



# Puente del Pueblo: A Miracle Ten Years in the Making

By Catherine McNiel

**H**ave you ever looked closely at a large mosaic? From a distance, it appears as a single, beautiful piece of art—but get up close, and you’ll notice innumerable individual pieces, each forming part of the whole.

Puente del Pueblo is like that.

Those “pieces” include fifteen staff and nearly two hundred volunteers annually, plus the hundreds of children, adults, and families they serve through a community-based outreach that literally wraps around people *right where they live*.

Since Puente was launched just ten years ago, an amazing transformation has taken place as families and individuals, staff, volunteers, partners, and clients have merged and mingled, building trust and relationships in which all parties find themselves changed.

So what do we see when we step back and view this mosaic as a whole? We see *community*. Beautiful, complicated, God-ordained community.

## AN ORDINARY DAY

Walk into Puente del Pueblo’s offices on any weekday, and you might see Irene Owens or Rosie Delgado helping a case-management client, assisting with a job application, or preparing to accompany someone to court. Or Irene might be leading a Bible study, and Rosie chatting with a client-turned-friend.

Later, teachers like Mary Cortez and Irving Ruiz arrive and begin preparing for the after-school programs. They’ll soon be heading to the elementary and middle-school program sites where, for the next three to four hours, teachers and volunteers will offer academic support and homework help—in addition to life-skills education, sports and recreation, computer-lab time, Christian education, and, of course, a time for snacks.

A little later, Saul Flores and his team will open the doors for the high-school program, which offers similar programming—plus college preparation, career-readiness training, and more.

Throughout the day you’ll see men and women from the community interacting with office staff and volunteers. Some arrive by appointment, while others come in with a spur-of-the-moment question to resolve. And in the midst of it all, you may catch sight of Puente’s director, Matthew McNiel, advising team members or addressing a particularly challenging situation.

Whether daytime or evening, you’ll inevitably find a few ESL tutors meeting with adult language learners. And if it’s Wednesday night, you can head over to Puente’s space in the Timber Lake Apartment Community Center, where you’ll receive a warm welcome from the Iglesia del Pueblo community group gathered there.

In fact, if you drop by any of Puente’s seven West Chicago locations, most days you’ll see people of all ages and stages—students elementary and older, adults holding babies or wrangling impatient toddlers, even grandmas and grandpas. Some are clients, some are volunteers, all coming together to form the community that Puente del Pueblo offers with open hands.

## THE GIFT THAT PLANTED A SEED

To understand how Puente became what it is today, it’s important to go back to the beginning of the story.

In 2006, as WBC broke ground to begin building its new campus on North Avenue, an anonymous donor gave \$100,000 to Iglesia del Pueblo and Wheaton Bible Church. The giver specified only that the gift be used to promote shared outreach between the two congregations.

So Pastors Hanibal Rodriguez and Chris McElwee approached the local expert—Outreach Community Ministries—about becoming our partner in this new undertaking. With an eye on West Chicago, the soon-to-be-home of our church, the next step was to take a “listening” tour.

As McElwee recalls, “We wanted to let the community know we were *listening*, not just *landing*. We didn’t want to step on

toes; we truly wanted to serve. So we met with the police. We met with the schools. We met with social workers. We met with community leaders.”

As Chris and Hanibal listened, the pieces began falling into place. The Timber Lake apartment complex was just a few miles from the new church property. Its 584 units were home to about two-thousand residents—about one-tenth of West Chicago’s entire population—including many immigrant families and children.

The complex was located next door to the Wegner School, a public elementary school willing to provide classrooms to Puente for an after-school program. Additionally, the teachers and faculty were positive about the partnership’s potential for their students—especially those without strong English language skills.

The icing on the cake was the response from Glen and Cornelia Mueller, the owners of the Timber Lake complex. When Pastor Hanibal and Pastor Chris approached them about renting an apartment for Puente’s office, the Muellers cried tears of joy. Christians themselves, the Muellers had a heart for the people who lived in their apartments. They not only provided the apartments Puente needed for office space but also made them available *rent free*, becoming key partners in this community initiative.

Marjory Lewe-Brady leads the community-collaboration organization “WeGo Together for Kids” and has partnered with Puente since the beginning. Marjory recalls, “When Puente first came in, their posture was ‘How can we support the community and have a positive impact?’ It wasn’t just a move to gain new members: they wanted to *act out*

their faith. People can be suspicious about a religious group’s motives, but Wheaton Bible Church, Iglesia del Pueblo, and Puente del Pueblo have demonstrated that they are authentic partners.

**“PUENTE’S SUCCESS REFLECTS THE FACT THAT A FAITH INSTITUTION CAN BE TRUE TO ITS WORD, BE RESPECTFUL, AND COME ALONGSIDE PEOPLE AND REALLY LISTEN.”**

“This is how good things happen. It is a cool thing that we’ve got going on here—and it has had much to do with Matthew’s leadership. His family moved here and became part of the community.”

Nothing new begins without labor pains, but it was clear from the start that God was at work in the formation of this ministry. Staff was hired: initially one full-time teacher, one part-time teacher, and one part-time case manager, led by director Matthew McNiel.

On November 17, 2008, Puente launched its first day of after-school programming, with one classroom and eleven students.



Victor Sr. and Cruz Castellanos and their children, Victor Jr. and Barbie—among the first families to connect with Puente, continue to feel its impact in their lives.

## NEW NEIGHBORS

When Victor and Cruz Castellanos moved into the Timber Lake Apartments in spring of 2009, their children, Barbie and Victor Jr., six and eight years old, were students at Wegner Elementary School. The Castellanos family learned about Puente from volunteers who went door-to-door at the apartment complex, welcoming families and inviting them to learn more about the new ministry.

Victor Jr. joined Puente del Niño right away, benefitting from the academic support and homework help. When Barbie was



ESL partners Don and Gilgardo



Brisa, now a high school senior, in her earliest days with Puente



Irving Ruiz, middle school program coordinator



old enough, she joined as well. In addition to the after-school program, Victor and Barbie also remember the summer programs offered in those years: Neighborhood Bible Clubs, weekly sports and fine-arts camps, and sleep-away camp at Norman B. Barr, on the shores of Lake Geneva. The friendships they formed in those early days are still intact today.

Someone invited Cruz to Puente a la Mama, a celebration for moms held each year around Mother's Day. Since mothers are highly esteemed in Hispanic culture, Puente created this special tradition: invite women for a night out—and treat them like queens.

The Place4You women's Bible study groups from WBC created beautiful gift baskets for the attendees, and women from Iglesia del Pueblo served the mothers an elegant meal and offered opportunities to have their nails, hair, or makeup done or to enjoy massages. A photo booth complete with special costumes was an added treat, as were phone calls "home" to family in Latin America at a time before Skype and Facetime made international calling affordable.

"This was a beautiful gift on a beautiful night," Cruz remembers. "Back then, we didn't have the technology to see our families in Mexico, so we treasured those calls."

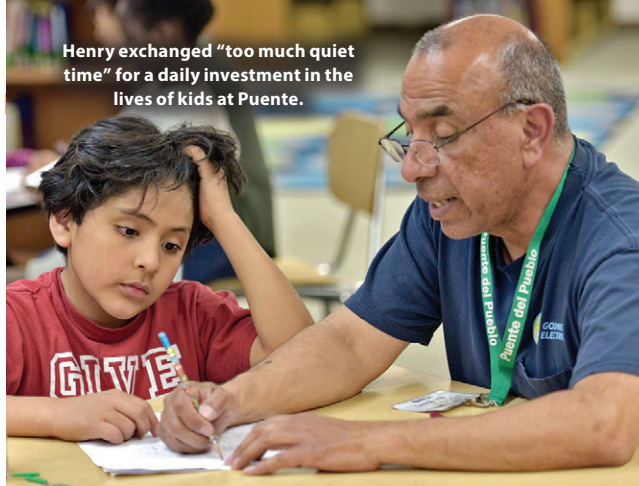
## AN HOUR OF NEED

Even more important to Cruz than those wonderful memories was an experience that happened not long after.

One day while driving, Cruz was pulled over and issued a speeding ticket. Taken to the police station, her car about to be impounded, Cruz needed someone who spoke English and understood the legal system.

"Matthew McNeil was the first person I thought of," she recalls. "He picked up the phone and said, 'Where are you? I'll be there in a minute.'" Matthew went to the police station and

Henry exchanged "too much quiet time" for a daily investment in the lives of kids at Puente.



walked with her through the process, translating for her and helping her get her car back.

"When I called my husband, I said, 'Don't worry, Matthew is here with me.' It was my first contact with the police, and I needed

someone who knew the culture and the language. But mostly, I needed to know that there were people in my life who would be there for me, to know for sure that when I am in trouble, there is someone I can call.

"From the beginning," Cruz adds, "Puente offered our family this confidence. We can trust them, entirely, with our eyes closed."

## TOO MUCH QUIET TIME

In 2008, Henry Pineda had too much time on his hands. His fifteen-year-old son Huston had been killed in a car accident a few years earlier, and his older son was grown.

"As a parent, my busiest time had been late afternoon and early evening—getting dinner, running kids around," Henry said. "But now I had too much quiet time, and I needed something meaningful to fill the gap."

That's when Henry heard about Puente, and after prayerful consideration, he made the leap into volunteering—just months after Puente opened its after-school program.

That was nearly a decade ago, but Henry has been there ever since, showing up at 3:30 every day that class is in session. Knowing kids need consistency, Henry eagerly became a constant in their lives—someone they could count on to be present.

Henry remembers helping Victor and Barbie Castellanos and others—Brisa, Ruby, Jonathon, Michelle—with schoolwork. Back then, everyone—kids, staff, and volunteers alike—was brand-new, but they were getting to know one another, forging the beginnings of a community.







Irene Owens, Matthew McNiel, and Lilia Salazar—Puente's original leadership team—still serving together!



"Volunteering with Puente gave me a sense of purpose," Henry said. "God made me with a heart for kids. After I lost Huston, God gave me these kids, not to replace him—nothing could do that—but to be in their lives. I feel like I'm doing what He wants me to do."

Reflecting on Henry's service, Matthew said, "The impact he has had on the lives of our students and in our community is hard to fully articulate. Henry has been present as a supportive, loving adult in the lives of our students. He has set before them a powerful testimony of a man who loves Christ and loves others with deep joy and steadfast commitment. There's no way to measure that."

## GROWING PAINS

By 2012, Puente's after-school program had expanded to three classrooms, with forty-nine students and a double-digit waiting list. More than one hundred families were visiting the case-management office for assistance each year. Adults were being tutored by trained volunteers in ESL—but there were only limited spaces available for them to meet. The same was true for the Spanish literacy classes that Irene Owens, Puente's Case Manager, was teaching to immigrants who never had an opportunity to learn to read or write as children.

Puente was bursting at the seams, leaving no room to house the growing demand for additional programming.

Each year, children in the after-school program were moving beyond their elementary years, and the fulfillment of the long-held dream of middle-school and high-school programs—walking with kids all the way to high school graduation and then to college or trade school—was overdue.

Just as the space limitations neared a crisis point, West Chicago's Chief of

Police approached Chris McElwee, asking if Puente would consider taking over the city's neighborhood resource centers. That would be a significant stretch for Puente del Pueblo, but thanks to another anonymous donor, Puente was able to accept this providential opportunity—an invitation that represented a powerful show of support from civic leaders.

That step would ultimately lead to an even greater expansion of facilities—adding both the Timber Lake Community Center and space at the Main Park Apartments, as well as an elementary program at Indian Knoll School and creation of the middle-school and high-school programs.

More staff were hired. And the people of Wheaton Bible Church and Iglesia del Pueblo stepped forward to provide the necessary funding and caring volunteers.

About the time of this expansion, resident Lorena Flores learned about Puente through an informational open house. Through that connection, she signed up for ESL classes, and was soon studying English with her tutor, Maureen.

"Maureen is such a beautiful lady," Lorena says. "She teaches me with so much patience. It is hard for me to pronounce the English words—sometimes even my kids try to correct me by scolding, 'You didn't say this well!' But Maureen is always patient with me. She says, 'Don't worry, you are going to get it.' She has built confidence in me, and a belief that I will learn this."

It was Maureen who told Lorena about the after-school and summer programs available for children, and suggested she talk with Joel Duncan, who ran the newly created middle-school program at that time. Joel helped Lorena register for the summer program, and asked if she wanted to opt-in for Christian Education for her children.

"That really impressed me," she said. "They taught my children about God, and God is *everything*."



Juan and Lorena Flores, and children, Yuli (15), Carlos (13), Ricardo (10), and Brian (9)



Apartments destroyed, families embraced and restored.



At that time, her children ranged in age from four to ten—and they have been involved in Puente ever since, through elementary, middle-school, and high-school programs.

“Puente is a beautiful program,” Lorena testifies. “Sometimes after school, kids get bored. But at Puente del Nino, they learn. Rachel Thornton (their teacher) formed such a strong connection with them. They knew they could trust her. Rachel helped Ricardo so much, because when he first started at Puente, he didn’t know English. It was hard for me to help him with schoolwork and language learning. But Rachel made it so much easier. Now he is fluent.”

Lorena remembers when Ricardo came home from school and asked, “Guess who I love most?” Lorena guessed Mom or Dad, but Ricardo had someone else in mind: God.

“To me, this was so beautiful” Lorena says. “Puente is teaching my children to think about God. Now they know that He is everywhere and in everything. When it is impossible for me to take them to church, I know that once a week, Pastor David (Iglesia del Pueblo’s youth pastor) comes to them and teaches them about God.”

## A BUILDING ON FIRE

When a ministry like Puente is community-based, whatever impacts the community impacts the ministry.

On Sunday, November 4, 2012, as the 9:45 service was beginning at Wheaton Bible Church, Timber Lake residents Juana and Jose Rangel were asleep in their third-floor apartment after working the graveyard shift the night before.

Their ten-year-old son, Christopher, heard cries of “Fire!” He ran to the window and was shocked to see the balcony adjacent to his own ablaze. Terrified, he pounded on his mother’s door screaming, “The building is on fire!” and ran out the door.

Juana, still half asleep, came out to see where her son had gone. She opened her apartment door and called “Where are you, Christopher?” Already the hallway was full of smoke. She grabbed her baby, woke Jose, and ran.

Finding Christopher outside, they went around the building and saw that their windows were overtaken with fire. “I was in

shock” said Juana. “As I saw how my apartment was burning, I was crying and crying.”

Ninety people lost their homes that day, including thirty-six children and twenty-six families. The fire destroyed all the units in that building.

Puente’s offices are in the adjacent building, and because of their proximity, WBC and Iglesia del Pueblo were able to join the city and county officials and other organizations to provide for the most immediate needs. By evening, all families affected were spending the night with friends and family or in a motel paid for by the Red Cross and arranged by Northridge Holdings. The next day, relief teams had delivered basic provisions to each family.

As Puente began assessing specific long-term needs, the church and others in the community responded with outpourings of donations, and a “store” was set up in the community center so residents could “shop” for the items that would meet their individual needs. Over fifty volunteers from Wheaton Bible Church and Iglesia del Pueblo responded.

One of Puente’s roles in the days after the fire was to facilitate effective communication—including translation and advocacy—between the fire victims and the various agencies and departments offering assistance. One of the most pressing questions the displaced residents had was whether they would be allowed access to their apartments to retrieve any belongings that had survived.

Many people didn’t have their wallets, car keys, important paperwork, daily medications, or shoes. Many of the victims did not speak English well, which only added to their vulnerability. And many were recent immigrants who relied on cash and paper documents kept in their homes.

Juana is thankful for the community that pitched in to help the people who lost their homes. “I really am grateful. Everything I have now is because of their provision. In the beginning I felt sorry for myself because I had lost my things. But now I have received much blessing, from friends, from this community. I can see clearly who is standing with me. Many have helped us at Puente del Pueblo so we are not left alone with nothing. Thank you for your presence during this time.”



## CELEBRATE!

It isn't only the tragedies of life that are shared by community, but celebrations as well. Baby showers, baptisms, weddings, and birthday parties are just a few major events shared between Puente's volunteers and clients.

Lorena invited Puente staff and volunteers to her daughter's *quinceañera*, the major coming-of-age celebration in her family's culture. And as American-born volunteers experience the beloved traditions and foods of their immigrant friends, they return the favor as newcomers to the U.S. are invited for their first Thanksgiving dinner or Easter egg hunt.

"First generation immigrants and refugees rarely have opportunities to engage in a relationship with someone from the dominant culture," Matthew said. "So an invitation to be part of someone's life, traditions, and family celebration—to sit around a kitchen table or in the living room—are so important. These seemingly 'small things' are where life-forming relationships take root.

"My friend Jose still talks about the exotic green bean casserole I made for his first Thanksgiving feast!" he says.

Then there's the Christmas Store. Based on a well-respected model that meets clients' needs while maintaining their dignity, the store annually helps roughly two hundred families in West Chicago, five hundred children, and one hundred and fifty volunteers.

A few days before the store opens, parents who have received an invitation call Puente's office to make a shopping appointment. Since so many Christmas "charity" events are first come/first served, men and women may have to stand outside in the cold and snow for hours, waiting to gain a place in line.

Puente's Christmas Store intentionally follows a different pattern, one that allows the body of Christ to ascribe dignity and honor to the shoppers. A predetermined number of appointments are made for each half hour, and gifts are planned, sorted, and set out accordingly.

As shoppers arrive at their appointed time, each is paired with a helper. This is generally a great experience for both shopper and volunteer, because so much happy interaction happens between the two. Sometimes what happens can feel like a miracle.



## WHAT IS PUENTE DEL PUEBLO?

It's after-school and summer-program volunteers who love on children as they teach math, spelling, swimming, and soccer.

It's Kiran, a local high schooler who bakes cupcakes to raise money to buy school supplies for Puente kids.

It's Rachel, the faithful office volunteer who has managed receipts, accounting, and more—every Wednesday afternoon since day one.

It's the pastor of a nearby church who collaborates with Puente to host the annual Christmas Store.

It's Glenn and Cornelia, who furnish facility space and have formed a faithful partnership with Puente since the very beginning.

It's Rosie, raised by immigrants in West Chicago. Initially skeptical of Puente, she met Jesus at Iglesia del Pueblo and now coordinates the Main Park site and the ESL program.

It's Vijay, who has provided space rent free to our Main Park site for the past five years.

It's the generous friend who provides tickets so dozens of Puente families can attend a professional soccer game each year.

It's Pastor the Gospel church weekly b

It's ele we a

Gabi arrived at her appointment needing to shop for five children with only thirty dollars. She was anxious and worried that her money could not possibly stretch enough to cover one Christmas gift for each child. As she shopped, she asked about the price of each item, carefully calculating the total in her head. When she had chosen something for everyone, she was amazed that her total was \$27.50—just what she had, with a little change left over. She teared up and expressed how shocked and relieved she felt.

Whether it shows up in crisis support after a fire, sorting Christmas gifts, or an invitation to a family celebration, being *inside* the community is what cultivates the trust and relationship that drives Puente's success.

"Our view of poverty," Matthew explains, "does not start with 'lack of material resources' but with 'lack of intact relationships.' For us, the health of a person's relationships—with God, with themselves, with the people around them, and with their environment—are the fundamental questions relative to poverty. Material resources are secondary."

By building relationships, Puente is changing the future for clients and volunteers alike.

## WE'RE STILL HERE

Today, ten years after the first seeds were planted, Puente is a thriving community. Three of the four original staff—Matthew, Lilia, and Irene—still come to work each day, continuing to build on the bedrock of long-term relationship and trust. Joining them these days are fifteen full- and part-time staff.

Then there are the volunteers. "It's not possible to overstate, or even comprehend, the impact that volunteers of Puente have made on the community over the past ten years," Matthew said. "The more I learn, the more I am convinced of the vital importance of the kinds of relationships those volunteers have formed in the lives of the children and adults we serve."

The children are still here too. Victor and Barbie Castellanos—six and eight years old when the program began—have grown up with Puente, just as the ministry's founders dreamed they would. Victor has graduated from high school and attends College of DuPage. Barbie is finishing her senior year and talking with colleges interested in her soccer skills, academic achievements, and leadership positions in her high school.

Both Victor and Barbie have attended the annual college tour, co-led by Saul Flores and Outreach Community Center in Carol



David, who brings  
el outside the  
walls on a  
basis.

It's Saul Flores, who moved  
from Mexico to launch the  
college-opportunity program  
for high school students.

It's people from all our  
congregations who generously  
provide the kinds of Christmas  
gifts that parents  
are thrilled  
to buy—  
and kids are  
excited to  
receive.

mentary principals who  
elcome Puente's programs  
nd people into their  
buildings with open arms,  
fostering relationships  
between Puente staff  
and educators.

It's the faithful  
from our Latino congregation  
who give of themselves, daily  
making Puente culturally relevant  
and contextualizing the Gospel  
for those they serve.

It's ESL tutors and clients, sharing their lives as they  
exchange language skills week after week. It's office-  
support volunteers who keep the lights on at the offices  
to pray for a case-management client in crisis.

## PUENTE DEL PUEBLO

is the more than 150 individuals each year  
who have poured out more than 100,000  
volunteer hours over the past decade—  
hours and hours of God's love, mercy,  
and grace flowing from one person to  
the next, from Timber Lake to Main Park,  
to Indian Knoll, to Wegner, to Wheaton  
Bible Church and Iglesia del Pueblo,  
and back again. And it is the community  
we serve, people who invite us into  
their lives and demonstrate the  
meaning of hard work, determination,  
brilliance, and resiliency.



Stream. On these spring-break trips, thirty-two students learn to dream about the future and imagine themselves attending college—the first members of their families to do so.

Julianna—whose *quinceañera* Puente staff and volunteers helped to celebrate—attended the college tour last spring and is eager to go again. To help pay her way, she works as a summer intern at Puente. In addition to earning money and developing leadership skills, Julianna is investing in the next generation of Puente kids. Barbie, Brisa, and others among the first children of Puente del Niño have also come full circle, now volunteering at Puente as young adults.

Henry is still here as well, volunteering daily in the elementary program. The kids he mentored as he began his long-running volunteer role are in high school now, or beyond.

“My favorite thing is when I see the kids outside school, like at the store, and they come running up to give me a hug. I was walking out of the grocery store a while back as Ruby and Brisa’s mom drove through the parking lot. We waved at each other, but then she stopped the car, and Ruby and Brisa jumped out and came running to give me a hug and tell me how they were doing.

“Another time, I was pulling into a parking lot when a van drove up behind me. I looked in the mirror and saw a former Puente student getting out of the car to give me a hug. I started talking to her mom, and that’s what’s cool: that the parents are happy with their kids running up to me, because they know me and trust me. They know I’m there for the kids. Those are the moments that really matter to me.”

## THE MOSAIC

It is trust that has built these relationships—a trust that has grown slowly and steadily, day by day, and year by year.

So tentative and fragile ten years ago, now hard-won, solid, and precious, trust has grown between schools, teachers, principals, city officials, volunteers, families, parents, and the children who are now grown and living far different lives than they would have without all the ways Puente del Pueblo has touched their lives.

## THE FRUIT

Community partner Marjory reflects on Puente’s impact: “The fruit of the past ten years is the impact on families—the way Puente gets to know a family and stays with them over time. The longevity, staying long term—that to me is their strong suit.

“When I think about how they approach conversations, who they talk to, how they make decisions—there’s a mutual cultivation of trust and respect. Even when things

were a little rocky at times, the folks from Puente were okay with that. When you’re getting to know someone and there’s a rocky start, there’s always the option to walk away. But Puente didn’t. They hung in there with us, with tenacity and authenticity.”

As a mom, Lorena looks back over the years her family has been involved since that first Puente del Pueblo open house: “Everything about Puente, put together, is so beautiful. There is so much that I feel, so much I could say about this program.

“They taught me English and helped my kids learn English, too. They took them swimming and other fun things during the summer. But most of all, my kids pray now before they go to sleep. They say goodnight to Mom and Dad, and to God. To me, providing ways for my children to learn about God is everything.

“We trust Puente because we see all that our children have gained through the teachers and volunteers. I trust Puente because our kids come home safe and happy, and talking excitedly about God.”

Ask Henry to highlight a particular memory from his years as a Puente volunteer, and he has to stop and think.

“Community,” he says after a moment of reflection. “That’s what it is. When we expanded to Main Park, the parents were a little wary. It took a while. But now they see that it’s not just for the homework but also for the companionship. I think they realize that Puente is a family, and being part of Puente is being part of a family.”

Victor and Cruz are grateful they moved to Timber Lake just as Puente began. “The impact Puente has had,” Cruz said, “it is difficult to express. It is bigger than our words. It is the trustworthiness that you have demonstrated, showing us that God is always with us and we can feel free, relaxed, at home in this community. It’s the feeling that we are safe and that we can move forward because God, and His people here in the community, are always with us.

“There is a long list of people who loved us and who built relationships with us,” she adds. “Matthew and his family. Lilia. Irene and her family. Saul. There are so many more. Puente lets us know that God is here, and we can feel at home in this community; that His people will always be there to help.

“Puente has told us, ‘Here we are. We are your friends and family.’”

Thank you, West Chicago, for accepting us. You are our family too. ■



Student engaging with Rosie Delgado, site coordinator and case manager at Main Park