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Daughter of Beverly Hills Starts a New Life at Tijuana Prison

Mary Brenner opted in her 50s to discard luxuries and become a nun, now a source of light in one of Mexico's darkest places.

By Jessica Garrison, Times Staff Writer

TIJUANA -- There's one thing Sister Antonia did not leave behind when she swapped her upscale Southern California life for a nun's habit and a tiny cell in one of Mexico's most notorious prisons.

Her giggle.

In between visits of succor and support to a seemingly endless number of prisoners and guards, the 76-year-old, who stands 5 feet 2, erupts in peals of laughter from dawn till dark.

With a mischievous chuckle,

she confirms that prisoners have tossed their guns away when she has marched into the middle of their deadly riots. They don't want the woman they call "Mama" to see them fighting.

Another chuckle accompanies her explanation of the way she trained for life in a cell surrounded by 4,500 murderers, thieves and drug dealers: "I'm the mother of seven children," she said. "I'm prepared for everything."

A quarter-century ago, after her children were grown and divorce had filled her heart with sadness, Mary Clarke Brenner gave away her evening clothes, shut the door on her beach house in Ventura and moved to a cell in Tijuana's La Mesa State Penitentiary. Until it was cleaned up last summer, it was one of Latin America's most lawless, violent prisons.

For years, this daughter of Beverly Hills did her work here alone. But starting this fall, she began spending much of her time with a French nun from the order of St. John Eudes, working to form a new association to help other women in midlife who want to make the same radical change.

Unlike many Catholic orders that do not encourage older women to join, the order founded by Sister Antonia, the Servants of the 11th Hour, is designed for those who, if not quite in their 11th hour, are at least in the second half of their lives. Requests for information have flooded in from women as far away as Brazil and Colombia.

Sister Antonia says seven have joined, most of them former career women and widows. She has ways of knowing whether someone is right for the job, she says: Those who ask when dinner time is, or where they'll be sleeping, may not be.

'A Message of Peace'

When she first came to the prison, some guessed the nun had committed a heinous crime. Now she is known as the "prison angel." Warden Sergio Ortiz Lara calls her "a great woman," with "a message of peace, love, a spiritual message."

As Sister Antonia strode through the prison yard on a recent Friday, her black-and-white habit flashing and her smile gleaming, a man rushed up to kiss her. Heads whipped around. Words of love and praise were called out through the bars. "Mama, look, my teeth are fixed," cried one prisoner.

A line of men had formed outside her cell, awaiting her counsel.

On the other side of the prison gates, mothers, wives and girlfriends say they thank God the sister is there for their loved ones.

Raxcon Cruz, 21, an American prisoner who credits Sister Antonia with changing his life, is among a small army of convicts who spend their days helping her. Cruz, who once lived in Los Angeles, arrived at La Mesa last spring to serve a year-long sentence for drug trafficking. "I wasn't close to God," he said. "Life was like a game."

Sister Antonia came to him on his first, terrifying day behind bars and helped him get food and a blanket. When he gets out next year, he said, he plans to seek a job in which he can keep helping her, although he wryly noted that the money won't be nearly as good as it was in his former line of work.

Clothing and medicine are hard to come by at La Mesa, and Sister Antonia spends hours trying to patch together basic goods and services, from bedding to dental care to medicine. She also helps with bail, using money raised at the soda concession she runs in the prison.

Her spare cell holds few possessions. A hard single bed occupies one corner, a mountain of toilet-paper rolls for prisoners the other.

Jorge Villalobos sat on a chair under the barred windows in the nun's cell, his head bowed. Sister Antonia perched beside him on the edge of her bed and took his hand.

His voice low, he told her his wife and child were suffering because he could not provide for them. She touched his face, and tears formed in his eyes. She hugged him, and two tiny rivers slid down his cheeks.

She wrote down Villalobos' name and promised to get back to him. Visibly calmer, he left her cell. "There is no one else to help me but Mother Antonia," he said.

Sister Antonia smiled and looked around the sparse room. "I wouldn't trade this cell for anywhere in the world," she said.

Her love for the prisoners does not mean she condones their acts. "There isn't anyone who hasn't heard my lecture on victims," she said. "They have to accept that they're wrong. They have to see the consequences. They have to feel the agony But I do love them dearly."

Those who have worked with her know that's true, even if they sometimes have trouble comprehending it. "From Beverly Hills to a Tijuana prison," said Father Joe Carroll, a San Diego priest who runs homeless shelters and has given the nun supplies from his St. Vincent de Paul thrift store over the years -- sometimes, he jokes, against his will.

"Every time my staff sees her, a truckload goes out [of] my warehouse," he said. "If I told her she couldn't have it, she'd just be smiling and giggling at me and putting it into her car and leaving."

"You walk in her presence and you know you're in a different world. Rhyme, reason -- you can't rationalize why she did it," Carroll said of Sister Antonia's decision to change her life. "She has that one-on-one relationship with God."

Beverly Hills Childhood

Sister Antonia, on most topics an ebullient conversationalist, full of whimsical riffs on everything from Nathaniel Hawthorne to the glorious attributes of German shepherds, is loath to talk about herself. She is particularly reticent about what she terms the "glamorous part" of her life.

Her father ran an office supply business in Beverly Hills and hobnobbed with Hollywood figures. Cary Grant was a neighbor. The nun still remembers his smile, and the patient kindness he showed to teenagers charmed like she once was.

Her staunchly Irish Catholic family emphasized charity work. She jokes that this Irish heritage, as much as the family's Catholicism, explains her affinity for the dispossessed (she also cites the 1932 movie, "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang").

She married after high school, then raised her brood in Granada Hills. Volunteer work was always part of her life. In the mid-1950s, her nephew died at City of Hope hospital in Duarte, and Sister Antonia, then known as Mary Brenner, began throwing Christmas parties for patients there.

"I never would have Christmas for my children until we had Christmas for City of Hope," she said.

Soon she was organizing shipments of medical supplies from Southern California to Africa and India. Later came a stint helping the United Farm Workers

and making visits with priests to prisons.

"I didn't step from my home into a cell," she said. "It was a series of many steps" -- including an instance of what some might call coincidence, but Sister Antonia is sure was providence.

Three decades ago, she and a priest crossed the border to deliver supplies to Tijuana's city jail. They got lost, and wound up at the state prison.

Sister Antonia was drawn to the need she saw there and soon fell in love with Mexican culture. Within a few years, she had permission from the bishop of San Diego to become a nun without joining an order. She moved to the prison in 1977, several years after she and her husband had parted.

That subject drops a cloud over her normally smiling face. "I'm divorced," she said. "That's very painful to say." She will say nothing more.

Heart Problems

Her home is La Mesa. Except for visits with her children, public lectures on her work and periods of illness, she has not left the prison. Nor has the pace of her work slowed, which worries those who love her.

Plagued by heart problems and shortness of breath, she has an oxygen tank in her cell. But she insists on answering every knock at her door. "She never stops," said Joanie Kenesie, 63, a San Diego widow who helps Sister Antonia, often sleeping in her cell on a cot. "They call her the Eveready battery."

Sister Antonia hopes her new order will become a lasting institution, one that continues her work after she is gone. Those who have joined so far include Sisters Carmen Hendrix and Olivia Fregoso. They came to her after careers spent at the Rockwell Electronics plant in Anaheim. "I didn't want to go to Vegas" in retirement, Hendrix said. But it wasn't until she heard the nun lecture about her work that she knew what she wanted to do: live on her pension in a trailer park in San Ysidro, coordinating delivery of supplies across the border.

Many women feel the way she does, Hendrix said: "They want to retire and give the best to God." The most difficult part, in many cases, is making their children understand that, though they will still be available, their allegiance now goes to God.

The Servants of the 11th Hour have a house near the prison, a clean, rambling refuge where some sisters live with an ever-changing cast of former prostitutes, cancer victims and lost children, along with birds in cages and the cats who peer at them. Beans and tortillas stay warm all day, ready for indigents who pop in for a bite.

Another house is under construction nearby; both are funded partly by parishes in Southern California.

"We're on our way," Sister Antonia said. "The longest journey starts with the first step.... It's a wonderful journey that God brought me on. I always felt for people in prison.... Where I live, I can do something about it."

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