



RALPH L. CORRIGAN

# ANSWERING THE CALL

*The Story of Community Service  
and Volunteerism at Sacred Heart University*

# ANSWERING THE CALL



*"Thousands of students and faculty and staff have been involved in some form of community service – Habitat for Humanity, the Merton House Soup Kitchen, tutoring at one of the local schools, visiting old age homes. You name it, we have students and faculty who have done it. There is a genuine concern for the poor."*

– Anthony J. Cerneria  
President, Sacred Heart University



*"This book is really fascinating, beautifully written, and assimilates a tremendous amount of material into a dramatic and engaging 'story' that tells something very important about what the school is about. It should be read by all members of the Sacred Heart Community."*

– Sid Gottlieb  
Professor, Sacred Heart University

*"This book tells the story of a journey of the heart, transformed by walking with the poor of El Salvador and Bridgeport – people who teach us about the meaning of hope, faith, and love."*

– Eilene Bertsch  
Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs  
Sacred Heart University



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## **The Story of Community Service and Volunteerism at Sacred Heart University**

Ralph L. Corrigan

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*Illustrations follow page 66*

## *Foreword*

**I**n Dr. Corrigan's moving account of Sacred Heart University's growing engagement with the world, you will read dozens of stories of selfless involvement by members of our community.

Some come here with a home-grown appreciation of the value of helping others, of growing into their best selves by reaching out to those in need. For others, it is more obviously a journey they wouldn't dare to have dreamed of when first they arrived at Sacred Heart University.

Thousands of our students, faculty, and staff have participated in community service. Why do we do it? Because, as a Catholic university, answering the call of the prophets and the Gospel to feed and clothe the needy, to visit those in prisons, to build bridges of justice and peace, flows from the heart of our deepest tradition. We do it, in the final analysis, because it's who we are, and it's who we want to be. It is a defining element of what it means to be human.

Sacred Heart University is motivated by a recognition of the dignity and worth of every human being as a daughter or son of God, a creature of inestimable value. Our Mission Statement puts it bluntly. Our University, it declares, "has a responsibility to share its resources and its special gifts and talents for the betterment of the human community. All members of the University community are encouraged to participate in the wider community through service to others, especially the poor."

In our years of community service many of us have learned a very important lesson. The lesson is this: Where there is love, there is life, and where there is life, there is joy and hope. When we extend ourselves in love toward another, in concern and compassion, we find our very selves. Love invites us to open our minds and our hearts, to be transformed and renewed.

Some years ago, Mother Teresa addressed a group of graduates with these thoughts: "I pray that those young people do not carry just a piece of paper with them but that they carry with them love, peace, and joy. That they become the sunshine of God's love to our people, the hope of eternal happiness and the burning flame of love wherever they go. That they become the carriers of God's love, that they be able to give what they have received. For they have received not to keep but to share."

Sacred Heart University has been richly blessed over these decades, and *Answering the Call* shows you some of the important reasons. Students and staff alike recognize engagement in the world as part of their ongoing educations. Just as they did not begin the process of learning when they entered this special community, so we hope they will not imagine that it ends when they take their leave of us. In the same way, the vocation of building up the City of God on this good earth belongs to all of us, all our days.

Anthony J. Cernera  
President, Sacred Heart University

## *Preface*

**O**n a breezy, sunny afternoon in late April of 2001, people stood four and five deep in a semi-circle around the front steps of the St. Charles Urban Center on East Main Street in Bridgeport. The crowd—including representatives from St. Charles Parish, the Inner-City Foundation, the Diocese of Bridgeport, the Bridgeport Community Health Center, and administrators and health professionals from Sacred Heart University—was assembled for the ribbon-cutting and blessing ceremony for the Sacred Heart University/St. Charles Church Health and Wellness Center, a facility dedicated to providing expert health care for parishioners and residents of Bridgeport.

At the ceremony, to place the moment in perspective, Dr. Anthony J. Cerna, president of the University, spoke about how more than a decade earlier, with the assassination of the Jesuits at the University of Central America in 1989, Sacred Heart University had pledged its assistance to El Salvador, to help in any way it could to support the growing worldwide appeal to end that country's bloody civil war. Soon after the Jesuits were slain, said Dr. Cerna, to underscore the University's solidarity with the people of El Salvador in their struggle to obtain social justice, and to show support for the voice of the Church in that region at that time, Sacred Heart University bestowed an honorary doctorate on the Archbishop of El Salvador, Arturo Rivera Damas. Next, the President explained, the University decided to further support the fledgling peace process in that country by sending faculty and administrative delegates to El Salvador. Then Dr. Cerna made the connection between the new Health Center and El Salvador by saying, "My friend Father Brackley, a Jesuit who worked in the South Bronx and who took up the cause of the slain Jesuit rectors said to us when we visited the University



of Central America, 'You don't have to travel all the way to El Salvador to help the poor and oppressed. You can do that right in Bridgeport.'" And that, the President said, is why we are here and why the Health and Wellness Center is today a reality.

Among the several representatives from the University for the Center's ribbon-cutting ceremonies stood five people who had traveled with the various delegations to El Salvador since the trips had started in the summer of 1992, each in her or his own way transformed by the Salvadoran experience, and returned to our campus determined to work on behalf of the poor in the inner-city. For those people, the Wellness Center represented a tangible outgrowth of their Salvadoran experience. That afternoon, several speakers at the ceremony lauded the efforts of those responsible for making the Wellness Center a reality, but the few words spoken by Sally Fernandez from the Parish Life Commission cut to the heart of the matter. "People come down here and say they are going to do something," she said. "Sacred Heart did it!"

Fernandez, in a real sense, gave voice to a distinctive feature of Sacred Heart University: its insistence, from its beginnings, on volunteerism and community service as an integral part of its educational mission. From the earliest days of the school, when the spirit of Vatican II and its mandate on the preferential treatment for the poor infused the thinking of the school's founders and the actions of the University community, to the current reality of service being fully institutionalized at the school, Sacred Heart University has projected an unwavering resolve to act as an agent for social change and social justice, particularly as those ideals apply to its neighbors, the forgotten poor of the Park City.

What follows is an attempt to capture in words and pictures the Sacred Heart University story of service and volunteerism, a story filled with heart-rending and heart-warming anecdotes, and the sweat and tears of countless members of the University community. Inevitably, because service so permeated the fabric of the school, some of what was accomplished will go unnoticed in the pages that follow, shrouded in the collective memories of the past. For every story told, others remain untold. Whether your story appears here or not, this book is dedicated to all who acted out the service mission of the University.

Much thanks must go to Dr. Cernerá for giving me the opportunity to work on this project, to Dr. Thomas Forget and Dr. Claire Paolini for helping me develop an outline of the chapters, and to Dr. David Curtis, whose advice on retirement gave me the space and time to write this book. Special thanks must go to my good friends Sr. Donna Dodge, Eilene Bertsch, and Phyllis Machledt, who generously put up with my constant pestering as the chapters progressed, and who from the beginning helped define, shape, and later critique this endeavor. Also, I want to thank Don Harrison from Public Relations for proofreading the manuscript, Eileen Paoletta for her gracious help running off multiple drafts of the chapters, Roberta Reynolds for her work on the photo section, and my long-time friend Joe Myers, of the Modern Languages and Classics Department at Siena College, for his assistance with the Spanish in the text. Lastly, a special note of gratitude must go to my colleague and mentor Sid Gottlieb for his patience, valuable advice, and expert editorial assistance.

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24. Muiioz, "Fighting the Enduring Earthquake," 2.
25. Terry Neu, personal interview, 28 February 2001.
26. Muiioz, "Fighting the Enduring Earthquake," 2
27. Neu, personal interview.
28. McAllister, "El Salvador Journal."
29. Neu, personal interview.
30. McAllister, "El Salvador Journal."
31. Neu, personal interview.
32. McAllister, "El Salvador Journal."
33. Sr. Elena Jaramillo. Unedited video by César Muiioz, Tierra Blanca, El Salvador, 11 February 2001.
34. McAllister, personal interview.
35. McAllister, "El Salvador Journal."
36. Lauren Kempton, campus e-mail.
37. Donna Dodge and Eilene Bertsch, personal interview, 18 January 2001.
38. Dodge and Bertsch, personal interview.
39. Bertsch, personal interview.
40. Bertsch, personal interview, 23 January 2001.
41. Dori Taylor Sullivan, personal interview, 29 January 2001.
42. Noelle D'Agostino, personal interview, 1 February 2001.
43. Fr. Bob Malone, personal interview, 21 February 2001.
44. Machledt, personal interview.
45. Machledt, personal interview.
46. Donna Dodge and Eilene Bertsch, personal interview, 13 March 2001.
47. Machledt, personal interview.
48. Anthony J. Cerner, "Welcome from the President," *Sacred Heart University Undergraduate Catalog* (2000-01), 2.
49. Anthony J. Cerner, class talk, 23 March 1999.

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