

A Brief Overview of Sacred Heart Community Service

by Kamran Muthleb

“Here at Sacred Heart Community Service, we are determined to create a community free from poverty by creating hope, opportunity, and action. We could not do the work that we do without all the individuals in our community! Whether you are volunteering your time, donating goods, or sharing your family’s experiences, you make Sacred Heart what it is. Thank you for being a part of our community!” -SHCS’s official website.

Sacred Heart Community Service is a non-denominational, non-profit service provider for the poor located in San Jose, California. It was conceived in 1964 by Louise Benson, and officially incorporated in 1972. In its time, SHCS has undergone much growth and development, incorporating a myriad of programs and extending its reach to the whole community. The organization’s mission statement is to create a united community, and it is their belief that they cannot accomplish this without support from the populace.

Benson began in 1964 by working with colleagues in her garage, providing food and clothing for her low-income neighbors. Benson’s following expanded over the years, and when the operation eventually outgrew her garage, it was moved to a Sacred Heart Parish School classroom in 1982 (which is where Sacred Heart Community Service derives its name, even though the two are no longer affiliated). Four years after the transition (1986), Benson passed away, leaving Barbara Zahner to oversee the operation in 1987. Under her watch, SHCS’s supporters continued to grow in number until they moved to their current location in 1998. Once the relocation was complete, Zahner continued to serve as the executive director until she was superseded by Poncho Guevara in 2006. He maintains his position to this day.

Throughout its history, SHCS has adopted a myriad of programs that are meant to foster self-sufficiency. Their current services include Food Pantry, Clothes Closet, Home Gardening, Children’s Education, Financial Coaching, and more. The home gardening program- La Mesa Verde- is the youngest at seven years old, while Food Pantry and Clothes Closet are the oldest and most prolific programs, having existed since almost the beginning and respectively serving more than 200,000 and 150,000 people each year. Collectively, these programs attract over a thousand people each day.

SHCS currently has thirty full-time employees and roughly 10,000 volunteers, most of which are derived from schools, churches, and corporations. The agency sees over a thousand people a day. The organization also maintains countywide collaborations with 70-80 organizations, and is a part of both the Emergency Assistance Network and Community Action Agency. SHCS is always open to volunteers, and anyone interested in getting involved is encouraged to visit the agency’s website at sacredheartcs.org.