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TAMPA'S LITTLE MOTHER

The heroic story of a woman who gave up all her wealth in order to assure homes for the homeless children of Tampa, Florida.

By RUTH VINCENT NOWACK

DR. RUBEN MORENO DIES AT AGE 70

Dr. Ruben Moreno, 70, 589 Luzon Ave., died in a Tampa hospital on Oct. 18, 1979. He was born in Cuba on Sept. 24, 1909 and brought to Tampa at the age of nine months. (Tampa Historian Tony Pizzo recalls playing marbles with Moreno next to his father's store on 7th Avenue and 7th Street.)

Moreno attended St. Joseph Convent and Jesuit High School, then called Sacred Heart College. He was graduated from Loyola University of New Orleans in 1933. He practiced dentistry in Tampa thereafter until taken ill in 1975.

Dr. Moreno was organizational president of the Ybor City Optimist Club and elected its official first President after charter on Feb. 10, 1936. He was elected Lt. Governor of the 4th District of Optimist International in 1939. That same year, 1939, Dr. Moreno was drafted by the Presidents Round Table of Civic Clubs as a nominee in a slate proposed for the first City Election Board and was duly elected. He was a past member of the Board of Directors of the Tampa Boy's Club.

He volunteered his service to the Army Dental Corps of World War II in 1942 till 1946. On his return from the service in 1946 he was elected President of the Hillsborough County Dental Society. During his tenure of office he organized and served as first President of the Tampa Dental Study Club, what is today known as the Hillsborough County Dental Research Clinic with facilities at Brewster Vocational School.

Dr. Moreno gathered data and wrote the story of Dr. Edward Dinus Neve, who was Tampa's first dentist and jeweler. This article is included in the Haines and Thoburn Book titled *75 Years of Dentistry in Florida* and is reprinted in this issue of the *Sunland Tribune*. Dr. Moreno was a charter member of the Tampa Historical Society.

He was a life member of The West Coast District Dental Society, life member of The Florida Dental Association, and a life member of the American-Dental Association. He was listed in the *Marquis Who's Who in the South and Southwest*. He was survived by his widow, Mrs. Mirtha G. Moreno; two daughters, Mrs. Sebastian B. Agliano (Mirtha), and Mrs. Frank J. Costa (Sonia); a son, Ruben J.;

Although Mrs. Alicia Neve of Tampa, Florida, has never had a child of her own, she is the "mother" of hundreds of orphan boys and girls.

At the cost of her own personal and financial comfort, Mrs. Neve provided the funds necessary to erect the Mary, Help of Christians School for homeless boys in Tampa, and moved out of her own home so that the Salesian Sisters in that city would have more room to conduct their day nursery for poor children.

In an attractive blue covered pamphlet entitled, *Don Bosco in Florida*, compiled on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the founding of Mary, Help of Christians School, the following words are written:

"First on our Gratitude Roll we place a modest but splendid woman whose name the Sons of Don Bosco in America have already put side by side with the names of great cooperators in the history of their society: *Mrs. Alicia Neve*. To her the Salesians and their boys owe their beautiful home in Tampa. She gave them of her holdings even to the extent of becoming poor for their sake. She now gives them of her time, of her motherly assistance, of her very self. She is their mother."

"She gave them of her holdings even to the extent of becoming poor for their sake" literally applies to Alicia Neve, who has chosen to provide herself only with life's urgent necessities so that hundreds of homeless boys and girls may be properly

(REPRINTED FROM *ST. ANTHONY'S MESSENGER*, SEPTEMBER, 1944)

and lovingly housed, clothed and educated.

Outstanding Citizen

Too many are charitable because it is the "thing to do"; only a few are charitable to the extent of depriving themselves of physical comforts, of draining their financial resources to the point where there is no need for a bank account because there is nothing to put in one. One of those few is Alicia Neve, a small, frail, unprepossessing woman who was designated as Tampa's outstanding citizen in 1942 because of her multitudinous benefactions.

When Mrs. Neve's mother, Susan Thorpe Gonzalez, died shortly before the death of Mrs. Neve's husband, she left her entire estate to her daughter, with the provision that upon the latter's death the residue would be used to erect an orphanage and trade school for boys.

After Dr. Neve passed away on July 16, 1920, his widow gave considerable thought to her mother's request. "Why," she asked herself, "should the poor boys of Tampa have to wait until I die? I might live to be 100." Whereupon she made preparations to dispose of the estate, in its entirety, while she was alive and able to see that her mother's wishes were properly fulfilled.

A Helpless Hand

"I had read the story of the life of Don Bosco," she reveals, "and decided that the Salesian Order, which he founded, was the most suitable because the priests and brothers devote themselves solely to the welfare of homeless boys."

Mrs. Neve went to New York and eagerly unfolded her plan to the Salesians there.

They were naturally enthusiastic and must certainly have been impressed with the charity of this woman who preferred to give away almost all of her worldly possessions so that boys on the threshold of life might be extended a badly needed helping hand.

The poor boys' benefactress paid the expenses of members of the Salesian Order who were sent to Tampa to look around. Before his marriage, Dr. Neve had homesteaded an orange grove picturesquely located outside of Tampa. It was in this grove that his widow intended to erect the orphanage.

Orange Grove Setting

The Salesians were delighted with the spot and could easily visualize an imposing school rising up in the beautiful setting of orange groves and palm trees. They recommended acceptance of Mrs. Neve's offer to their superiors in New York, and she immediately set about to convert her estate into cash immediately so that the building could be started without delay.

Before her mother had died, Mrs. Neve's maternal uncle, Charles A. Thorpe, had made a substantial bequest to his sister, Mrs. Gonzalez, who had requested her son-in-law, Dr. Neve, to invest it for her. With that money, Dr. Neve erected what is now the Rex Theater in Tampa. Most of the building space was rented out for stores and flats, and Mrs. Gonzalez lived comfortably on the income therefrom. Mrs. Neve sold this property for \$50,000, several thousand of which had to be deducted for various expenses. The remaining amount was presented in toto to the Salesians, together with the tract of land.



MARY HELP OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL, 1937

... for homeless boys.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION

While the work of construction was in progress, Mrs. Neve was as excited as a child building his first house of blocks. She wanted the boys to live in a *home*, not an edifice with four walls, a roof, and an adequate number of rooms, and she saw that they had it.

Dedicated in 1928

Mary, Help of Christians School was dedicated on the Feast of Christ the King in October, 1928. Pope Pius XI cabled his Apostolic Benediction, and the Successor of St. John Bosco sent an affectionate message.

Then came the first boys-shy and frightened little fellows, to whom the solitary wilderness of the school's environs with its high white walls must have been rather a cheerless sight. But they had come to their "home"-and they soon realized it in the kindness of their instructor, the Salesians, and the superior, Father Bergamo, who may well be called the founder of the Salesian work in Florida. Father Alvin succeeded Father Bergamo at the helm in the fall of 1929.

With the help of a handful of young but spirited Salesians, Father Alvin, himself but recently ordained, accomplished great things. The course of studies was placed on

a sound basis, the sodalities were organized, the band was started.

"Golden Age"

When Father Rinaldi was called to succeed Father Alvin in the fall of 1932, the school embarked on what it fondly terms its "golden age." The number of boys admitted reached an incredible maximum-the library, the infirmary, even the staff's private quarters were confiscated for the boys' use.

It was in Father Rinaldi's term that an artistic monument to St. John Bosco was erected on the school grounds in 1935, an event that had statewide repercussions. Quasiminature trade shops made their appearance, and the boys began to learn trades as carpenters and printers. The farmhouse and annexes were improved so that the boys now have a model farm composed of low, gleaming white buildings, around which flocks of chickens travel in their busy, pecking way.

Joe and Jim

When Joe and Jim came to the Salesians from the streets of Tampa, they hardly expected to find themselves rowing on their own private lake, surrounded by palm trees and orange groves. They didn't dream of spending happy, carefree, healthful hours each day outdoors beneath sunny Florida skies playing ball under the expert eyes of Salesians who can bat as mean a ball as any man despite their cumbersome, long and heavy habits. Joe and Jim hadn't taken much time for prayer as they aimlessly roamed the streets of Tampa, but somehow or other they found themselves regularly stopping to kneel in front of the simple, impressive Shrine of Our Lord, appropriately erected on the lakeside, or attending Mass in the small chapel of the school.

When the tenth anniversary of Mary, Help of Christians School rolled around, a



VILLA MADONNA SCHOOL
... made possible by Mrs. Neve.

-Photo by HAMPTON DUNN

beautiful new structure, the Ann Pitsch Memorial building, was inaugurated as a fitting companion to the original school erected by Mrs. Neve.

Mrs. Neve had set a stirring example for others who came to the aid of the school, which depends solely upon charity for the \$15,000 or \$16,000 required annually to operate it and properly to care for the approximately 120 boys who live there until they are able to go out and earn their living in occupations to their liking and for which they have been thoroughly trained.

The story behind the Anna Pitsch Memorial building was so dramatic that it appeared in leading newspapers all over the country and was dramatized by two radio stations.

One day in the early spring of 1932, at the request of a friend, some of the boys had knelt and prayed at the graveside of Mrs. Gustav Pitsch, a non-Catholic, in nearby Myrtle Hill cemetery. The husband was so moved by this touching tribute that, at the end of the simple burial service, he said, "I'll come to see you."

The kindly faced old gentleman from Grantwood, N. J., became a familiar figure at the school. During his sojourns in Tampa, his weekly drive to Myrtle Hill cemetery

almost invariably included a visit to the boys. He liked to sit and talk to them, and sometimes he would tell them of the days when he came to this country as a penniless immigrant boy from Germany.

Anniversary Prayers

On May 2, 1935, he paid the school what was to be his last visit. "I am returning to Grantwood," he said. "It's getting too warm for me." Hardly two months had passed when news reached the home that Mr. Pitsch had died. He asked that his body be sent to Tampa for burial beside his wife and that the boys sing and pray at his grave.

It was a group of sorrowing lads who gathered around that grave and prayed and sang for eternal rest to the soul of a beloved friend.

Some weeks later, the father director received a letter informing him that the late Gustav Pitsch had bequeathed to the orphanage half of his American estate, specifying that the fund should be used "to provide for an annex capable of housing and sheltering in comfort additional boys."

No one knew Mr. Pitsch possessed wealth. Neither he nor his wife were Catholics, and no one had ever thought that he might leave anything to the school. His one request in the will was that the new structure should be considered a memorial to his wife, Anna, and that every year on the anniversary of her death the boys would pray at her grave and his in Myrtle Hill cemetery.

New Building Rises

Slowly the new building rose from the sand, its size and the mellow color of its buff tapestry brick providing a rather pleasing contrast to the slightly smaller, profusely stuccoed older structure erected by Mrs. Neve. The interior is designed to provide for the utmost of roominess, light and

ventilation. The ground floor is occupied by two large-study halls, the boys' library, three dining rooms serviced by a centrally located kitchen, a wide stairway, situated between the two buildings, leads to the second floor, which is entirely occupied by a large dormitory with adjoining shower, baths and other toilet facilities. Colorful terrazo floors add dignity and a sense of comfortable cleanliness to the whole structure.

Certainly the boys and their guardians, now under the direction of Father Dominic, are appreciative of the extreme generosity of Mr. Pitsch and of their other benefactors. But Mrs. Neve is still their "mother," and the 10th anniversary pamphlet published by the "Salesian Press"-the boys themselves, if you please-is dedicated to "Mrs. Alicia Neve, Beloved Friend and Generous Benefactor, that she may glean from these pages our joys of the present, our hopes for the future and the boundless gratitude which for her is in the heart of every member of Don Bosco's family."

The tract of land which had been her husband's pride and joy was not all she disposed of. All of her married life, Mrs. Neve had lived in comparatively small quarters. As with all of us, she had her dream of a big home, with spacious front porch, topped by a balcony supported by impressive pillars, like those she had seen in Cuba, where she had lived in her youth.

So Alicia Neve built her big home, pillars and all. But after she was settled in it, she felt guilty. She looked up the street one morning at the day nursery conducted by the Salesian Sisters and thought of the good use to which they could put her lovely home and the six acres upon which it rested. What did she do? She moved out, of course, and the Sisters and their charges moved in.

Mrs. Neve's "dream house" now bears the name of Villa Madonna de la Neve (House

of the Lady of the Snow), which many people believe was named after her. The Salesian Sisters conduct a day school up to the eighth grade for poor children who are complete orphans or children of working women. Between 50 and 60 are regular boarders. They also care for small boys, those who are able to take care of themselves. The children have separate dormitories.

Father From Cuba

In the future, the sisters propose to erect another building and teach the girls to be cooks, typists, etc., using the same plan as the Salesian Brothers follow at Mary, Help of Christians School. Mrs. Neve won't have a house to give this time or money to build one, but you can be sure she'll be among the most active campaigners despite her poor health and her almost 75 years.

Mrs. Neve's mother, of English descent, was born in Bridgeport, Conn. Reared a Protestant, she became a Catholic after attending a mission in St. Louis, where she was visiting Catholic relatives.

Her father, Guillermo Gonzalez, was born in Cuba, where his father owned a sugar plantation. He attended school in Havana until he was 16 and assisted his father in the sugar warehouse business. Then young Guillermo decided to be a doctor, so he went to New York.

Their first child, Alicia, was born in Philadelphia Oct. 9, 1869.

After she reached the age of one year, Alicia's life story can best be narrated through her birthdays. She became two, then three, in Jamaica, where her father managed a sugar plantation. It was there her brother, now dead, was born. The death of the sugar plantation owner sent the Gonzalez family to Cuba, where Alicia's fourth and fifth

birthday parties were held across the bay from Havana.

Alicia was seven and eight in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, and had nine candles on her birthday cake in Santiago, Cuba, where she lived until she was 14.

When she was 14, Alicia was sent to Sacred Heart Academy at Elmhurst, Providence, Rhode Island-and it marked the first time she had ever attended a formal school. Her father had been such an excellent instructor-she speaks Spanish as well as English, with French a close third-and she was such a quick pupil that she progressed rapidly in her studies.

That Bad Tooth

After four years at Elmhurst, Alicia returned to Cuba and stayed at home for three years. The Gonzalez family suffered severe political and financial reverses, and Nov. 4, 1891, they left Havana for Tampa. Alicia taught French, English and Spanish and became bookkeeper for a men's furnishing company.

Romance isn't normally associated with a bad tooth, but if it hadn't been for that tooth Alicia might never have met and married Edward Neve. Edward was a dentist, and evidently took such good care of Alicia's tooth that when he asked to look after her for life she accepted. They were married in 1894. Her husband died in 1920.