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# Countering hostility with civility

by Yvette Cabrera

These tough times have brought out the worst in some, but Dorothea Love inspires students to be empathetic.

There's no doubt that a lot of Americans are struggling these days. And some are very angry. More state budget cuts are looming. Our social safety net is strained. The state has the third-highest jobless rate in the country, and Californians who have worked hard their entire lives are maxing out on unemployment.

Dorothea Love packs bags of donated groceries for the homeless after Sunday Liturgy at St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine.

So I can understand the despair. What I don't get is the anger, at least not when it's directed at people in need, whether welfare recipients or undocumented immigrants or the homeless.

Dorothea Love of San Juan Capistrano says that anger is on the rise. Love, 66, a petite grandmother, is a regular at San Juan Capistrano's City Council meetings, watching and listening and taking notes as an observer for the non-partisan League of Women Voters.

Though Love remains quiet during the meetings, she believes hostility against the have-nots is unmistakable. Since January, she's seen an escalation in anger during the public comment portion of these council meetings, where people voice their discontent with, in this case, undocumented immigrants, whom they claim are draining dwindling public resources.

What bothers Love isn't just the nature of the comments, but also the lack of civility. "We can disagree; that's how this country was built. But not with anger," she says. "San Juan Capistrano is not unique. The rising frustration can be seen in cities throughout the county, and as we saw last year, at town hall meetings across the country. Watching last year's outbursts, I wondered then if there was any way to ease this tension."

Love, I believe, has found an answer. She isn't walking up to the mic and joining the verbal fray. But she works part-time as an administrative assistant in San Juan Capistrano's Community Services Department. In that job, she works with – and gets to know – some of Orange County's neediest residents.

"I don't care where people are born. If they're in trouble, they need help. Or (if) they're hungry, we try to take care of them, or we steer them to the various groups in the city," Love says.

About a year ago, a homeless Vietnam veteran came into the department seeking affordable housing. Love was distressed because after spending time listening to the man, the only thing she could do was send him to city hall to seek affordable housing referrals. "That was the worst — to send him away and not be able to help him, a veteran," Love says. "He was a nice man, not angry, just, you could tell, discouraged."

Love has found other ways she can help as a volunteer. Since 1991, she's been a parishioner of St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine, where she's actively sought ways to help the homeless who, about twice a week, either call or knock at the church's doors.

As president of the church's women's group, Philoptochos (which means "friends of the poor"), Love organizes fundraisers to buy grocery and restaurant gift cards for the homeless and parishioners who are struggling financially. The group also pays some bills and/or rent for needy parishioners.

At a bake sale last December Philoptochos raised $2,000 for the needy, half of which went to Orange County Catholic Worker's Isaiah House for homeless women and children.

Love has volunteered at Isaiah House since 2004. But there, what began as simple donations of food and clothing has evolved into something bigger. In 2006, Love started bringing some of her church's teen parishioners to the Santa Ana-based shelter, exposing them to challenges faced by some of the county's poorest residents. Isaiah House, run by husband and wife team Dwight and Leia Smith, often shelters women who have lost their jobs, or others who are employed but have no place to sleep at night.

The young volunteers Love brings their way do everything from chopping vegetables to serving food. But, Love says, the time the students spend with the clients helps them learn that people in need are, simply, people – no different from people lucky enough to not need help.

"The (students)... had one of the (clients) laughing," Love says, recalling a recent outing. "If you can get them to laugh and to see another side of life and hope, what better thing is there?" adds Love, who, once a month, helps to cook homemade Greek meals and deliver them to Isaiah House.

Love hopes that by meeting and helping people in need the young volunteers will be inspired to treat others with civility, kindness and respect. Already, her work has paid off. Some students are returning to Isaiah House on their

own while another, a 14-year-old girl who recently volunteered, told Love: "Thank you for bringing me here. We get so caught up in our own lives; it's just so hard to believe that people live like this every day.... I want to help. When will you come back?"

Students in Dorothea Love's Sunday School class pack groceries and other items to be given away to Orange County's homeless.