

November 15, 2005

**Section:** San Tan Monthly

**Edition:** Final Chaser

**Page:** ST1

## ANGEL IN THE MORNING FEEDS THE HOMELESS

*Lisa Nicita, The Arizona Republic*

It was still dark when I set off to meet Mary Gloria near Norton's Country Corner one Thursday morning last month. Gloria planned to hand out hot breakfasts to Queen Creek's homeless, many of them day laborers, as part of her work as the founder and president of **Pan de Vida**.

I keep the windows up as I drive because it's surprisingly cold. I know, I'm shaming my Midwest roots, but I needed to bundle up even though it was only October - in Arizona no less. I sit in my car and wait for Gloria to arrive, watching several men standing just west of Norton's in sweatshirts and jackets with their hands in their pockets.

Gloria's car pulls up at about 6 a.m. She jumps out and sets up a folding table with the help of volunteers Anne and Bill Shanley. Gloria puts a few garbage bags full of clothes on the ground next to her car, and a half-dozen men walk up and rifle through them looking for something that fits.

The Shanleys set up an orange cooler full of hot, sweet tea. When they offer me a cup, it takes a half-second for me to accept. I needed a heater if nothing else.

Gloria sets up her "buffet" in the back of her car while Anne Shanley slices apples and tosses them into a fruit salad.

Then, the guys line up.

Gloria pulls the foil off a pot of Ramen noodles and peas, takes the lid off of the chili beans and tosses a couple packages of tortillas to the table where the Shanleys are standing and helping the workers practice their English.

"They are trying to impress them by speaking English," Gloria said as she scoops a steaming plate and hands it to the Shanleys.

Anne scoops salad onto the plate and Bill adds tortillas and then hands it to the waiting workers.

Gloria does this three to four times a week. She's been cooking breakfast for the homeless for about a year.

"I knew a lot of people came here from Mexico and they got here penniless," she said. "I wanted to do something."

The men make tables out of the trunks of idling cars or the sides of a truck bed.

Bill Shanley asks Gloria to help translate to a worker, who has asked his help in tracking down money that is owed to him.

His story isn't all that rare, Gloria said. People often hire the day laborers from the side of Ocotillo Road and then don't pay them, knowing they would be afraid to report it for fear of deportation. Gloria has a small booklet the size of a wallet that she hands the workers. To help them keep track of how much money they are owed, the packet has columns for hours worked, money owed and license plate numbers. Gloria said she and Shanley report non-payment to the police.

The first batch of men finishes eating within minutes, but another wave strolls in

soon enough.

After accepting a plate of food, one man puts two dollar bills on the table. Gloria thanks him.

"I like them to contribute, give a little bit that they get back," she said.

The chili runs out, so Gloria opens a batch of Spanish rice. The tortillas are gone, so the men who eat later get rolls instead.

The men are shy and polite. They ask how Gloria is doing and she responds in Spanish. No one comes back for a second helping, and many ask for a trash bag when they are unable to find it. Gloria forgot one this day. Almost all smile and say goodbye when they leave.

Gloria, one of nine Valley volunteers celebrated for their work in their communities this year by the Hon Kachina Council, is busy planning **Pan de Vida's** holiday activities. She is organizing a seniors dinner with music and games at Town Hall sometime around Christmas. She is planning for Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless in the same dirt lot where she serves breakfast during the week. A club at Queen Creek High School will help her distribute wrapped gifts on Christmas Eve as part of the Adopt-A-Family program.

She's also hoping to have to sort through a lot of warm clothes donated to the non-profit organization in the coming weeks.

"They come from countries where they're not used to it being this cold," Gloria said.

"I'm always trading my sweatshirt because I'll be wearing one and someone will come and need one."

Gloria strategically places herself near the hot food in her trunk in case she surrenders her jacket.

Three stragglers come by just before she plans to pack up for the day, but Gloria was expecting them.

"They are coming later and later because they are getting picked up later," Gloria said. "They are usually the last to come."

It's just after 7 a.m. and I watch as the men wait by the side of the road looking for work. Gloria packs up her table and puts it back in her trunk. She'll go to Bashas' grocery store next to pick up food to distribute to families living in Sonoqui Park. Then she'll go home and sort through donated clothes.

She'll see the men again in a couple days.

Every month, reporter Lisa Nicita will spend a day with someone in the Santan area. She'll show you the real person behind the job, give you a peek into their lives and hopefully make you laugh a bit.

CAPTION: Mary Gloria, president and founder of **Pan de Vida**, serves breakfast to Queen Creek's homeless, many of them day laborers, a few times a week.