



## Illa Alexander: The neighborhood minister



COURTESY OF ILLA ALEXANDER  
Estefana "Panda" Corral (Left) and Illa Alexander share a moment together at the "Helping America's Youth" conference.

by Laura Atkielski  
Regular Contributor

Around 51 years old, Illa Alexander sensed God's calling to do more with her life. "I realized I still had time and something to give [but] I didn't know what it was going to be to," Illa said.

Enter Kit Danley. One week at church, Illa heard Kit speak about a program dedicated to help struggling families cope in the rugged streets of Phoenix. It was known as Neighborhood Ministries. Thinking this was the perfect opportunity to give of herself, Illa latched on immediately and signed up to tutor a student once a week. Although this was a positive step for her, God still had a few tricks up His sleeve.

After learning that Illa had been running a preschool at her church, Neighborhood Ministries asked if she would be willing to run a preschool for all the children "who would sit home in their dark apartments all day long with no stimulation," as Illa put

it. She and her church agreed, and began picking up the kids once a week to bring them to preschool. During this time, the kids' stomachs enjoyed a good meal while their brains lavished in story time, alphabet, colors, singing and different interest groups.

"That's how I started out," Illa explained, "but in the process I got to know the moms." She soon became a part of Neighborhood Ministries' new program called Mom's Place. Their intent was to provide something teen moms could turn to for support and parenting education. According to Illa, Neighborhood Ministries was "hoping that if their kids were in the preschool than they could do parenting skills with the parents at the same time."

This plan became a success, and Illa was able to develop a relationship with four Hispanic sisters, their kids and extended family. Her key approach to helping these young moms was to listen and give advice when they asked. The most important

aspect was that the moms trusted Illa to remain in their lives. "They have all been abandoned," Illa said. Now she jokes about being in the kids' lives for good, even if they want her to go away.

Illa also gets to teach God's truth to the sisters. She emphasized, "We've got a close enough relationship that I can be truthful with them and they know that it's not judgmental."

Naturally, the sisters and the Alexanders blended together into one huge multi-cultural family. They do many activities together, including fine dining, sleepovers, amusement parks, and even Alexander family functions. "It's exciting to see lives change and it's exciting to see the growth in the kids and how important their education is to them now," Illa said.

Being involved in the sisters' lives and Neighborhood Ministries has given Illa some new perspectives on her life as well. Six years ago she thought the inner city was about going to the symphony, a Diamondback's game or a theatre. Illa admitted, "I really had no idea [about] the life that was going on around the perimeter of that." Yet, "when I became aware and became involved, it...totally transformed my life...I have seen Jesus in many different colors and not just white."

Regarding Illa's faith she said, "I have loved the fact that I see people now more through the eyes of Jesus." The most challenging aspect about becoming involved with Neighborhood Ministries was "being able to give up my idea of how things should be done," Illa said. This self-titled fixer learned "that I wasn't called by God to come down there and fix anybody I was called to come down there and love them."

As much of a difference as she has made at Neighborhood Ministries Illa could only imagine herself becoming more involved. She explained, "I've fallen in love with the people. I've fallen in love with the culture. I've fallen in love more with Jesus."

### Testimonial from Estefana "Panda" Corral

I have been in Neighborhood Ministries (NM) since I was seven. It was a safe haven for me growing up because, when I was young, there was a lot of abuse in my family and there were a lot of gangs in my neighborhood. So NM was a safe place from gangs and drugs and violence. I stayed with NM through Jr. High.

I had my first child at 17. When I had my second child I came back into Neighborhood Ministries. One of the leaders from NM found me and asked me to come to a teen mom program called Moms Place. I was skeptical at first, wondering what they wanted from me. But I came anyway and I had a great time. I saw adult women who cared for me and my kids and it gave me an opportunity to get out of the house. We had lots of fun activities and food. About 1 1/2 years after being in Moms Place, I met Illa through the pre-school program.

Think it is amazing that we started out just going out to some white lady from the church and now Illa is someone I want to be like. I could see God in Illa, and it made me have more faith. I had lost faith for a long time. I saw God in her, loving us and accepting and it made me know that was God in her. And that God had sent her to be with us, to love us. She just loved us.

Having Illa & Steve in mine and my kids life is going to help prevent them from going into wrong choices and choosing the gang life.