



FEATURE STORIES

# Tutorial Tune-Ups: The Orange County Magic of Rosie's Garage

BY CATHERINE A. SMITH

If the measures of a program's success are that, over time, it grows, has measurable achievements, and attracts resources, volunteers and the media, then Rosie's Garage of Orange County, California, is a remarkable grassroots success story.

Most simply, Rosie's Garage is an after-school tutoring program for low-income, primarily Spanish-speaking children that literally began in Rose Espinoza's garage. Rose Espinoza started the tutoring program after she purchased a home in 1990 in a neighborhood being revitalized by La Habra Neighborhood Housing Services. She quickly learned that the revitalization activity still had a long way to go, for her El Campo neighborhood was besieged by gang activity, its residents living in fear. (LaHabra NHS since has merged with Santa Ana NHS and become NHS of Orange County.)

Students at a Rosie's Garage site.  
PHOTO BY SÉAN BENNETT





Rose Espinoza of Rosie's Garage  
PHOTO BY SEAN BENNETT

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"I wondered how I could have brought my little son into this neighborhood and how the neighborhood could tolerate this," Espinoza said. "And since I had no equity in my home, I had to figure out how to address the issue."

Her answer was to go door-to-door with a questionnaire, and ask what her neighbors thought about the problem and how they should resolve it. Her car was marked repeatedly by graffiti that said things like "Keep your mouth shut" and "Get lost!" But she persisted.

What she found out was that the parents of the neighborhood kids – including the gang members – weren't fluent in English. They couldn't help with homework so their kids weren't thriving in school, and no organized activities for the kids were available once school let out.

#### **Original Plan**

With this information in hand, she approached NHS Executive Director Glenn Hayes. Espinoza had a plan for a tutoring program in her garage. Hayes provided his support, and

Espinoza secured donations of tables and chairs and books, and got parents and others to assist with tutoring.

Rosie's Garage started at her house in 1991 with 12 children. With NHS's backing, two more Rosie's Garages opened, in the Grace/Pacific neighborhood in 1994, and in Brea in 1997. A fourth opened in Santa Ana in 2000, but laid fallow for about a year until being rededicated in March 2002. Today, nearly 120 young people come to a Rosie's Garage for help with homework.

Most importantly, Espinoza herself does not run the programs. Parents do. "They start out shyly," Espinoza said, "passing out pencils and paper or getting a first grader to write something 10 times. But then they gain confidence. More and more parents start to volunteer, and eventually they are running their own program."

"I'm more a gofer now," she says, in a notable understatement. In addition to working full-time as an electro-mechanical designer at Beckman Coulter Inc., a provider of instrument systems and support services in biomedical testing, Espinoza also serves on the La Habra City Council, is an active NHS board member, and was just named one of the California legislature's Women of the Year. A producer with PBS television just did a documentary on Rosie's Garage, in a series that features Espinoza as the first of four "American Heroes."

### Lessons Learned

Many lessons have emerged over time in how Rosie's Garage came into being, how it flourished, and how it continues to be in demand in NHS neighborhoods. A selection follows.

**You Need a Leader.** Rose Espinoza at first was simply a resident with an idea. Then in 1991 she went to a leadership conference hosted by Neighborhood Reinvestment in San Diego. "I went up on the train saying 'I think I can,'" Espinoza said, "and came back home on the train saying 'I know I can.'"

The board of La Habra NHS encouraged her leadership ability, and she absorbed many a lesson running the first Rosie's Garage that she brought to subsequent programs. She has remained a volunteer but a very committed one. Her true leadership has been demonstrated in her insistence that others take the lead.

**Residents Are the Nucleus.** For a neighborhood-based volunteer program like Rosie's Garage, residents have to make a commitment that they will show up and do the work.

**"Word spreads, and that's how we get our communities to help themselves." Starting slowly also keeps residents from becoming overwhelmed by the sheer level of need for services like tutoring.**

"Politicians and corporate sponsors are great," says Manuel Solis, neighborhood outreach director of NHS of Orange County, "but the bottom line is that the program is all about the kids, so families have to be involved." Solis helped jumpstart the fourth Rosie's Garage in Santa Ana.

Espinoza adds, "A very important part of the program is that kids love to see that the adults in their lives have gone to the extreme for them. It really matters to children, and especially to their education, that their parents show they care."

**Nurture New Leaders.** As residents get and stay involved, identifying potential leaders is easy. "You start to notice the parents who like this idea," Espinoza says. "You give them a little more responsibility, and you can see

whether or not they like that. It's the ones who start coming and want to help out who become the leaders eventually."

**Take It Slow.** The second Rosie's Garage began in 1994 in the house vacated when La Habra NHS merged with Santa Ana NHS. In building interest in the program, "We took it really slow," Espinoza said. She started out by distributing flyers in the community, announcing a meeting to discuss the future of the neighborhood. There she explained that Rosie's Garage could be offered as a one-year pilot, with tutoring done just one day a week. "When I told them it would only work if they volunteered," Espinoza said, "they said, 'Me?' Some had very limited English skills and lacked other basic skills, too, but I always encouraged them to come. We took it a little at a time – added one day, then another – and before I knew it, they were confident they could run their own program."

Starting slowly has been a strategy at all four sites. "We go out and knock on doors and say 'we need you,'" Espinoza said. "Word spreads, and that's how we get our communities to help themselves." Starting slowly also keeps residents from becoming overwhelmed by the sheer level of need for services like tutoring.

**Ask for Help.** Espinoza first went to NHS for help with her idea, because she knew its concern was with overall neighborhood revitalization. Then she got involved with La Habra's CDBG committee. "I didn't know protocol," she said, "so when they asked if there was a program that could use money, I explained how Rosie's Garage worked, why I was doing it, and how NHS was supporting it." The committee granted \$2,000 a site. NHS's board then approached foundations and corporations. It drew support from United Way, the Orange County Community Foundation, Chevron, NCLR and others. Espinoza twice



applied for Disneyland's community service award, and received \$40,000 in 1997 (on Disney's 40th anniversary) and \$20,000 in 2001.

By going out and making presentations to corporations and civic organizations, Espinoza has generated in-kind contributions of everything from pencils to computers. "It seems like the resources are out there and that it's just a matter of knowledge and connections to tap into them," she said.

**Network!** At the Vietnamese and Hispanic Chamber of Commerce meeting last year, Manny Solis happened upon a booth manned by Dave Lopez, an area manager with the U.S. Department of the Treasury. They got to talking about how little NHS's clients knew about savings. Solis mentioned that NHS was having a 5K Walk/Run event in June to benefit children in the Rosie's Garage program. Instead of giving the kids cash that they would raise from sponsors, Lopez suggested giving them savings bonds, which the Treasury Department would help match with corporate donations. He also offered to teach NHS residents about savings and investments.

Not only did the Walk/Run event bring people into a neighborhood that they once would have avoided and raise funds for needy children, it also added to the organization's funding base and will expand the life skills of residents in the community. You never know where a conversation will lead, Espinoza says.

**Be Willing to Regroup.** When NHS in 2000 opened a Rosie's Garage in Santa Ana, the program floundered when a tutor withdrew and its advisory board burned out. NHS then hired Manny Solis, and made part of his job description the task of bringing the program back to excellence. "We revitalized our advisory board and changed its structure," Solis said, "got some new people in, and started up again in November of last year." Again, a slow, steady approach was

taken. The program was open first only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with 28 children enrolled. Now, it operates Monday through Thursday, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

**Celebrate Your Successes.** NHS used the Santa Ana regrouping as an opportunity to celebrate, and a Grand Opening was held in March 2002. Among the dignitaries present or represented were California State Senator Joseph Dunn, Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, and State Assemblyman Lou Correa. A commendation plaque was presented from Mayor Miguel Pulido. NHS honored the sponsors of two mentoring groups, Albertson's and Sav On (which also donated a computer system to the site). A check for \$1,000 was presented to Rosie's Garage by David and Mary Schultz's foundation, Urban Children Educational Fund. The festive event drew media attention and reminded everyone involved of the important work the organization is doing.

**Don't Be Swayed by Media Attention.** Espinoza says she is amazed at all the publicity Rosie's Garage receives. But even with that, she says, "We just make sure we're grounded, and we let the media know it all depends on the residents and whether or not they step up to the plate. It's not about quantity, but about quality."

**Measure Your Success.** At the request of a foundation, the Rosie's Garage program was evaluated in 1996, when two of the programs were fully operational. Using test-score data provided by the school system, the study found that Rosie's Garage students' written language and math ability increased considerably – about two grade levels. Their math ability also increased, to nearly three years' academic improvement in just one year.

The study also found that children's attitudes toward school, schoolwork and themselves improved, that more than 70 percent of their parents volunteered in the program, and that

calls to the police were greatly reduced (an indicator of decreased gang activity). Statistical studies are important to potential funders, but also can reveal information about a program that can lead to improvements.

**Capitalize on Your Identity.** The name "Rosie's Garage" obviously came about because the tutoring was done in Rosie's real garage. But additional programs didn't need to carry on the name. "I don't care what it's called, I just want it to work for the kids," Espinoza said. "It sounds so corny, and we wanted the program to sound reputable. But we realized that the name piques people's curiosity and is what causes them to inquire about it. So now we say we do 'tutorial tune-ups.' It just seems to work."

**Stay Focused, but Don't Stop.** Just about any successful program that grows from a grassroots effort indicates real need. All four Rosie's Garages, for example, are still reaching only a very small number of children in NHS target neighborhoods who need help with tutoring and could benefit from more contact with caring adults.

So NHS's board and Espinoza think about a big capital campaign that might lead to more sites, and they actively raise funds and work to make people aware of the program. But although several neighborhoods are clamoring for a Rosie's Garage, Manny Solis says, "I'm all for slow growth, especially because residents have to be willing to come in and do the work."

Or, as Rose Espinoza puts it, "If you're going to plead it, get ready to lead it." ■

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