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A BIG THANK-YOU: AWARD NAMED IN LOCAL HEALTH ADVOCATE'S HONOR

'She is a true humanitarian'

A.G. resident Isabel Ruiz has spent three decades helping others be healthy, even as she fights cancer

By SARAH ARNQUIST
sarnquist@thetribunenews.com

When searching for a health advocate for Latinos or low-income families in San Luis Obispo County, one name is constantly mentioned: Isabel Ruiz.

And now, every year an individual who demonstrates Ruiz's same brand of leadership, generosity and commitment to improving lives in this community will be given an award named for her. The San Luis Obispo Community Foundation recently announced the creation of the annual Isabel P. Ruiz Humanitarian Award.

"She's one of the hardest-working individuals I've ever known," said Bill Broadbent, who established the award and volunteers with Ruiz at the American Cancer Society. "She is a true humanitarian."

Moreover, she's done her work for the past seven years while battling cancer herself, Broadbent said.

For more than 30 years, Ruiz, 63, has toiled tirelessly to improve the health of people living in San Luis Obispo County. Personally, she has helped thousands of people get access to health services, and many of the programs she created, such as a senior health screening proj-



TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JAYSON MELLOM

Local health advocate Isabel Ruiz says her motivation has always been the thank-you she receives from those she helps. 'That fills you and gives you satisfaction,' she says.

ect, continue helping thousands more.

Ruiz's colleagues describe her as selfless, positive, gentle, caring, steadfast, sincere, peaceful and focused.

Thirty years of sharing those qualities have gained Ruiz trust and respect from the disadvantaged families she helps and from community officials, said Janice Fong Wolf, program director at the community foundation, who

has known Ruiz for 20 years.

"She is completely about the community," Fong Wolf said.

An unexpected honor

Sitting in her small office in a corner of the Grover Beach public health building, Ruiz said she felt honored by the award, but she never expected it.

Her motivation has always been the thank-you she receives from those she helps.

"That fills you and gives you satisfaction," she said.

Ruiz wears her black hair in a stylish bob, and black rectangular glasses rest on her nose. Around her neck, she had a jade circle enclosing a Chinese symbol meaning long life. Ruiz bought it on a recent trip to China with her husband, Napoleon.

Thirty-four years ago, Ruiz

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Ruiz

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followed her husband to San Luis Obispo from Lima, Peru, where she had trained to be a doctor. She finished her medical residency there in obstetrics and gynecology, but never practiced in California.

She doesn't regret not practicing medicine because she said she fulfilled her goal of helping people in other, equally important ways.

Ruiz now works for the San Luis Obispo Public Health Department, where her primary duty is enrolling uninsured children in public health insurance programs.

Her success is known throughout the state, said Kena Burke, director of the county's Children's Health Initiative. People cannot believe one person has been able to enroll hundreds of children within six months, she said.

"She beats everybody hands down in the state," Burke said.

Cancer can't stop her

Ruiz says she considers each day a precious gift. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1987 and then again in 2000. Her illness went away the first time, but not the second. She undergoes regular chemotherapy treatments, but the cancer has spread to her lungs and bones.

Yet she still works, preaching her message of early cancer screening and detection. She enrolls children, and whenever possible their parents, into insurance programs so they can access preventive care and stay healthy.

Ruiz's ability to speak Spanish and her understanding of Latino cultures has made her a trusted advocate in that community.

"I believe very strongly that every person in the U.S. should learn English, but it's hard, especially for those who are illiterate in their own language," she said.

Those people, she said, need an advocate, and because they often are reluctant to ask for help or don't know where to go, the assistance must be

brought to them.

Community outreach has been a constant theme in Ruiz's career.

During her 12-year tenure as the health services director at the Economic Opportunity Commission of San Luis Obispo County Inc., she helped the nonprofit agency develop a medical clinic and start teen sex education and senior health screening programs.

When she later moved to manage the clinic at the Community Health Centers of the Central Coast for 11 years, she started a free mammogram program for uninsured women.

And while working as a community outreach coordinator for French Hospital Medical Center in San Luis Obispo and Arroyo Grande Community Hospital, she started the community health fairs that are now common.

She also has been on the boards of French Hospital, the American Cancer Society, Latino Outreach Council and the Oceano Community Center.

Of all her life accomplishments, Ruiz said she is most proud of her family. Her husband is an agricultural engineer who helped develop the Edna Valley vineyards.

Her daughter, Diana, works as a microbiologist in San Diego, and her son, David, sells life insurance locally. Her family includes her many great friends.

Ruiz has always taken a pragmatic approach to her work. She recognizes a need, and then works to fill it. She never waited for anyone else to do the work, and for many years, there was no one else.

In the 1980s and '90s, San Luis Obispo County had few bilingual advocates to step into leadership positions. Ruiz smiles when she thinks about how that's changed. She can be happy to step aside now and let younger leaders take over.

Those rising leaders may some day be honored with the award named after her, and that would complete Broadbent's vision.

"We need to recognize people that are making selfless contributions to the betterment of the community," he said.