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**OPTIMISM:**

“HOPEFULNESS AND CONFIDENCE ABOUT THE FUTURE OR THE SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME OF SOMETHING”

- OXFORD DICTIONARY

Left: residents' art adorns school walls; below left: Sil Orlando; below right: Larry Moore, Leslie Chambers and Barbara Moore



# REASON FOR OPTIMISM

A HANDFUL OF SOUTH BAY RESIDENTS DEVOTE THEIR TIME, TALENTS AND COMPASSION TO CHAMPION SERIOUSLY DISADVANTAGED AND TROUBLED CHILDREN.

WRITTEN BY DIANE E. BARBER • PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEPHAN COOPER

When Palos Verdes resident Silvio (“Sil”) Orlando was selected from 80 candidates nationwide to take the helm as executive director of Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services in 1999, he arrived, as did those before him, with a mega-dose of optimism in tow—ready to serve, care for and empower abused, neglected and at-risk children.

What began more than 100 years ago with a farmer and his wife taking in an orphaned boy on their five-acre dairy and chicken farm in the Highland Park area of Los Angeles has since evolved into a nationally accredited agency that now services more than 500 children and their families every day. Under the watchful leadership of Sil, and with the heart-connected support of his wife, Adriana, his dedicated staff, volunteers, donors and an advisory board that includes co-chair Barbara Moore, Larry Moore and Leslie Chambers of the South Bay, the vision of a pioneering optimist a century ago continues to shine brightly.

## STRONG ROOTS

In 1906, Jacob Strickland and his wife opened their farmhouse door to a homeless child—the first of many who would follow. Though the kind-hearted farmer wore denim and soiled work boots instead of the pressed and polished business clothes Sil Orlando wears today, he, like his contemporary, devoted his life to wayward and forgotten youngsters from that day forward.

By 1908, 13 boys were living with the Stricklands, supported by selling dairy products and chickens. As the number of young residents on the farm grew, so did a city-wide need for an alternative to a traditional reform school for delinquent and orphaned boys. With the guidance of Los Angeles Juvenile Court Judge Curtis Wilbur, the Strickland Home for Boys was established.

The home prospered in its early days because of the generosity of a philanthropist by the name of O.T. Johnson. Expansion began in 1911 after Johnson purchased the five-acre farm for \$15,000 and leased it to the Stricklands, with the understanding that if it was successful, the land would be deeded back to them. A dormitory was built, the farmhouse was enlarged, and 57 boys eventually called the farm home.

In the late 1920s, local Optimist Clubs became involved and brought much-needed awareness and funding to support

the Stricklands’ mission, along with a new name in the mid-30s: the Optimist Boys’ Home and Ranch. Additional housing, a dining room, kitchen, administration building, chapel and a gymnasium made a welcome appearance by the 40s and 50s.

Classrooms were added in the 60s for youngsters who were having difficulties in local schools. By 1972, the home had its own private school and a program that accommodated 87 boys. Two more major expansions were completed in 1991 and 2005, adding day program facilities, business offices, computer operations and the 21,000-square-foot Everychild Youth Learning Center. Now operating as Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services (often called “Optimist”), the former farm provides education to more than 200 boys and girls ages 12 to 18 and a home to 99 boys who have been referred by California Departments of Probation.

## EDUCATION. REFORM. CELEBRATION.

Upon arrival at the Optimist main campus at its original site on Figueroa Street, visitors are warmly greeted by a security guard wearing an ear-to-ear smile—not the locked gates one might expect of a correctional facility. In fact, as the guard checks his clipboard for each visitor’s name, he does so with such graciousness that it seems he is checking a VIP list for a special occasion.

For a first-time visitor, preconceived notions quickly melt away when strolling through the parking lot and passing by dor-

## TODAY’S CHILDREN, TOMORROW’S PROMISE: ABOUT OPTIMIST

The greatest accomplishment for the Optimist staff and volunteers is the positive difference made in the lives of the high-risk youth served. An average of 85% of youth emancipating from Optimist make a successful transition to life in the community during the first year following their 18th birthday. Of those, nearly 90% maintain stable employment, abstain from alcohol and/or drugs and maintain positive adult relationships in the second year. Approximately 20% of Optimist youth go on to attend classes at a college or vocational training school upon their graduation from high school. With child abuse, child neglect and juvenile crime constantly on the rise, the services of the agency become more vital every day.



For more information on Optimist or how to become involved, visit [oyhfs.org](http://oyhfs.org).

**Art instructor Maria Cruz teaches a watercolor painting class to residents.**



mitories, the chapel, a pool and gymnasium to the steps of the learning center, which houses Sil's office. Original buildings blend with new, and an unmistakable upbeat energy is felt in the midst of what outwardly appears to be a regular, small college campus.

While walking through the halls to the administrative offices, there is an unexpected need to linger and marvel at art adorning the walls—colorful masks, paintings, sketches and photography created by the residents. These art pieces tell very private and moving stories to those admirers who take the time to look and listen.

When meeting Sil, the expectation of feeling like an outsider continues to shift to that of being a welcome guest. With the day's calendar quietly pulling at him, he takes the time for a conversation that quickly reveals the grave circumstances and sadness that have created the long-standing need for what Optimist continues to provide for some of California's most challenged kids.

However, offsetting the heaviness of that reality is hope and the unflappable spirit that defines Optimist. Asked what motivates him as the executive director, Sil says, "The passion of our staff and the board and the long history of excellence. I

believe that we are making a huge contribution toward making better lives for our kids and their families."

The youth at Optimist are given a second chance in life and much more. With education at the forefront, the teacher-to-student ratio is 1-to-4 for special education and 1-to-8 for alternative education. Behavior slips are carried by students and presented to each teacher throughout the day with the hope of earning coveted points—ones that can be traded for items at the student store or banked for greater aspirations, such as first dibs for on-campus, paying job opportunities that come available.

Allowance is paid weekly and credited to each youngster's savings account, as well as student-of-the-week bonuses. Special requests are considered for accessing the funds, but ideally the students graduate with a savings account along with a high school diploma in hand as they face the world anew. "Our graduates continue to return to Optimist to thank us and tell their school, career and family success stories. Several come back to volunteer for us to 'give back,' and that is most satisfying," says Sil.

Though Sil runs a no-nonsense program with a strong, steady-to-the-wind



## FROM THE STREETS TO THE KITCHEN



Erick Vasquez, a former Optimist resident, is currently attending Los Angeles Trade Technical College to become a chef. His tuition and supplies have been paid for by Optimist. During a recent visit at the main campus, Erick reflected on his days living there. Beaming, he shared that his fondest memories are of a special social worker, Ron Rambo, who greatly influenced his life, and of the art therapy program. "I was 15, angry and sad when I arrived at Optimist, but after about six months, I felt safe and at home. I never had a birthday cake before I lived here, and the first time they gave me one, I cried. It even had my name on it," he said.

When asked about art therapy, he shared, "Art therapy allowed me to express myself in a way that I never did before. I loved it. My favorite painting that I did was of a moon and the sun. It was the dark and the light in my life. Optimist was the light."

Above right: entrance to the campus garden; below: art therapist Megan Barr





Cheri Steckbauer, Leslie Chambers, Adriana Orlando, Larry Moore, Sil Orlando and Barbara Moore fill Christmas stockings.

demeanor, he proudly shares the softer, soulful side of Optimist. The youth in the program are not just educated and reformed, they are celebrated. South Bay residents and board members Barbara Moore, Larry Moore and Leslie Chambers and their local volunteer friends are always front-and-center, fanning the celebratory flame with gusto. The Moores' favorite celebrations are birthdays and graduations, which include a new suit for every graduate. "The best part of our work with Optimist is spending time with the amazing boys and girls we have met over the years, planning parties for them and celebrating their successes," shares Barbara.

There are traditional holiday celebrations and not-so-traditional behavior celebrations. New residents are recognized for 30 days of attendance with an ice cream party, certificate presentation and a t-shirt with the words "On my way to success" emblazoned across the back for all to see. There are "Resident of the Week," "Student of the Month," "Deal With It" (anger management) awards and a host of other gatherings to applaud milestones.

Beyond birthday cakes, Christmas stockings and awards presentations, there is also an ongoing celebration of each child and their own special gifts that the arts can awaken and reach unlike anything else. As Jacob Strickland is likely smiling down on the campus' garden that is a source of great pride and connectedness for the kids who tend to it and share produce with their families and the campus kitchen, he most certainly never expected rehabilitating troubled youth with art therapy, which was introduced along with music therapy shortly after Sil came on board.

Art therapist Megan Barr, who oversees the program, says, "Art makes feelings tangible, and when kids are presented with art as a form of psychotherapy, they can safely project feelings, which is very helpful in treatment." With watercolors and paintbrushes in hand, broken hearts and broken dreams are given wings at Optimist in a secure haven for self-expression.

## GIVING BACK

Regardless of the century, the year or the moment, optimism, giving and compassion have been and always will be vital. The purity of a child's heart opened by an outreached hand in celebration of his or her unique-

ness blurs all racial, gender and socio-economic lines. What is seemingly insignificant to those who are more economically privileged can be a life-changing moment for those challenged by a more difficult path in life.

I know this firsthand, for I was fortunate to spend a day not long ago sharing my passion for horses in an art class at a Palos Verdes stable with a group of Optimist boys who had never seen a horse, let alone touch one. I often reflect back on that special August afternoon and remember a six-foot-tall teenage boy peeling away his shield of a black hooded sweatshirt with a whispered request, "Can I kiss your horse?" A nod and smile from me prompted him to lean over, close his eyes and kiss his new friend's neck.

As I looked on, I whispered to myself, "Lucky me," for I did not realize until then that those kids were giving back to me tenfold what I presumed I was going to give to them. ●

## GIVING A HOME TO OTHERS



Doug Fritts arrived at Optimist in 1961 as a troubled 12-year-old. Forty-nine years later, he has proudly retired from a 30-year career as a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service, and he and his wife have been foster care providers for 12 children. "Optimist was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me. They picked me up, planted my feet on the ground and pointed me in the right direction. I don't even want to think about where I would be today without Optimist."

Today, Doug attributes his success to the stability, structure and discipline that he experienced at the agency and applied to his life after finishing the program. With deep gratitude, Doug volunteers at the main campus one day a week wherever he is needed. "Tuesdays are my favorite day of the week. This is my way of giving back. Every time I am at Optimist, even at the age of 63, I consider myself a boy with a home."