

NETWORK ANCHOR

Texas' Elaine Hernandez is no lone star; she works her deep community connections to tackle tough problems

By Vanessa Glavinskas Photography by John Davidson



THE "HUNGER LADY" — that's what people in South Texas call Elaine Hernandez. If you want to get food to a family who needs it in Hidalgo County, Hernandez is the person you call. The poverty rates in the counties of this region, along the Mexican border, are among the highest in Texas — averaging about 30 percent, according to recent census data — and hunger has long been a problem. But with the coronavirus pandemic exacerbating food insecurity, her role is vital.

She combats hunger by connecting people with resources. Shortly after schools closed in March, Hernandez, a member of the Rotary Club of Mission, helped promote a project led by Baylor University's Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty called Emergency Meals-to-You, which worked with partners to send 10 days' worth of meals directly to students' homes through the mail. "No child should go hungry in the United States," Hernandez says. "There are enough resources out there to find local solutions."

The program, which began as a pilot in 2019, was so successful that the federal government expanded it across the United States.

"We serve the most difficult areas to reach, and we're able to do that because people like Elaine have a deep knowledge of these communities and are able to adapt programs," says Jeremy Everett, executive director of the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, where Hernandez works as regional director for South Texas. "No one sector can solve hunger and poverty by itself. That's why we focus on building coalitions." Hernandez gets to know key people in communities, learns about what they need, and builds partnerships among nonprofits, faith organizations, businesses, government leaders, and academic institutions to meet those needs. In May 2019, she connected Rotarians with 65 other community organizations and food banks as part of an event to address local hunger called the Hunger Summit.

"Elaine has a passion for volunteering," says Hernandez's friend Andy Hagan, a member of the Rotary Club of Brownsville Sunrise. "But she doesn't just think about how one club can help. It's 'let's bring together the academics with Rotary with the health department.' She connects people."



HERNANDEZ SPENT MOST OF her career in education, first as a public school teacher and later working with adult students as director of continuing education at South Texas Community College. Her career in humanitarian work came about only after her position at the college was eliminated and her marriage fell apart. "At the same time I learned I would lose my job, my husband of 23 years asked for a divorce," Hernandez says. Then her two youngest children left home for college. Within one week in 1999, everything she had defined herself by was gone.

"I lost the titles of mom, Mrs., and director all at once," Hernandez says.

So when she received an unexpected invitation to go to Guatemala for six weeks on a Fulbright-Hays scholarship, she felt she had nothing to lose. "You know what they say: When three doors close, another one opens," she says wryly. "They were looking for someone with an education background who spoke Spanish, and someone recommended me." She packed her bags.

One afternoon, while touring Tikal, an archaeological site in northern Guatemala, Hernandez climbed a Mayan pyramid. Breathless, she reached the top and found herself asking God, "What am I going to do with my life?" "I thought there'd be a thunderbolt," she says. "But suddenly a quiet little voice in me said, 'You can do anything you want to do.'"

Hernandez had been thinking about pursuing a career in humanitarian development since the late 1970s, when she moved from her native Canada to Mexico to marry her husband, Raul; the couple had met when both were students at the University of Guelph in Ontario. In 1976, they married and then spent four years living with Raul's family on their dairy farm in Ojocaliente, Mexico. Unable to work there under immigration laws, Hernandez had time

to get to know everyone on the farm and soon found that the children of the workers who lived with their families in adobe huts on the farm weren't going to school. She found a teacher and started a school for them.

Hernandez, whose undergraduate degree is in Spanish, had no teaching experience and no budget, but she was determined. She cleared out a shed to serve as a one-room schoolhouse for 28 children, repurposed an old door into a blackboard, and arranged empty produce crates to serve as desks. "Sometimes the goats would get in there and eat the paper off the walls," she recalls, laughing and noting that much of what she learned was through trial and error. Still, she says, "That experience taught me a lot about international development. I learned later that some of those kids went on to graduate from high school."

After four years on the farm and the births of a daughter, Margaret, and a son, Eric, Elaine and Raul moved the family back to Canada, where their third child, Leila, was born. "After I left, the farm school closed down," Hernandez says. "But by then, the families were used to sending their kids to school, so they started driving them to a local school. They saw the value of education."



HERNANDEZ GREW UP in Brantford, Ontario, the middle child of a plumber and a stay-at-home mom. Rotary plays a part in one of her earliest memories: When her younger sister was born with a cleft lip and palate, the doctor who delivered her and the Rotary Club of Brantford, where he was a member, stepped up to help. "We did not have a car and we did not have health insurance," Hernandez recalls. "A member of the Rotary club drove my mother and baby sister to the hospital, and the club paid for the operation." Years

later, the same Rotary club lent her father the money to pay for her sister's braces. "Rotary gave my mother hope, my father dignity, and my baby sister a beautiful smile," she says. "That's when I fell in love with Rotary."

The next time Hernandez heard the word *Rotary*, she was in high school. There was an announcement that the Brantford club would be holding a meeting after school for prospective Rotary Youth Exchange students. "That announcement set off something warm in my body, a physical and emotional reaction, and I knew intuitively that this was going to be my opportunity," she says. Her intuition turned out to be correct. Hernandez was selected as the first outbound Rotary Youth Exchange student from Brantford, and in October 1970, she left to spend a year in Hermosillo, Mexico. "Going to Mexico was the first time I was ever on a plane," she says. "Within six months I was bilingual, and after nine months I was dreaming in Spanish. I fell in love with the language and culture."

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Elaine and Raul eventually decided to leave Canada again, this time for McAllen, Texas, where Elaine planned to earn a bilingual teaching certificate. Raul was happy to move closer to his native Mexico, so the family headed south. Elaine, who by then had a master's degree in adult education, learned that the region had a particularly dire need for bilingual teachers, and she began teaching in public schools. "My mom drove more than an hour to teach in a rural community," Leila Hernandez remembers. "She was teaching students who lived in homes without electricity or running water." Leila says her mother would often buy school supplies for students who couldn't afford them. "She was driven, and she loved her students."

Elaine, by now a member of the Rotary Club of McAllen North, took a job as director of continuing education for South Texas Community College, but when she learned that her position would be eliminated the very same week that her marriage unraveled and her youngest children left for college, she realized she was at a crossroads. "That whole experience made me reflect deeply," she says. Her next steps became clear when she read about a new master's degree program in public health being offered at a Texas A&M University satellite institution in McAllen, just minutes from her home. She enrolled in 2001.

"I came to realize that one period of my life was at an end," she says, "and I had the power to determine what came next."



WHEN SHE COMPLETED THE public health program in 2003, Hernandez was 51. "I got a cold call at my office one day," says Lance Leverenz, who worked for the American Red Cross at the time. Hernandez wanted to talk about doing some public health work along the U.S.-Mexico border. "Eventually, she brought to the table a possible partnership between the U.S. and Mexican Red Cross with Rotary support," Leverenz recalls. "We ended up hiring her to run a cross-border tuberculosis control project."

From 2005 until 2008, Hernandez cultivated a network of people in communities along the U.S.-Mexico border as a Red Cross delegate. From health authorities to chambers of commerce, she asked every sector to come together for a common good: stopping the spread of tuberculosis. "She checked every single box for someone you'd want to run that type of activity," says Leverenz. "She's bicultural, bilingual, and has a dedication and passion

for improving people's lives."

But tuberculosis was a stubborn problem. "It's one thing to treat a patient who has access to a doctor, who will adhere to their treatment," explains Leverenz. For very poor people without access to medical care, however, compliance was often low, frustrating efforts to mitigate the spread of the disease. So Hernandez's team came up with an idea to ensure that the most vulnerable patients took their medication: Health workers would check in with them in person every day throughout their treatment. The Mexican Red Cross offered to help the Ministry of Health in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas work with 50 tuberculosis patients who had stopped taking their medication. Some were homeless, others transient. "We'd scour all the neighborhoods and shelters," Hernandez says. Once a patient was located, a Red Cross worker would check in every day and administer medication.

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"We took a delegation once to see the project," Leverenz remembers. "It was inspiring and scary and very important. We went to abandoned buildings where homeless drug users would sleep, and the Mexican Red Cross would go in and deliver their medicine." But it worked.

"We cured 49 out of the 50 patients assigned to us by the ministry," Hernandez says.

In 2008, Hernandez helped secure \$300,000 in grant funding from The Rotary Foundation to equip a treatment center for tuberculosis patients that the Tamaulipas Ministry of Health was building in Reynosa. It was certified by the World Health Organization in 2013 and is still in operation. The grant provided equipment and training for the health workers employed by the center, along with funds for community education about tuberculosis in the lower Rio Grande Valley. "It started as a vision or a dream, and it ended in a million-dollar center," she says. "That's when I learned the power of vision."

Hernandez continued to work for the Red Cross until 2012. Her second project was a joint effort with the Canadian and Honduran Red Cross that focused in part on the role of men in maternal and child health in rural Honduras. By the time she returned to McAllen, she was 61 years old — an age when many people are starting to think about retiring. Instead, she embarked on another life goal: getting a PhD. "I started my doctoral studies in leadership in 2013 and graduated in 2017 at age 66," she says, adding: "You can achieve all

your dreams, but some dreams take longer than others."

Hernandez's next dream is a lofty one: to confront the reasons so many people are leaving Central America. She hopes to find funding for development projects there. "I want to address hunger and poverty in Central America," she says. "I want to create regional councils to bring resources from Rotary and other organizations to help rebuild the economies of Honduras and Guatemala, so families don't have to leave."



IN JULY, HERNANDEZ TOOK ON a new role: president of the Rotary Club of Mission, Texas, having transferred from the Rotary Club of McAllen Evening earlier in 2020 to help revitalize the 100-year-old Mission club, which was considering shutting down. "The club got down to three active members" who were ready to turn in their charter, she says. "Now we're up to 17." At first, Hernandez used her own contact list to grow the club, and now those members have begun to invite others.

"When Elaine reached out, we discussed what my time in Rotary would look like," says Ricky Rendon, 28, a new member recruited by Hernandez. "We talked about how I could practice my talents in Rotary. That's one of her strategies that I think is brilliant — Elaine ensures that she captures your passion and that it's highlighted in the mission of the club."

Rendon, who works with young people with disabilities, is leading the Mission Rotary club's effort to form a community-based Rotaract club for young adults with disabilities. "The goal is to help them gain job and life skills," Hernandez says.

Hernandez is also her district's international service chair, a member of The Rotary Foundation Cadre of Technical Advisers, and a member of the board of a proposed Rotary fellowship focused on global development that's getting underway — and she has joined a new Rotary Action Group on migrants and refugees. It sounds like a lot to take on at once, but the 69-year-old says, "I still feel like I'm 24 years old." Her daughter Leila notes that it's not in her mom's nature to slow down. "I think she'll be doing projects until she's 100," she says.

Andy Hagan says he's continually impressed by Hernandez's ability to connect with people, and the growth of the Mission club is a testament to that. "It's one of the first times that we've seen [a club have] an aggressive turnaround," says Hagan, a past governor of District 5930. "Their club is now filled with young, enthusiastic professionals, and it's exciting.

"Elaine is one in a million," he adds. "Actually, she's one in 1.2 million."

INTERNATIONAL IMPACT

Elaine Hernandez is the recipient of the **2020 Rotary Alumni Global Service Award**, which each year recognizes one outstanding alumnus whose career, activities, and service to humanity show the reach and impact of Rotary's programs. In 2013, she was honored for her work in Honduras with the first **Kroum Pindoff Award** from the Canadian Red Cross.

THROUGH THE YEARS



Hernandez in 1970 as a Rotary Youth Exchange student in Hermosillo, Mexico.



As a Red Cross delegate, Hernandez worked in both Mexico and Honduras.



In 2002, Hernandez led a Group Study Exchange team to India.

