attendance and grades shot up. Impressed school officials allowed Ham to continue her program. She did so, earning the girls' trust and challenging their attitudes.

As her friendship with them deepened, she slowly integrated them into the additional off-school activities that her ministry, City Impact, was offering to at-risk youth—mentoring, Bible studies, field trips. In a high school where girls from their backgrounds often dropped out because they were pregnant or struggling with drugs, all eight graduated.

Hazel Gonzalez was part of a second wave of support groups begun by City Impact with middle-schoolers; she too eventually left gang life behind, improved her grades and graduated. Today she is a sophomore on a full academic scholarship at California Lutheran University, studying pharmacology. And with some 60 City

Impact groups operating on 38 public school campuses, over 450 students receive the same mentoring and training in life skills that turned Gonzalez's life around.

Among City Impact's most recent participants, 86 percent have improved their school performance, 87 percent have stayed off probation and 76 percent have improved their school attendance.

A late 2003 issue of *PTO Today*, published by a national association of public school parents and teachers, included a feature story titled "Making Church and School Partnerships Work." A few years ago, the White House commended a faith-based organization called Kids HOPE USA for mobilizing over 250 congregations to adopt elementary schools and provide nearly 4,500 one-on-one tutors for kids. But these sorts of partnerships were a novel idea 12 years ago when Betty Ham first showed up at Ventura High. Cheryl Meyers, who has been a school counselor for 18 years, recalls that she "just couldn't believe that somebody was coming on campus asking if they could help, because usually that doesn't happen from the community."

Ministry leaders and school officials—as well as officials overseeing community housing, juvenile justice, or health care agencies—are often intimidated by church-state concerns. The result is far less collaboration benefiting youth and families than could be accomplished. City Impact's approach in such a context is strategic: it connects Oxnard's Christians to a variety of public agencies. Today school superintendents, police chiefs, prison officials and county bureaucrats involved in everything from child care to transportation services can point to ways that City Impact and its volunteers are helping to solve problems.

Ham terms what her organization is doing "incarnational ministry"—witnessing to God's love through one's presence and actions. It works, and the results—and Ham's integrity in respecting limits on evangelizing on school grounds—have school officials clamoring for City Impact groups on their campuses.

"I've seen many positive changes in the way kids who are participating in the City Impact programs [behave]. They're not as negative about school," Shirley Herrera-Perez, principal of Rio de Valle Middle School, reports. "It makes a difference in their whole demeanor." Reflecting on the effect of City Impact rap sessions on racial reconciliation, school psychologist Teresita Gomez observed that participants didn't "seem to have the same anger toward each other. They laugh at each other's jokes." Recalling one meeting, she continued, "They were all sitting together, and it

was the first time I realized I wasn't scared to have all these kids together."

Teachers and administrators say City Impact's uniqueness lies in the quality of its staff and volunteer mentors. They are able to connect with kids that few others can reach. Sometimes this rapport stems from the fact that the volunteer is drawn from the same neighborhood or ethnic background as the students. But even middle-class white women are making a difference, because they are tenacious in their love. Meyers recalls a time when a wealthy suburban mentor drove her Mercedes into Cabrillo Village—a federally funded project for destitute Hispanics—and was immediately surrounded by cops anticipating a drug bust. When the cop peering into the car saw the middle-aged woman, he knew immediately to call Betty Ham, since the driver had to be a City Impact volunteer.

Hazel Gonzalez remembers her mentor, Sue, with whom, six years later, she retains a friendship. "She'd pick me up for school; she'd go out of her way. She'd be there for my softball games. She made a big difference because she was always 'on' me," Gonzalez recalls. "[She] kept me on track, bugged me, until I finally got the hint that I did have potential. That's why I'm in college now." That, Gonzalez says, and the fact that, off campus, City Impact staff led her to a personal relationship with God that healed her angry heart.

City Impact's commitment to serving as a bridge linking Oxnard's Christian community to its public agencies goes beyond serving the public schools. The organization is also assisting various city agencies struggling to respond to the community's dramatic demographic shift. Between 1990 and 2000, Oxnard's Hispanic population grew by 47 percent. City Impact is helping public administrators mediate their relationship with newly arrived Hispanic families.

Tom Cady, who recently retired as assistant police chief for Oxnard after 30 years on the force, says City Impact seminars have helped cops better understand Latino kids and families, improving the department's community policing initiatives. The education that City Impact has provided the officers, Cady says, gives the cops "one more tool in their toolkit" for dealing with troubled families.

City Impact has also mediated a conflict with Hispanic day laborers for the municipal government of Thousand Oaks, an affluent, predominantly white suburb near Oxnard. For several years, according to the assistant city manager, Scott Mitnick, the city received complaints from homeowners regarding the day laborers, who

would congregate on a neighborhood street corner each morning, hoping to get picked up for odd jobs. The workers were not doing anything illegal and had no desire to cause trouble. Mitnick could find no one to help the city council with the headache until he was referred to City Impact.

Latino members of the City Impact staff befriended the day laborers and conducted an informal survey among them. They discovered that most of them lived and worked in Thousand Oaks and walked or rode their bikes to the pickup site. They were unhappy that they were a cause of distress in the community, but they also needed their day jobs to put food on the table.

When Mitnick learned that the city could establish a pickup site on a greenbelt a few blocks away, City Impact was able to convince the laborers to move to the more appropriate site without a fuss. And it ensured that the city provided the laborers basic amenities—port-a-johns and some benches—at the new location. The city has since hired one of the day laborers to maintain the grounds at the site and serve as a liaison with the council.

Mitnick notes that city agencies hadn't been able to resolve this problem themselves. The police hadn't wanted to touch it, since the day laborers were scared of them, and city employees with business suits and no Spanish-language ability couldn't talk to the workers. "City Impact did what our police department couldn't do, they did what our bureaucrats couldn't do," Mitnick sums up. "They were really instrumental. I can't say enough good things about them."