



From GA Camp to UBA WMU Director

By Jonathan Brooks

Mary Valerio has been the participant of several "firsts" during her life. She was one of the first recipients of Texas Baptists' Mary Hill Davis Ethnic/Minority Scholarship Program as a student at East Texas Baptist College (now East Texas Baptist University). She was the first Hispanic to serve as vice president of the Women's Missionary Union (WMU) of Texas. And now she is beginning her tenure as the first bi-lingual Hispanic WMU Director in the history of UBA.

One of Mary's goals as UBA WMU Director is to help Hispanic people see themselves as missionaries. She notes that they have typically seen themselves on the receiving end of others' money and time. She believes it is time to transition from that mentality to one of being missional.

She also wants to see more families doing missions together. Parents working alongside their children can have a major impact on the lives of their children.

Knowing that Mary has a long history of being missional and training others to be so, the UBA is excited to see the impact she will continue to have in the life of the church in Houston.

From the beginning, missions has been an integral part of Mary's journey of faith. The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Mary grew up in several small towns in Texas, in one of which an important event occurred in the life of young Mary. "Six miles from Camp Ruby, which is in East Texas, was an Indian Reservation. I remember my Catholic parents allowing me to be part of a Bible school that was taught by three ladies from the reservation."

Her parents allowed her to attend the local Baptist church in Camp Ruby since the nearest Catholic church was too far for them to attend. It was at this church she joined GA's (Girls in Action, a WMU organization for girls) and first heard the plan of salvation.

As a 14 year-old at GA Camp, Mary was moved by the speaker's general challenge to answer God's call to service. After deciding to devote her life in service to God, her church gave her opportunities to serve. At the age of 14, they gave her the responsibility of being church clerk – a position she would hold through high school.

Mary believed that God was leading her to be a missionary – possibly going to Mexico. While in college, she met her late husband, Reverend Mike Valerio, and her plans for being a missionary changed – at least geographically. As a young pastor's wife, Mary did not at first realize the missional aspect of the work that she and her husband would be doing. When Mike, along with his father and brother, planted a new church sponsored by the UBA, Mary realized that her mission field was working alongside her husband in Primera Iglesia Bautista de Kinwood, a church which Mike would pastor for over 50 years. She learned that Houston is the largest mission field in Texas.

Mary began a GA's group at the church. She started with three girls and had thirty by the end of the year. The group became too large for her to handle by herself, so she trained other women to help out. After training those women, she organized and started a Mission Friends group. She soon trained other women to lead that group.

After doing a survey of the neighborhood, the church realized that the two biggest needs of the community were a clinic to provide inoculations and a kindergarten – neither of which were available to the community at the time. Having studied elementary education in college, Mary started a kindergarten and taught for 17 years. After hunting for students the first year, the kindergarten had a waiting list each year after that.

With the help of Harris County, the church opened a clinic, which would serve two elementary schools, a junior high school, a high school, and senior citizen apartments. On the first day the clinic opened, the staff inoculated 98 children. Both the kindergarten and clinic opened doors for them to share the love of Christ in the community.

Because of her ability to train and start ministries, Mary found herself being asked to share her knowledge and skills with others on the associational, state, and national levels. She served as the assistant to the Spanish WMU leader for the UBA. She was elected as a representative for the Texas WMU Executive Board. She has served as state president for the Hispanic WMU of Texas. As a member of the Advisory Council for the National WMU she has conducted trainings in nearly every state.

Mary – a mother of three boys, grandmother of four, and great-grandmother of one – has a desire to help people be aware of the opportunities to minister in Houston. "God has sent the world here to Houston. I want our women and all the people in our churches to be aware that there are people in the shadows of our churches who are lost. Since the people of the world are here, excuses about not being able to do missions are no longer valid."