

San Antonio Express-News

Visionaries guided by service

In a city named after a saint, faith often lights the way forward

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Cities are transformed through the imaginations of people seeing what their communities can become. Cities are also transformed through the moral imaginations of people seeing clearly how their communities are in the present.

Visionaries peering into the future imagine expanded skylines, glittering downtowns, state-of-the-art stadiums, new businesses and the fusion of human capital and technologies, which earn cities the titles of “great,” “modern,” and “world-class.”

Visionaries confronting the present see the unmet needs of city residents lying in the shadows of skylines and stadiums, living outside the radius of downtown’s bright lights. Seeing the needs that exist in all cities — want, injustice, imbalance of services and people depending upon the compassion of strangers for survival — visionaries imagine how they can comfort and assist others to build a stronger community.

Through their work, they become twice-bearers of light. First, by illuminating and calling attention to problems and inequities that have been hidden, ignored or forgotten. Second, the light of their compassion inspires others and brightens the city's path, reminding all how a great city should, first, be a great community that is loving, just, protective and inclusive, leaving no one in the shadows.

Born by a river, more than 300 years ago, San Antonio has been growing ever since, spilling over the river's banks and spreading its diverse cultures and rich history in all directions.

The climate, land, flora and fauna we enjoy are gifts of nature. But the places and institutions built by men and women — neighborhoods, homes, parks, museums, schools, houses of worship, hospitals — are gifts to ourselves.

For as long as I can remember, growing up here, I've heard the saying that San Antonio is a big city with a small-town feeling, suggesting an intimacy and sense of community unusual for a city this size. I've always felt that myself.

San Antonio is now the seventh-largest city in the United States, and it was the fastest-growing of the top 10 largest cities in the nation from 2000-2010. It is also, consistently, one of the most economically segregated cities in the country; has 17 school districts ranging from topnotch to low-performing; and is a historically low-income per capita city with a high poverty rate.

A sense of community, and its implicit embrace of inclusion, should always keep pace with a city's growth lest more of its citizens are left behind. It's the challenge of any growing city with world-class ambitions.

One of the ironies of Hemis-Fair '68, the world's fair that made San Antonio an emerging, international city, is that a few weeks after it opened in April 1968, San Antonio's poverty was spotlighted in the CBS documentary, "Hunger in America."

A historic 1921 flood and a pandemic, 100 years later, have also highlighted San Antonio's inequities and, in the case of the flood, worsened them through policy decisions.

Each generation inherits legacies of progress as well as the challenges of work not completed and problems unaddressed. They bequeath that same heritage of success and failure to the generations coming after them. A city older than 300 years of age has been home to countless bearers of light.

Initially, this essay was to have been a history of some of these lights in San Antonio history. But elected officials and business leaders — and all their complicated legacies — kept crowding out everyone else and, in many ways, this SA Lights project is about *everyone else* — those whose lack of public office, wealth or other reasons kept them outside the inner sanctum of movers and shakers.

Of course, elected officials, business leaders, philanthropic foundations and nonprofits have, through vision, policies,

funding, and advocacy, shaped San Antonio, moved it forward and improved the quality of life for many of its citizens.

But as I wrote and rewrote, other historic examples, or lights, of people in areas such as education and housing came to mind. After I'd jotted them down, I was reminded that communities of faith built some of this city's most venerable institutions.

In education, for instance, because I regularly drive by the schools that are their legacies, I thought of Artemisia Bowden and Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy.

A city named after a saint may have been home to two more. Bowden, the Georgia-born daughter of slaves, arrived in San Antonio in 1902 to revive St. Philip's Normal and Industrial School, which mostly served poor Black girls. The school was founded by the Episcopal Church.

Bowden not only valiantly kept the school alive through difficult times but expanded its mission, casting a wider net over who would be educated.

In 1918, Bowden, moved the school to San Antonio's East Side while advocating for a junior college for the Black community. St. Philip's Junior College opened in 1927. St. Philip's is a historically Black college and Hispanic-serving institution with an enrollment of 11,590, of whom a majority are Latino.

In 2015, the Episcopal Church elevated Bowden to sainthood with Aug. 18 as her saint day.

Inspired by a sermon she heard in 1887, Healy-Murphy, an Irish immigrant and widow, was moved to dedicate her life and fortune to the education of Black children in San Antonio. Educating San Antonio's Black children had never been a priority — except for San Antonio's Black parents.

In 1888, she opened St. Peter Claver Mission, the first Catholic school for African Americans in Texas. Along with the school, at the corner of Nolan and Live Oak streets on the city's East Side, Healy-Murphy also built a chapel and established the first Catholic parish for African Americans in the state.

This was done with considerable opposition from members of the community. Healy-Murphy then founded Texas' first Catholic community of religious women, the Sisters of the Holy Ghost, which is now known as the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate.

Still standing at Nolan and Live Oak streets, but renamed the Healy-Murphy Center, the school is now an alternative education program offering high school and GED curriculums, daycare, and health services.

Healy-Murphy is now in the Catholic Church's canonization process toward possible sainthood.

The Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate are just one example of the impact that congregations of nuns have had on San Antonio and the long-standing institutions they've created.

The Sisters of Divine Providence built Our Lady of the Lake University. The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word founded the University of the Incarnate Word and Santa Rosa Hospital.

The story of housing in San Antonio and the ongoing struggle to provide quality and affordable housing for everyone can't be told without chapters on Father Carmelo Tranchese and Habitat for Humanity.

Many have heard of Habitat for Humanity, the nonprofit ecumenical organization that has built, rehabilitated and repaired hundreds of thousands of houses around the world, and which brings people together to build homes. Most may not know that the first Habitat for Humanity home was built on San Antonio's West Side, on Hidalgo Street. The San Antonio affiliate of Habitat for Humanity was founded in 1976 by Faith Lytle; her husband, Bill, a Presbyterian minister; and Rod and Patti Radle.

Fewer are familiar with the Italian-born Tranchese who, in 1932, was assigned to Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church on San Antonio's West Side, the heart of the city's Mexican American community. He arrived to a community of dilapidated shacks without toilets and running water, of unpaved streets that flooded when it rained and high rates of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, smallpox and diphtheria.

When Congress passed the Housing Act of 1937, which created the U.S. Housing Authority and funding for clearing slums and the building of public housing, Tranchese began advocating,

through a letter-writing campaign, for public housing in San Antonio.

He reached out to first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who visited him in San Antonio. Tranchese's campaign led to Alazan Courts opening in 1940 and Apache Courts in 1942 as San Antonio's first public housing.

These were followed by Victoria Courts, Wheatley Courts and Lincoln Heights.

The flooding streets Tranchese saw in West Side neighborhoods were a regular recurrence predating his arrival and continued after he left San Antonio.

In September 1921, San Antonio suffered the most destructive flood in its history.

The overflow from creeks and ditches rushed into the San Antonio River and San Pedro Creek out of which rose waves of water that crashed into the city. Houses, poles and trees were ripped from their foundations, cars slammed into buildings and more than 50 people — those who were accounted for — were killed. Most of those deaths were in the West Side where dozens of houses — more like shacks — were washed away.

The flood led to a bond election that funded the building of the Olmos Basin, which protected downtown from flood risk. This stimulated investment in the area including a construction boom in the late 1920s, which saw the raising of landmarks such as the

Smith-Young/Tower Life Building, the Medical Arts Building, the Municipal Auditorium, the Scottish Rite Temple and the San Antonio-Express News building.

The Basin was essential and a springboard for the city's economic growth, but it did nothing to protect the West Side from floods whose muddy waters, for decades, would continue to overflow ditches and rush through its neighborhoods, often claiming more lives. These floods and the lack of drainage they highlighted led to the 1974 founding of Communities Organized for Public Service (known as COPS) by the master community organizer Ernesto Cortes, a son of the West Side.

Believing in the natural leadership in neighborhoods and churches, the organization (now COPS/Metro) was made up of more than two dozen parishes in which people, no matter their income or education, learned they could be sources of light to illuminate and find solutions to their problems.

Armed with passion, knowledge of the issues and a newly developed fearlessness in confronting city and corporate leaders, they discovered an ability to correct inequities such as bonds being approved for West Side drainage projects but never spent on those projects.

While these small examples reflect the impact that all communities of faith have had on San Antonio, faith isn't the only light guiding people to do good works. People affiliated with no religion are no less connected to the women, men and children in need around them and no less committed to helping them.

Nonbelievers are no less driven by the impulse to fulfill their moral responsibilities in pursuit of community.

A crusty and lovable former Express-News city editor, the late Craig Thomason, used to marvel at the generosity of the people in this city by saying, “Never underestimate the heart of San Antonio.”

Those hearts are moved by many things including love, compassion, conscience, faith and shared humanity. The heart of San Antonio is a beacon calling attention to those most in need of the warmth of community, those carrying burdens in darkness that they shouldn't bear alone.

Burdens each of us has the power to lighten.