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Local Heroes

Our fifth annual look at
Tucsonans who make the
world a better place



Carmen Romero

A senior herself, she makes sure other seniors get companionship and assistance

On a rainy winter day, Carmen Romero hurries between the raindrops falling in the courtyard at the Lalo Guerrero Barrio Viejo Elderly Housing complex south of downtown.

The apartments are painted violet, ochre and green, but the sunny shades can't take the nasty chill out of the air. But Romero just clutches her windbreaker close. She has someplace she needs to be. She's on her way to visit 85-year-old Carmen Samaniego y Alvarez, in her little one-bedroom apartment.

Samaniego beams when her son Pedro opens the door to Romero. The older woman throws her arms around her.

"I love her very much," Samaniego declares in Spanish. "She's my friend."

Samaniego is just one of Romero's elderly friends--or clients--in the barrio. Romero works as a senior companion, in a Pima County elderly services program run by the nonprofit Our Family. She spends her days visiting the old, the lonely and the infirm, sitting to talk, peeking into the refrigerator to make sure they're eating adequately and driving them to the pharmacy. Some of them get few or no visitors other than Romero.

"I stay with them, sometimes for an hour," Romero says. "Some of them are desperate. They don't talk to people sometimes. It does them good. They really appreciate it."

Romero is almost more of a volunteer than an employee. She earns just \$2.65 an hour--a rate well below minimum wage--but she doesn't have to pay taxes, and she can keep collecting her own Social Security checks.

After all, Romero herself is a senior citizen, and she's lived in the senior apartments herself for the last four years. She'll turn 71 two days after Christmas, but she has no plans to stop working. She's had jobs her whole life, and she likes this one.

"Oh yeah, I enjoy the work," she says. "It's a very interesting job. It's not the money. It gets you out. When I got the job, I had lost my husband. I was helping other people, and they help me, too."

The work has one major drawback.

"It's hard when they decease," she says, "but in this job, you've got to get used to it."

Romero works primarily in the Lalo Guerrero complex, a Catholic Community Services project for low-income elderly. Built on the site of the old Drachman School, the complex weathered vocal opposition from historic preservationists. Ultimately, The Architecture Company's design preserved one piece of the historic school: The offices occupy the old pillared portico building on Convent Avenue. The shady porch is a favored spot of one of her clients, Romero says; the woman likes to sit and watch the people and cars go by.

Romero grew up a few blocks to the south, in Barrio Libre. She was one of 21 children, she says, but just six grew up. She went out to work at an early age, after her father suffered an accident.

"I would pick cotton in Marana. They took us in a truck. Later, I got a job at a private school, helping with the breakfast and cleaning the dorms. Then I was offered a job cutting french fries in a factory close to home."

After she married and had three children of her own, Romero continued to work. For 19 years, she worked in restaurants at the UA Student Union, finishing up as a grill cook. She brings that same energy to her retirement job. When she finishes her paid hours, she volunteers.

"I help in the dining room," she says. "Sometimes, I help with the coffee. We decorated the dining room for Christmas. Last Thursday, we had a party celebrating Lalo Guerrero's anniversary." (The late musician is probably the barrio's most famous native son.)

Romero's labors not only bring joy to her clients, but peace of mind to their families.

Pedro Alvarez Samaniego and his brother switch off spending the night with their elderly mom. But it's a huge help to them to know that Romero will come by to see her, no matter what.

"It's helpful for Carmen to visit," he says. "If my mom didn't have anybody, it would be difficult."

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