



# Culver City News

**103** year  
ANNIVERSARY  
Since 1907  
Vol. 100, No. 46

Culver City's Community Newspaper

Thursday, November 25, 2010

## An activist transforming lives and a community



BY SANDRA COOPERSMITH

No glitzy superhero costume hangs in the closet of Lucia Diaz, CEO of Mar Vista Family Center in Del Rey. Yet her incredible transformative powers manage to function just fine absent such trappings.

Diaz has been a powerful influence in fulfilling the center's mission, "to provide low-income families with quality early childhood education, youth enrichment and educational tools to create positive change in their lives and their community," thereby turning a neighborhood that was once violent and gang-ridden into a safe and thriving environment.

Challenges Diaz faced in her personal life supplied firsthand knowledge that proved invaluable in her leadership role. One of 11 children, she

came to the U.S. from Mexico in 1976. At the age of 17 she began working as a live-in maid and by 20 she was a wife and mother. But her career trajectory is a testament to the taking charge of one's destiny.

In 1982 Diaz enrolled her child in the center's preschool program and began volunteering in the classroom. She began serving as head teacher in 1985 and the following year was promoted to program director. Since 1995 she has led the center as its CEO, a position requiring strength, sensitivity and a fierce commitment to making things better, as evidenced by the peace march she organized in 1996 following local violence that resulted in a young boy's death.

### LENDING A HELPING HAND

Lucia Diaz of the Mar Vista Family Center

"One of my biggest challenges is learning to speak a universal language that everyone can understand," Diaz said. "One of the main problems that exists in any relationship is communication. Unfortunately, most of the time we think we are right and someone else is wrong. And that gets in the way to have an understanding with others."

Convinced that effective communication was the key to change, in 1999 Diaz requested an agreement with the Los Angeles City Attorney to exempt the center's programs from an injunction involving local gang members, so that the center could continue to support them in positively transforming their lives. And in collaboration with the Los Angeles Police Department she organized a peace walk in 2005 to address violence and racism issues.

Her relationship with law enforcement had a bumpy moment one morning when after finishing a community street cleanup, she was heading back to the center, pushing a cart filled with tools. A

new police officer stopped her and told her that she could be arrested, in her words, "because of the way I was looking." It was not until the senior lead officer recognized her that "I was saved," she said.

The numerous advisory boards and committees on which Diaz has served and the bevy of awards she has amassed include being named a Hometown Hero by the *Los Angeles Times*, the inaugural Professional Achievement Award from UCLA Extension and her appointment in 2006 by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to the Commission for Children, Youth and Their Families. She currently serves on the advisory board for the Angell Foundation and as a Community Champion for the Annenberg Foundation's Nonprofit Leadership Program.

Among the many events that she coordinated in the 25-plus years she trained people to take control of their lives and their community was one for the Del Rey Neighborhood Council. Through her efforts residents estab-

lished a community board through the local council to plan events and address issues affecting their neighborhood. And for the past 10 years youth members, with her coaching, have planned and hosted a national conference.

The center, which involves the community in the decision-making and running of its programs, operates 21 projects with three main program areas: early childhood education, youth and community. And its long-term involvement with entire families has led to more stable families with greater academic success and attendance at institutes of higher learning for their youth.

Sarah Feliciano, whose children attend the center's preschool and its Seppy's Summer Camp program, praised Diaz. "Lucia is a great motivator," she said. "She continues to support me and the community. The Mar Vista Family Center provides my children with activities that they enjoy."

"Having the Mar Vista Family Center helps me and my family," added Juana

Reyes, who has two children attending its programs. "It gives my kids tutoring and allows my older son to be involved in the community. He is getting better grades in school as a result of it. Being here helps me to relax as well, since I get to enjoy time for myself in the knitting class."

Martha Medina, who received her certification from the center's UCLA early childhood education course, said the center "helps kids in the community. It encourages families to communicate with each other. I have never seen any other place that has supported me more as a parent. I never felt alone when my children were going through the preschool program. Nothing can compare to my positive experience with the Mar Vista Family Center."

Melissa Urbina says she is "more motivated to do better in school because of the youth programs. It also allows me to have fun with my friends."

Leslie Rodriguez said she has found that the "By Youth for Youth [program] has helped me to notice more stuff that is going on in other

places. The movie we watched about the Women of Juarez allowed me to understand what is going on there. I used to be really shy but our programs and Lucia have helped me to communicate better."

In December, there are slated to take place four special events: A community cleanup (Dec. 4), a cash for college workshop (Dec. 8), a Posada (Dec. 15) and a community holiday party (Dec. 22). Visit [marvistafc.org](http://marvistafc.org) or call (310) 390-9607 to learn more about these events, as well as other of the center's many resources, which include advice from Diaz.

"No one can make you feel bad if you believe that what you are doing is good," Diaz emphasized. "If you believe in what you do, keep doing it. To accomplish something in life, do not think about what other people think about you. Think about what you think about yourself and you will become successful. Changes in our lives come as we choose to change."