

FAR-REACHING LEGACY

by Kathryn Hauelsen



*“... showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation
of those who love me and keep my commandments.”*

(Exodus 20:6)

What prompts someone to reach out across cultural borders to assist others? Can this characteristic be taught? Or is it more likely to be caught? Wherever she picked up the “love thy neighbor” trait, Laura Mellenbruch’s kindness to her Latino neighbors nearly a century ago set in motion a legacy of ministry that still unfolds today.

Known to some as “The Mother of Mexican Missions,” Laura’s influence on her Latino neighbors began in the San Juan community deep in the Texas Valley near the growing city of McAllen. In 1917, when the Mellenbruch family moved there from Kansas, San Juan was rural farm land. Land was inexpensive, according to Laura’s grandson, Larry Mellenbruch. The soil was good, and the growing season was longer than in Kansas.

During World War I, San Juan was made up of a combination of Latino families who’d been there for generations and newly arriving immigrants from Mexico, eager to escape the unrest in Mexico at that time. Part of the reason, farm land was cheap was because some people feared a possible invasion of Germans through Mexico into the Texas Valley. The Mellenbruchs and other Anglos saw the potential of the area and moved in as others were moving out.

Laura Nevada Lehman Mellenbruch was born in 1871 in Nevada when her father was searching for gold in the region. Her upbringing prepared her for cross-cultural community life in San Juan, according to Laura’s daughter-in-law Julia Mellenbruch, who said Laura’s mother was the only white woman in the Nevada region.

Laura Mellenbruch’s father’s family had immigrated to America in the 1700s as part of a Mennonite migration from Switzerland. By the 1800s they’d moved to Ohio. After a failed attempt to find gold in the Australian Gold Rush of the 1800s, her father settled the family in a remote area of Nevada.

A MOVE AND A MARRIAGE AND MORE MOVES

When Laura’s mother got tuberculosis, she took Laura and her brother back to Central Ohio to be near their grandparents.

Laura’s future husband, Louis C., attended Capital University in Columbus, Ohio—near where Laura was living. By then Laura had earned the title “orphan girl” since her father was out West and her mother had died. After Louis C. and Laura met and married, they moved to Kansas where all nine of their children were born. In 1917, they moved with their seven younger children to San Juan and took up farming near one of the canals running through the area.

Two of her children—daughter Irene and son Glen—returned to Ohio years later to study for ministry at Capital University. Irene then studied Spanish at the University of Texas in Austin.

The Mellenbruchs soon met their many Latino neighbors who came around to buy milk, eggs, and fresh produce. And they got a lot more than food for their bodies; they also received spiritual care from Laura and her family.

As a teenager, daughter Irene would sometimes translate between her family and their Spanish-speaking neighbors. That’s how the Trevino and Mellenbruch families got acquainted. Mañuela Trevino remembers that Irene would gather all the children on their front porch or under the shade of a big tree and teach them Bible stories.

“My father liked that idea. So we were allowed to go there often,” she said.

MINISTRY TO THE SICK

While most of the Latino families in San Juan were Catholic, the Mellenbruchs were Protestants. When the American Lutheran Church established a mission in the area in 1925, the family joined it. Laura then helped build a series of missions in Las Colonias—small communities throughout the Texas Valley.

What Laura's Latino neighbors really remember is how she helped them during the 1919 influenza epidemic that swept through the San Juan area.

Today as Mañuela Trevino Alanís approaches her 100th birthday, she still remembers the kindness of the Mellenbruch family when she was a little girl.

Mañuela was the only one in her family who wasn't in bed and critically ill during the epidemic. She recounted that, "Laura came to our house every day, day after day. She nursed my family back to health. She did that for many families."

Laura's grandson Larry thinks Laura also must have presided over the funerals of the neighbors who died in the epidemic. "There weren't any regular Catholic priests in the area at that time, so she must have had to tend to them," he said. Priests were scarce in that part of Texas in those days. One would come around periodically to perform weddings, baptisms, and confirmations.

A CONVERT TO THE LUTHERAN FAITH

Mañuela Trevino was one of many Latino children blessed by the Mellenbruch family. She remembers how her family developed a deep affection for these German neighbors who helped them through the

flu epidemic. Because of the compassion Laura showed the Trevino family and the attention Irene gave the children, Mañuela's father decided the family would join the new San Juan Lutheran church. Mañuela says they did so despite strong peer pressure and criticism from Catholic friends and neighbors.

When Mañuela married Santiago Alanís, they continued to worship at the Lutheran church. On Sundays the whole family worshiped at the church, and during the week, the children attended the school next door started by the congregation.

Laura died in 1948, yet her legacy lives on. Stories of her extraordinary kindness during the flu epidemic are told over and over in that area. Her portrait hangs in the fellowship hall of San Juan Lutheran. Beneath it is this inscription:

*Mrs. L. C. Mellenbruch (1871-1948)
Mother of Mexican Missions
Of the American Lutheran Church*

LIKE A PEBBLE IN A POND

Laura's ministry and compassion for others has rippled out to three generations of neighbors. One indirect recipient of her outreach is Jay (Javier) Alanís, the youngest of Mañuela's sons.

Jay was an attorney in Brownsville, Texas, when his pastor, seeing his capacity for leadership and his passion for helping people, encour-

aged him to study for the ministry. He earned a master of divinity degree through the Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest (LSPS) in 1992. The director of the LSPS program encouraged Jay to get a Ph.D. and return to teach.

"I went to Chicago [Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago] to study and returned to Austin as assistant professor of theology, culture, and mission in 2002," he said.

Subsequent jobs included associate professor, director of TEEM (theological education in emerging ministries), and academic dean. In 2009, he was named the interim executive director of LSPS, which continues to offer the TEEM program with a special emphasis on preparing church leaders for service in cross-cultural contexts.

Today, Jay works closely with leaders at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to strengthen theological education in cross-cultural outreach. As a beneficiary of Laura's ministry, he was witness to an expert role model in effective outreach in cross-cultural settings.

Like all of Mañuela and Santiago's children, Sylvia (Jay's sister), grew up in the San Juan Lutheran congregation and school. She then taught for more than 30 years at the school, which is now closed.

After her husband died and

she retired from teaching, Sylvia's pastor encouraged her to study for the ministry. "He told me about the TEEM program in Austin."

"Me?" she thought. "I just couldn't imagine it." Today she laughs as she recalls the journey that eventually led her to Austin and the TEEM program.

"I didn't even realize this was where my brother was teaching!" she said. "Once he heard I was talking about studying for the ministry he told me, 'Just get on the plane and come to Austin. I'll help you.'"

FULL CIRCLE

Sylvia became a pastor in 2005 when she graduated from the program. And what turned out to be her first call?

"Right back to San Juan," she said. "It works out well. I know all of them. We can laugh and joke together. But I can also say the hard things that they need to hear because I know them and they know I love them."

Now she is also passing on the example the Mellenbruch family set for the Trevino Alanís family. One of the people Pastor Sylvia is mentoring is Alma Morales-Saavedra. For more than 20 years Alma served Latino families in the valley as a Methodist lay preacher. In 2004, she completed her TEEM studies at LSPS. Today she is pastor at Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey

in Pharr, Texas.

Pastor Alma explains there is a great need for ministry among new residents—both those with and without proper documentation. She guides her church to meet the spiritual needs of their neighbors, just



Laura Mellenbruch

as Laura Mellenbruch did for her neighbors a century ago.

Also like Laura, Alma tends to practical needs such as teaching women homemaking skills, overseeing teaching English as a second language (ESL) classes, and helping women who are separated from their husbands or families because of work issues.

"Sometimes the men come here for work and leave their families behind," she said. "They cannot earn enough to get documents for their families to join them."

"Sometimes the family lives in the area and the men leave to find work somewhere else," she added. "It is very difficult because without the documents and no way to earn enough money to get their papers, they cannot come back for several years. They cannot get permission to work."

The connections between the Mellenbruch and Trevino Alanís families continue today. Laura's grandson Larry and his wife Nancy attend another San Juan/St. John's Lutheran Church in Austin. The congregation is one church in two languages.

The compassion and witness that Laura Mellenbruch showed at the dawn of the 20th century is being carried forward in the 21st century by the grandchildren of those she helped.

Thousands have been blessed because one woman reached across cultural borders to share the gospel and help her neighbors in thought, word, and deed. 🌿

The Rev. Kathryn Hau Eisen has served congregations in Texas and Ohio. Now semi-retired, she helps non-profit organizations with small budgets reach big goals. Visit her Web site at www.kathyhau Eisen.com for more information.