George I. Sánchez Memorial Award
A Life Devoted to Helping Others in Need

◊ Elmo Padilla ◊

There were 1.6 million homeless school children in the U.S. last year. That's a record.

In Las Cruces, New Mexico, on any given day, there are 750 school children who do not have homes (out of 25,000 students)—and some of those children, quite literally, go to school unsure of where they will sleep that night.

As the Family School Liaison in the Federal Migrant Program, Elmo Padilla devotes many of his waking hours helping poor families find housing, food for their children, and access to health care. Mr. Padilla goes into the fields and homeless shelters to find children who need to be in school. He often pays out of his own pocket for the shoes and clothing and supplies those children need. When a student's family's ramshackle house burned to the ground, Elmo Padilla and his brother Art led a fundraising effort to meet the family's immediate housing needs.

Mr. Padilla started teaching 5th and 6th grade 40 years ago in Bayard, New Mexico in the Cobre School District, and he taught there for 19 years. In 1993 Elmo Padilla's father's declining health required him to move to Las Cruces so that he could assist his mother. There he continued his career as classroom teacher, except for taking one year off to help his sister while her sick daughter (his niece) waited for and finally received a heart transplant.

A long-time colleague says of Elmo Padilla: “It isn't all book learning that students get from Elmo. It is life lessons, personal responsibility, character and teaching by example.”

He was often assigned the roughest students and would develop a great rapport with them. In addition, he would volunteer for after school programs. He coached the Special Education Boys Basketball team, and they won the New Mexico State Championship. What's more, he was chosen to coach eight New Mexico boys in the Special Olympic Games (track and field), and they won two gold medals and two silvers.