

## **MoNA Moments: *Interviews with Children of the Valley***

Transcript provided by George Luo.

Welcome to MoNA Moments, a podcast hosted by the Museum of Northwest Art, located in La Conner, Washington. The Museum of Northwest Art resides in the land of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Swinomish tribal community. With gratitude, we honor their stewardship of these lands since time immemorial to the present day. This land acknowledgement does not take the place of authentic relationships with indigenous communities.

In this episode of MoNA Moments, you will hear interviews from Children of the Valley or COV, an after school program in Skagit county whose mission is to serve under-resourced children and their families by valuing their cultural identity and empowering them through education, personal growth, and mentorship.

You will hear from Flora Lucatero, the current executive director at COV, Mary Nolt, the founder of COV, and Erica Gaona, a parent whose children have been enrolled in the COV program. Founded in 2006, COV works in partnership with the Mount Vernon, Sedro-Wooley, and Burlington-Edison's school districts to serve students from kindergarten to sixth grade who are referred by a school teacher or counselor or administrator for exhibiting substantial academic need. Free to the families and children, the Children of the Valley program is guided by five cornerstones of care. One, academic assistance. Two, enrichment activities. Three, social and emotional learning. Four, family support. Five, mentorship.

Children of the Valley partnered with the Museum of Northwest Art in 2024 to present *My Roots: honoring the cultural identity of Skagit valley's under-resourced children*, an art exhibition highlighting COV student's culture and identity in MONA's Outside In education gallery. "My Roots" is on display at MoNA from February 3rd through May 12th, 2024. Thank you for listening to MoNA Moments.

Hi, I'm Flora Lucatero, executive director for the Children of the Valley after school program. Thank you so much for being here and listening a little bit about our program and who we serve. I'm excited to be interviewing a few people who have been impacted by our program, and I'm excited for you to hear some stories on how COV has made a difference in their lives and first I'm excited to introduce our first interviewee, Mary Nolt, who is the founder of Children of the Valley. She is the one that had the idea to start this free after school program for kids most in need of our community. So welcome Mary, can you tell us a little about yourself?

**Mary Noltz:** Yeah so I'm Mary Noltz and I am a retired schoolteacher from Mount Vernon school district and retired from Centennial (that was my last teaching assignment in the third grade).

**Flora Lucatero:** Ok, Can you explain the need you saw in your community before COV was founded?

**Mary Noltz:** When I was teaching, I became aware of the need, especially our underprivileged students, there was a great need for a safe place to be. I remember being heartbroken when a few of my students went home to homes that didn't have a parent there and they were getting into problems and I was so bothered by that that I began to feel a strong need for an after school program of some sort. And it was a vision that God would not let me get rid of. I was kind of prodded on by that need for a couple of years. I really felt like we had to do something.

**Flora Lucatero:** So Mary after overseeing the need in your community, what were the following steps that you took to help create COV.

**Mary Noltz:** Well the first thing I did was realize that I couldn't do it alone so I started talking to people who I thought could help do something and luckily people came into my life. God put people into my life to help create some positive effects toward getting us started. For example, Ken Wagner, there were two candidates for our church socio pastors position and he had expertise in finance and also had a lot of knowledge about a nonprofit in Seattle that he and his wife were involved with. And then I met Molly and Don Mullet who were in a number of nonprofits and really had a world view and a lot of connections that I didn't have and ultimately they really believed in this vision too. They believed in a place to be and to get support and as Don Mullet once said "the community would be as blessed as the students would be". So through their help and the efforts of other people that came onboard, we made it happen, and it was a God thing totally, and it still is.

**Flora Lucatero:** So what is something that you wish people knew about the power of a nonprofit organization like COV?

**Mary Noltz:** In both ways, both with the volunteers and with the people receiving the help. It's a win-win for everyone and nonprofits offer a benefit that you can't get otherwise and it's very impactful.

**Flora Lucatero:** So is there anything, Mary, that you wanna share more about COV?

**Mary Noltz:** One of the things that I was always hopeful for was that the community would. That there would be a bridge that would be happening between cultures, and I believe that's one of the beautiful things about COV. For people to understand that there is a need, it is important and also it creates a beautiful relationship between all of us then if we can all work together to support each other. And the best part, and the most important part of this whole thing is that I had a part in hiring Flora Lucatero who is an amazing executive director.

**Voiceover:** Now we will hear from Flora Lucatero, the current executive director of the Children of the Valley, about how she first got involved in the program. We are here today with Flora Lucatero, our executive director of the Children of the Valley.

**Interviewer:** So how are you Flora?

**Flora Lucatero:** I'm good, thank you.

**Interviewer:** So we have a few questions here. Can you share a little bit about who you are and your current role here at COV?

**Flora Lucatero:** Yeah so I'm Flora Lucatero and as you said I'm the executive director for Children of the Valley and I am actually the founding executive director so I've been here for 17 years and helped start Children of the Valley to become what it is today, so I actually was born and raised in my youth years in California, moved to Washington state in third grade and then to Mount Vernon when I was in sixth grade so I say I was raised here in Mount Vernon in Skagit county but still half my life was in California but graduating Mount Vernon high school I went to Western Washington University, graduating with my bachelor's degree there and moved away after college for a few years, then got some life experience, and then moved back here in 2006 and that's when we started Children of the Valley.

**Interviewer:** Awesome, great. So here is our next question. What is some gate or barrier of hardships that you have faced since graduating from Skagit County?

**Flora Lucatero:** Yeah so many barriers and challenges that we see students face or why students refer over to COV really have to do with their personal life. We, here at COV, want to provide a safe and positive environment for kids after school everyday. And Why students are referred to COV is due to homes after school that don't have adults where they would be going home to empty households. No one is at home to help them with their homework or prepare an afternoon snack or food. So we see a lot

of students referred that parents work long hours, work beyond six pm, maybe raised in single-parent households where there is only one adult in the home or we see students that have language barriers, parents that don't speak the language to be able to assist the students with their homework because it is not in the first language that they speak. There are many challenges and barriers that our families face as to why a student is referred over to COV, but I think one of the biggest challenges is poverty. About 64% of Mount Vernon school district students receive free and reduced lunch and that means that our students are living at or below the federal poverty level, which means you know many more families are struggling with food insecurity, paying their utilities, really providing basic needs for their family's food, clothing, and shelter and so that is a barrier and you know if kids aren't taking care, or if they don't feel secure in those areas, then it is really hard for them to learn so I see that as being really the biggest barriers that our students face but it is something that we can provide for them after school until 6 pm, until they go home.

**Interviewer:** Great, thank you for sharing. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

**Flora Lucatero:** No, that's everything

**Interviewer:** Beautiful, thank you

**Voiceover:** and finally you will hear an interview with COV parent, Erica Gaona, about how Children of the Valley has impacted her family.

**Interviewer:** So go ahead and introduce yourself to me

**Erica Gaona:** Umm my name is Erica Gaona. I'm a COV parent.

**Interviewer:** Ok and can you share a little bit more about who you are and how long you have been part of COV?

**Erica Gaona:** I'm a medical assistant. I work for Semarc community health center in Mount Vernon, and I have been with COV for seven years now.

**Interviewer:** Ok and who first started COV or how did you hear about COV?

**Erica Gaona:** My friend had her daughter in COV before my son started COV and when I talked to the school counselor, the school counselor then referred my son to COV and that is how we started the COV journey with my oldest son.

**Interviewer:** and why did you talk to the school counselor about wanting your son to be a part of COV?

**Erica Gaona:** Well, I noticed that he was falling behind on his reading, his writing, and he was a shy boy.

**Interviewer:** So before your son attended COV, what were some of the needs you and your family or your son faced?

**Erica Gaona:** well before COV was founded or well before I even knew about it, it was him not being able to read properly even though he got help at home also I didn't feel that the school that he was going to was hearing my concerns so that's why I talked to the counselor and also talking to my friend "do you know that my daughter is going to an after school program and they are helping her with her homework, especially math, she is having some problems with it and she needs an adult to help her with it, so you should talk to your school counselor and see if they might be able to do a referral, and so that's how I found out about it

**Interviewer:** Ok, great, thanks. So how has COV helped you and your family?

**Erica Gaona:** Oh my gosh. It has helped us in many ways. [first], with my son, it helped him to be less shy, and it also got him into sports. He has made a 180 degree change overall.

**Interviewer:** It's ok. You are doing great.

**Erica Gaona:** He didn't have many friends. He is making friends now. Oh my gosh. Interviewer: and now your daughter is attending COV, right?

**Erica Gaona:** Yeah, my daughter is in COV. It also has helped her. She is much more outspoken but she isn't also able to make many friends. She is shy, and COV has helped her a lot. Whenever I go out, I see a lot of her little friends and she tends to get shy but I know that she has more interaction with other girls at COV.

**Interviewer:** That's great, have you seen your children's grades increase?

**Erica Gaona:** I have. With my daughter, her reading level went up by three levels. Right now, in English, she is reading at the level that she is supposed to be reading. And in

Spanish, she still has a couple of levels to go up. The last report that I got is that she is at a normal reading level.

**Interviewer:** Oh my gosh. That's amazing and now your older son is volunteering because now he is in middle school, right?

**Erica Gaona:** Yeah he is a 7th grader right now, and he volunteers a couple of days a week because you know he is also in sports. His schedule kind of changes a lot.

**Interviewer:** Does he talk about how he was a student at COV for five years and now he has come back as a volunteer? Does he talk about his experience or difference in that or how it has impacted him being a student and now volunteer?

**Erica Gaona:** Well he says that now he likes to volunteer but he also misses being a student so yeah

**Interviewer:** Does he talk about what his favorite things were in COV?

**Erica Gaona:** umm when he was a student he said that he really liked the field trips and the different activities that they have to do here. Also not just the school portion about it but also learning how to be a team player, learning different life skills (e.g. cooking, sewing, painting), so he really likes that part

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I love that Erica. Is there anything else you wanna share?

**Erica Gaona:** Well, I just wanted to say that COV is in all of our children. Thank you so much

**Interviewer:** thank you

**Voiceover:** Come to the Museum of Northwest Art to see art from the students of the Children of the Valley *My roots: honoring the roots of Skagit valley's under-resourced children* from February 12th to 24. Thanks for listening to this MoNA moment.