

Profiles in Christian Neighborliness

*By Marilyn Glaim
Photographs by C. Tom Turner*

Tourists driving California's Highway 29 see only mile after mile of beautiful vineyards. Eliseo Gonzalez and Jorge Foncecca see the grapes and care for them.

In California's beautiful Napa Valley there is a perennial shortage of decent housing for permanent and migrant workers who care for the grape vines that help make the valley one of the most popular and expensive tourist destinations on the West Coast. For the people who taste wine and dine their way up the valley, the men in the vineyards merely add to the scenery.

However, those who know the workers realize that their labor is backbreaking and that they toil in the vineyards long hours in the damp, foggy mornings of early spring, in the heat of summer, and in the chill air of the harvest. Most are family men with wives and children in Mexico. Wages start at \$8 per hour and go up to \$12 for more skilled jobs. The men keep only enough money to get by, sending the rest back to Mexico.

They cannot afford the typical \$1,000-dollar-per-month rent for an apartment, nor can they afford year-round leases. A few lucky ones get into the Calistoga Farmworker Center, a nonprofit establishment run by the California Human Development Corporation, where sixty men live dormitory style and eat in a common dining room hall for \$10 a day. Others stay with relatives, or they rent tiny apartments where a dozen men spread sleeping bags on the floor. Too many of these men camp in vineyards or under bridges or stay in city parks until the police move them on.

As the number of vineyard acres has increased, the need for workers has grown, but the number of farm worker camps has gone down. Vintners know that state rules for decent housing are both strict and enforced. They can make more money filling every spot of acreage with grapes than providing private housing for their laborers.

Many valley residents simply ignore these men—that is, when they're not complaining about their old cars and pickups. But the Farmworker Committee works to find permanent solutions to the housing shortage. Rosaura Segura chairs the committee. Monsignor John Brenkle and Issac Perez are two of its members. In the stories of these three individuals, who operate from a Christian perspective, lessons can be learned about what it means to live God's love for our neighbors as for ourselves.

Learning Lessons in Africa

Monsignor Brenkle, affectionately known simply as "Father" to his many parishioners in the valley, began his career rather conventionally as an

academic in canon law and a priest in a California city. Now seventy, he says he might have stayed in an all-too-comfortable position had it not been for his sisters, who were Catholic missionaries in Africa. They persuaded him to spend some time with them, and he developed an understanding of people in desperate physical and spiritual need.

In 1978, he went back to Calistoga, California, a changed man, knowing that he would serve his people differently afterward than before. At his new church in the Napa Valley he found himself drawn into the housing needs of Mexican workers when people from a nearby worker housing area began lining up at the Catholic Church in search of help. He quickly discovered that their housing lacked water because the landlord had failed to keep up with the water bills. He discovered to his surprise that the workers did not appear to mind hauling water—they had done it in Mexico—and was troubled by their terrible living conditions. Thus began his first efforts to improve worker housing.

In Calistoga, they were shutting down these [housing] places one by one and tearing them down. Then the spas started coming in and buying up everything, so the housing stock for the farm workers was being decimated. I was asked to get on a citizens' advisory committee to look at housing, and through that committee we obtained two or maybe three federal grants for \$600,000.00 each to rehab housing. That is how I got started in the housing business. We saved forty or fifty houses that people would remodel and then agree to use them as Section Eight government subsidized housing.

For him, volunteer work for housing became almost a second job. Father Brenkle remembers a friend from Ecumenical Associates for Housing saying, "Listen Father, you're never going to do this on a volunteer basis. You've got to go professional on this—set up a corporation where you hire somebody that's working on housing, because it's too complicated to do it on a volunteer basis." Father Brenkle took his advice and worked with the community to begin Napa Valley Ecumenical Housing in 1986. In the beginning it was a "shoestring" operation, as he refers to it, and when a director was first hired, Father Brenkle at first shared his own salary with him.

Then the big breakthrough came when we applied for a grant for \$50,000 from the Irvine Foundation. We got the grant for \$50,000 from the Irvine Foundation. This was 1986 or 1987. Twenty-five thousand was given outright, but the second \$25,000 had to be matched by local industry. So we went to some of the vintners and had lunches, where we asked for the matching \$25,000.

I think it was Jim Barrett from Chateau Montelena who said, "What do you really need? Twenty-five thousand is not going to get you anywhere is it?"

We said, "Well, it will pay Bill's [part-time] salary for a few months.

But I said, "It would be nice, Jim, if you could just add a zero to that and we would have a quarter of a million."

And he said, "Well, now you're talking."

They contributed to this fund over a period of three years and came up with about \$407,000.00.

As we talked, Father Brenkle began to bring out brochures that feature the beautiful and affordable apartment complexes built since that time: Hunts Grove and Stonebridge in St. Helena, with a combined total of 137 units, and La Predero, a 48-unit complex in Calistoga. Father Brenkle recalls with a wry smile that Hunts Grove "took us five years of struggling and effort, battling with the neighbors. Some people still don't talk to me because we put affordable housing in their neighborhood. I think they're kind of getting over that right now." He chuckles.

It's hard to imagine anyone not talking to Father Brenkle, but then we remember a recent interview with a local businessman who disparaged affordable housing. "No one helped me get a start," he said. We did not remind this man that the previous generation of family members had handed his business to him. Usually people who resist affordable housing are those who truly did not have to start on their own.

Although we might imagine that the intense work involved in getting affordable housing for working families might leave little time for his church or other volunteer work, Father Brenkle has kept up with a full schedule of church duties, even taking on extra part-time duties at a nearby diocese that had run into serious financial difficulties due to mismanagement and lawsuits against a priest accused of sexual misconduct. Father Brenkle helped straighten out the financial and legal woes of the diocese without dropping a beat in his home church.

He also kept up his efforts to get community support for more housing to accommodate temporary farm workers, and this is where his story directly involves Rosaura Segura and Isaac Perez.

Local Girl Makes Good

Segura grew up with her own reasons for being interested in Mexican farm workers: as a child, she came with her family to the Napa Valley from Mexico. Her father worked in the vineyards, and when she started school in St. Helena she knew only Spanish. She learned English quickly and fit into her new community well. In fact, she broke the usual Latina mold by going directly through college and into a management career in the wine industry.

While working as the tasting manager of the largest winery in the valley, she chanced upon her next job. Because of her facility with both Spanish and English, she was constantly asked to help new immigrants fill out their immigration papers. Though she was making good money at a place of employment she liked, she began to feel that her job was



Photo: C. Tom Turner

Monsignor John Brenkle worked to make affordable apartment complexes such as this one in St. Helena available for migrant workers.



more about money than helping people. In a leap of faith, she quit her secure winery job and started her own immigration services business, the only one of its kind in the Upper Napa Valley.

For a while I was by myself, and before I built a clientele, it was difficult financially. Father Brenkle knew I was struggling even though I wouldn't admit it: "Oh I'm doing fine, of course I am." But he could see I needed income, so he offered me a part-time job for the parish.

He said, "You know, you can do your stuff part time, and you can use the office there, but you've got to help me."

That is when all the housing development was going up—the low cost rentals—and I helped. I'm proud of that. I didn't do as much as I wish I had done, but just working by his side and learning from him was a great experience.

Segura's business is now successful and she remains active in the housing programs, having chaired the Farmworker Housing Committee for a number of years. She considers her immigration service to be a business as well as a helping agency, because she allows people who can't afford to pay in full to put something down and pay when they can. She says sometimes it's a long time before the final payment comes in, but everyone does eventually pay. They just come in with a pocket of cash and count out the money they still owe.

Unlike some social service entities in the valley, Segura does not resent the vintners. She credits two of the largest ones with great generosity toward farm workers and other needs in the valley. "I think that is why God has blessed them so much," she says.

Segura and Father Brenkle's latest victory is passage of a county measure that allows farm worker housing to be built on farm land. It took months to work out the legal difficulties and to persuade local residents that the measure would not provide legal precedent for ending the decades-old agricultural preserve law that prevents urban sprawl in the Napa Valley. Under the measure, a vintner is allowed to donate limited pieces of land for building nonprofit, communal-living labor camps similar to the Calistoga Farm Center. The first land donation, given by local vintner Joseph Phelps, has now been legally cleared for construction.

Until that new camp and others like it are built, farm workers continue to scramble for decent places to sleep. New men arrive each spring begging for places to stay. If Father Brenkle cannot find housing for them, he allows them to sleep on church property so close to his own residence that he can hear them getting up to dress for work in the mornings. He makes them as comfortable as possible, buying sleeping bags for men who come without bedding. He has a temporary shower installed, and he arranges for members of several churches in the valley to bring the men hot meals in the evenings. For the meals, the men pay a minimal fee; the sleeping accommodations are free. Father Brenkle and Rosaura Segura both dream and work toward the day when overflow accommodations will not have to be provided.

For a time, the Calistoga Farm Center was operated by the Isaac Perez family, shown here in the Farm Center kitchen.



Good Samaritan Burnout

Photo: C. Tom Turner

Isaac Perez is the former director of the Calistoga Farm Center. A member of a local conservative Protestant church and the Farmworker Housing Committee, he once worked closely with Father Brenkle and Segura. When we first met him in 1998, he showed us around the camp where he and his family lived with and cared for forty men. We sat in the camp's small, plainly furnished dining room as he told us about his daunting schedule.

Perez and his wife arose each morning by 3:30 a.m. to prepare breakfast and sack lunches for the men. Afterward, they left for work, some by 5:30 a.m. Perez and his wife then cleaned up and started preparations for supper. Although his wife usually managed to go back to bed for a couple more hours of sleep, he usually went straight to his office, where he dealt with mountains of paperwork or met with various groups, such as the Farmworkers Housing Committee.

When we first met Perez he expressed frustration over the lack of housing for farm workers. Even though the forty-person rule for the camp was to be strictly enforced, he admitted that he sometimes allowed extra men to sleep in cots in the camp's recreation room. He told us not to mention this violation of rules. Two years later, the overcrowding came to



a head. By that time we had developed a close working relationship with Perez. Our English majors at Pacific Union College were providing English as a second language classes for the men two evenings a week.

One day he told us to go ahead and photograph the evidence of extra men at the camp. He could no longer deal with turning men away, knowing full well that they would end up sleeping outdoors. He showed us through all the rooms in the camp where he allowed men to sleep and store their belongings. He took us around the parking lot, where we met men sleeping in their vans, their boots neatly lined up under their vehicles. They were allowed to use the bathrooms and have meals for a small daily fee.

No longer was Perez keeping his decision secret, and before long he was in open revolt against the California Human Development Corporation and the Farmworker Housing Committee, both of which he saw as incapable of understanding the urgency of the situation. Even though these groups had quietly worked with local officials to increase the legal camp population to sixty men, Perez argued that farm worker housing needed to move forward faster.

The revolt came to a head when he had the men stand out on the highway with signs and invited the local press to run stories about the overcrowding. Others viewed his behavior as insubordinate, and Perez was told he could not continue as camp director unless he signed an agreement never to overcrowd again or go to the press. His refusal led to his resignation and the installation of a new director, and before long Perez took his family and moved to the south end of the valley.

In these examples of three dedicated Christians who idealize the concept of serving "the least of these" why were two able to keep on year after year working to improve living conditions for workers? Why did one self-destruct in the effort to do good?

Our assessment is that Father Brenkle and Rosaura Segura learned the art of pacing themselves and, even more importantly, of building community alliances so they did not work in isolation. Their work includes the full spectrum of community members, including many churches and local and county political organizations. They know when to press hard for change and when to allow themselves time to recuperate from the extra hours of volunteer work. The loss of Isaac Perez to the community seems to have occurred because he began to feel isolated in his work.

There is much to learn from all three stories. Truly caring for one's neighbors means more than the individual or single church approach. It means working together across boundaries of church and class to build lasting working relationships.

Marilyn Glaim is professor of English at Pacific Union College. In 1998, she joined with Tom Turner, chair of the college's art department, in a project that interviewed and photographed workers in the Napa Valley. A Pew Research Grant supported the project. Among the several dozen people interviewed were three valley residents, who, for Glaim and Turner, defined Christianity in action.



Photo: C. Tom Turner

Rosaura Segura interviews a client at her immigration services agency.