

# Coastside Opportunity Center

*Extending hope and a hand to Coastside residents*

Letter from COC Executive Director Cheri Parr

Hope.

What a powerful word.

**Every day at the COC, we are touched by stories of hope. For the Mendez family, hope meant fulfilling their dying father's wish to see his son one last time. To Michele Lamirande, hope means a special family holiday, and for Maurilio Flores, citizenship means hope for a new life.**

Thirty years ago, hope was the foundation on which the COC was built. On Oct. 26, join us as we celebrate 30 years of "Shining Light on the Coast." We'll announce a new name, logo and, importantly, a new vision for the next 30 years. But one thing remains the same: Hope is our foundation.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these amazing stories.

As someone who supports our cause, you understand that together we can do what none of us could do alone – give hope.

– Cheri Parr

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## COC's 30th Anniversary Celebration

### Shining Light on the Coast

**October 26  
Save the Date!**



**Jazz ... Wine ... Hope**

*"Dare to reach out your hand into the darkness, to pull another hand into the light." Norman B. Rice*

The Coastside Opportunity Center (COC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit multiservice center incorporated in 1976 whose mission is to provide human service programs to the homeless, low-income, working poor, immigrant, farm and nursery worker, elderly, and disabled residents of the San Mateo County Coastside.

Our office is located at 99 Avenue Alhambra, El Granada. Our mailing address is P.O. Box 1089, El Granada CA 94018. Our telephone number is 650-726-9071.

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### COC Staff

Violeta Almaguer - Dispatch Manager  
Lorena Galindo-Perez - Immigration Paralegal  
Susie Maya - Executive Assistant  
Fatima Soares - Social Worker  
Cheri Parr - Executive Director

### Bus Drivers

Michael Chicotel, Kenneth Cox, Denis Bossa,  
Ricardo Deleon, Jose Dutra, Terrence Hammer,  
Francisco Hernandez  
Jean Tominaga, Carlos Velazco

### COC Board of Directors

President - Dell Williams  
Vice President - Casey Sample  
Secretary - Judy O'Leary  
Jim Bolton, Gary Naman, Salvador Navarro,  
David Pasternak, Jeff Perls, Patricia Strohlein,  
Rose Serdy, Barbara Wright

### Volunteer Departments

Beth Bryant - Volunteer Coordinator;  
Gary Naman - Director of Transportation;  
Judy O'Leary - Adopt-A-Family; Erika Pardo -  
Grantwriting and Fundraising Coordinator;  
Lucy Rodriguez - Food Pantry Manager;  
Katie Sanborn - Editor; Dell Williams, Jeff Perls,  
Marshall Pierson - Food Delivery  
Newsletter Design Assistant: Renee Davis

**Coastside Opportunity Center  
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El Granada CA 94018**

## Christmas Spirits ... Adopt-A-Family

*A COC social services success story*

The COC's Adopt-A-Family Christmas program makes the holidays a little merrier for families like Michele Lamirande's.



*From left, Justin, 10, Tyler, 5, and Mikaela, 8, experienced a merry Christmas last year through the Adopt-A-Family program*

On Christmas morning last year, Michele Lamirande's three children – Justin, 10, Mikaela, 8, and Tyler, 5 – awoke to find Santa had visited. "Their eyes just popped open," she said. "Christmas morning is great. It's the one time of the year that my kids are happiest."

Michele was able to provide the joy of the Christmas surprise through the COC's Adopt-A-Family program, one of the organization's social services.

The Adopt-A-Family program raises money from other Coastside residents to buy Christmas gifts for each member of every family enrolled in it. Last year, the program provided gifts for more than 300 Coastside families and seniors. COC Board Member Judy O'Leary and Ruth Raffello and Delores Crabb solicit donations, adopting families and volunteers to buy and wrap gifts at the COC's busy North Pole outpost, a Princeton warehouse. "It's a unique opportunity to watch two elements of the community come together in a way that makes them all feel good," Judy said. "So many people tell me, this is the most impor-

tant part of Christmas for my family every year: to adopt a family. To watch that process happen is why I do it."

Michele, a single mom, found out about the program through Fatima Soares, COC's social worker. A disabling back injury has prevented Michele from working. Putting food on the table and paying the mortgage has been a challenge – not to mention giving gifts. "Kids don't understand the severity of the problem," said Michele, who lives in El Granada. "And it's really hard for me to ask for things. It took me a long time to go in there."

But the joy her kids got out of seeing what Santa brought offset the discomfort of needing help. "It's comforting to know there are people like Fatima," Michele said. "Fatima goes far beyond her duties to help families bring joy to the little ones. If not for her hard work, the joy of Christmas wouldn't exist."

**To adopt a family for Christmas or make a donation, please call Judy O'Leary, 650-563-9910. To apply as a recipient, call the COC, 650-726-9071.**

# In Time to Say Goodbye

A COC immigration services success story

Through the efforts of the COC and cooperation of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a dying man's wish was granted.

Ramon Mendez was a farmer. He worked on Coastside flower farms for nearly 20 years, tending mainly dahlias and *los peritos*, snapdragons. Even after cancer made it impossible for him to continue working, he was able to tend a small garden on the Pescadero ranch where he and his family lived. He planted cilantro, tomatoes, chiles. He liked to cook, especially menudo. "Mucho el menudo," said his wife, Elvira Zavala-Mendez, with a sad smile. His youngest son, Miguel-Angel, said, "He would eat only his own menudo."

The COC's Lorena Galindo-Perez met Mr. Mendez in the mid-1980s, when she helped him apply for legal residency through the amnesty program. He continued to work on Coastside ranches, returning to Cuernavaca, Guanajuato, Mexico, to visit his family every two years. In 2000, his wife, Elvira; daughter, Lucia; and youngest son, Miguel-Angel, immigrated to the Coastside. But the eldest son, Alvaro, who was 21 at the time, was no longer eligible to immigrate as a dependent.

After an accident at work nearly three years ago, Mr. Mendez sought the healing services of *los so-*



Photo: Cheri Parr

The Mendez family (left to right) Lucia, Elvira, Melanie, Miguel-Angel, Jr., Miguel-Angel). Mrs. Mendez holds a photo of Ramon, Alvaro and herself in Mexico when Alvaro was a boy.

bradores, but when his health worsened, they encouraged him to see a medical doctor. By then, though, his newly diagnosed cancer had metastasized.

When Mr. Mendez became ill, he was still in the years-long process of petitioning to bring Alvaro to the United States with the COC's assistance. But by mid-June, Mr. Mendez's health worsened dramatically; this time his request was different.

He told Lorena, "The last thing I would love for you to do for me is to see if you can bring my son to see me because I only have a few weeks of life. I want to see my son for the last time." Lorena filed the required paperwork with the U.S. immigration officials, including providing a doctor's letter.

A week later, June 21, Alvaro flew to California on a ticket the COC purchased. He arrived at 8:30 p.m. at his father's bedside, surrounded by the rest of his family. Mr. Mendez had not spoken for 24 hours before Alvaro arrived and that morning could no longer move the lower half of his body. "When Alvaro arrived, he said, 'I'm here, Papa. I'm here,'" said Mrs. Mendez, tears forming. "His last words were, 'Hold me. Hold me.' Alvaro put his hand at the back of his neck – that's when he passed away." Mr. Mendez died 20 minutes after Alvaro arrived.

Alvaro was able to stay a week, and the family again sought the assistance of the COC to send Mr. Mendez's body back to Mexico with Alvaro. Alvaro's petition for immigration was terminated with Mr. Mendez's death. Now Mrs. Mendez will apply for naturalization and reinstate the long process to bring Alvaro to the United States – this time for good. – Katie Sanborn

## COC Fact Check

During June–September, the COC met critical needs for 279 families and 761 individuals:

- > Provided food to 205 families and 559 individuals
- > Provided housing assistance to 9 families and 28 individuals
- > Provided rental assistance to 2 families (security deposit and other) and emergency assistance to 7 families to avoid eviction
- > Provided forms assistance to 94 families
- > Determined 11 families are maintaining stable housing six months after receiving COC rental assistance (100% of total evaluated)

## WHAT COC CLIENTS NEED NOW ... That You Can Provide

- > Clean winter coats in good condition
- > New warm socks
- > Laundry detergent
- > Diapers
- > Cooking oil
- > Office filing supplies
- > Shampoo, conditioner, soaps, toothpaste/toothbrushes
- > New warm socks

For more information, call Susie Maya at 650-726-9071

# RediCoast Rolls Up

When Devil's Slide was out, the COC and RediCoast revved up their partnership.

Santos Orellana, operations manager for RediCoast, a paratransit company operating on the Coastside, knew the moment he saw the illuminated highway sign indicating Devil's Slide was out that he and the COC would be facing some logistical challenges getting clients to necessary medical appointments.

By the second week of the closure, the COC and RediCoast were cooperating along with SamTrans to make sure COC clients got to their appointments. "Everyone cooperated – employees and passengers," Orellana said. "Nobody was left out because of the closure."

RediCoast, a division of MV Transportation in Fairfield, provides approximately 100 trips a day in nine buses for Coastsiders who cannot use SamTrans or other public transportation systems.

During the Devil's Slide outage, RediCoast provided rides to approximately 20 COC clients a day, bringing in an extra driver to supplement the COC's capacity. "It's a partnership," said John Murphy, vice president for the Bay Area for MV Transportation. "We are working as partners with [the COC] even to this day."

Of the extra work for RediCoast, Orellana and Murphy played down their roles. "We are here

A COC transportation services success story



RediCoast drivers Renato Cruz Jr., George Leon, Ajax Guevara and Richard Aquino

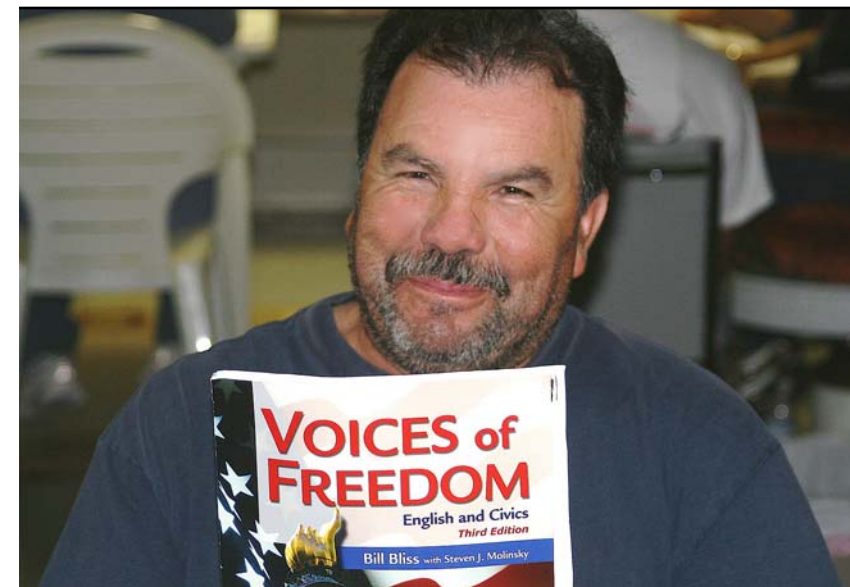
to provide a service to the community. It doesn't matter who does it as long as it's done properly," Orellana said. – Katie Sanborn

## Volunteer Opportunities

Looking for a way to give back to your community? Do your skills and interests fit one of the following jobs?

- > Family Harvest food distribution: 12 to 15 volunteers
- > Assist with weekly clothing distribution: 1 volunteer
- > Grantwriting assistant: 1 volunteer
- > Maintain stock of food at COC Pantry: 2 or 3 volunteers
- > Family Harvest food distribution: 12 to 15 volunteers

For more information, call 650-726-9071 or email Beth Bryant at savee@aol.com



## Did You Know?

**Citizenship Classes:** "I'm so happy to be a citizen," said Maurilio Flores, left, who studied for the exam through the COC's new citizenship course. "My teacher, Anthony Moss, is very good and helped me study, study, study." The COC began offering citizenship classes – covering history, government and mock interviews – in June. The free class is held every Wednesday at the COC office on a drop-in basis. For more information, call the COC at 650-726-9071.