

Biography - Aguirre  
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# Patron saint of nutrition

## Toppenish woman's 'a blessing,' friends say

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To neighborhood children she's known as the "Tortilla Lady." To people needing food and clothing, she's a friend.

And to the Toppenish community, she's a saint.

Olivia Aguirre has been working for 14 years as a nutrition aide in Toppenish, Buena and Zillah. She works in the Expanded Food and Nutritional Education Program through Yakima County Cooperative Extension — Washington State University.

Aguirre was recently named one of four outstanding nutrition aides in the United States by the National Association of Extension Home Economists. Representing 14 western states, she was flown to New York to receive her award at the annual home economists convention.

"I really never dreamed I'd be spending a week in New York City," said Aguirre, who worked as a migrant farm laborer as a child. "It was a little unreal. When the people in my office submitted my name, I thought nothing would come of it. But then I found out I was named the top aide in the state. Not long after that, word came that I was a national winner. It was very exciting."

Cora Vowell, supervisor of the county nutrition program, feels that Aguirre's selection was very deserving. "She puts a lot of work into what she does. She cares a great deal for the people she helps and shares so much of herself."

Aguirre's New York trip was filled with sight-seeing, workshops on nutrition, and visits to Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Highlight of her stay was a four-hour dinner cruise in the New York harbor.

Back in the Valley, Aguirre continues her daily rounds, visiting homes of people who are part of her nutrition caseload. She checks in on 50 families at least twice a month. These are low-income people, referred by social agencies, churches or neighbors.

"My job is to teach people sound nutrition so the family can be fed good food using less money. I stress the principles of eating right."

Once Aguirre adds a family to her



(Photo by Jane Gargas)

Nutrition aide Olivia Aguirre rolls out another batch of tortillas for hungry friends

caseload, she delivers a set of basic recipes and checks on the family's food situation. Her first nutrition lesson is usually on the cost advantages of using powdered milk. When she leaves, she recommends that the family purchase certain foods for her next lesson later in the month.

When she finds families who are low on food, she returns with government commodities or surplus foods. Often she turns to her parish, St. Aloysius Catholic Church, for additional help. The St. Vincent De Paul Society of the church administers a food bank and used clothing service.

"Olivia comes to us once or twice a week, saying that she's found a family who needs help," explained the Rev. Desmond Dillon, pastor of St. Aloysius. "She comes on her own time, after work, and picks up blankets, diapers, and other necessities."

"She finds the people who have fallen between the cracks in our society. When she comes and tells us that someone needs help, then they really need help. We don't question anything she tells us because whatever she says is always so. We tell her to take whatever she needs."

Extension agent Vowell agreed that Aguirre spends a good deal of her own time after hours helping peo-

ple she has visited during her job. "She gives time above and beyond her work, solely on a volunteer basis."

"But she doesn't do everything for people. She provides opportunities for them, but she's careful about not letting them become dependent on her. She helps them help themselves."

Aguirre tackles more than emergency aid and nutritional guidance. She also teaches cooking methods, sanitation, and economizing. "I emphasize decent meals. Everyone knows how to cook their favorite foods, but not everyone knows how to make food go further."

"I often work with people who don't read or write. Their lack of information is a big handicap nutritionally. I start with basic skills and work from there."

Aguirre continued, "I stress cooking foods like macaroni and cheese and Spanish rice. We go over what foods combine to make more usable protein. Sometimes I do group demonstrations where several families and I will make applesauce or can tomatoes. My favorite cooking activity is baking bread together."

Families stay in the nutrition program a maximum of 18 months. Aguirre estimates that one quarter of her families are migrants.

She feels she has a great deal of

in high school in Mabton. I decided then that if I ever had children, they wouldn't wander from school district to school district."

Aguirre went on to have 13 children, who now range in age from 34 to 19. All are high school graduates; 11 have diplomas from Toppenish High School.

Her family is active in church functions, athletics and school events. Rev. Dillon noted, "Olivia and her family are extremely well-respected and well-known by all the community. She's very forthright, very genuine, and on top of that, she's very effective."

"If I have problems on any level, she helps in a guiding way. She speaks her mind clearly, is very proficient in two languages, and everyone in the parish holds her in high regard — myself in particular."

Aguirre taught catechism for 10 years and is a member of the church's Guadalupe Guild. In addition, she does volunteer work for the Toppenish Food Bank and is a charter member of the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic board of directors.

She loves her work. "It's nice when I make people feel proud. When they are successful at something like cooking nutritionally for their families, then they are bound to feel happier."

She added, "And I like the success of it, too. At least I know there are families who've taken sugary drinks off the table because of me. Or traded in their pop for juice."

Aguirre has seen other improvements after working with families for a few months. "Many people do better. They start organizing their households and budgeting. They put money away to buy food for later. It isn't always an emergency situation."

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