

CALM leader retiring after 3 decades with organization

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At just 12 years old, Cecilia Rodriguez made a very mature vow to her future self:

"I promised that I would be a grown-up who really listened to kids," she recalls.

The executive director of Child Abuse Listening and Mediation, or CALM, has not only fulfilled that promise over the past three decades, she made it her life's work and will leave a legacy of love and hope when she retires from her post later this year.

CALM's goal is to prevent child abuse by reaching at-risk parents before they hurt their kids, and to offer several programs that assess and treat family violence.

Ms. Rodriguez first learned of the organization in 1984 after answering a small ad in a newspaper looking for volunteers. At that time, CALM had only 15 people on staff and only served the city of Santa Barbara, Ms. Rodriguez said.

But it didn't take her long to realize it was exactly where she wanted to be.

"I knew the minute I first walked in, I was hooked. I knew I would spend the rest of my career doing this vital work in the community," she said. "At CALM, we help children find voice and give families hope for the future."

Ms. Rodriguez said she understood the importance of growing up in a safe home, because hers was not.

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Cecilia Rodriguez joined CALM in 1984 as a volunteer and became its executive director in 2008.
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Over the past 31 years, she has served as a child abuse prevention educator and helped to develop many of CALM's programs.

Prevention, she said, begins with identifying and reaching out to at-risk parents, including young or undereducated parents, those suffering from mental illness or depression, or those who were abused themselves as children.

In each case, the key is treating people with respect and nonjudgment.

For the past 20 years, Ms. Rodriguez also has served as one of CALM's forensic interview specialists. She works with local law enforcement speaking to children about their abuse. In many cases, she was the first person with whom young victims opened up to about their most traumatic experiences.

"I've figured out in the moment to be there for the child, to help them feel comfortable telling their story, you can't act surprised or emotionally respond," she said.

The information she gathers is used as evidence against the abusers in court.

Santa Barbara County District Attorney Joyce Dudley said Ms. Rodriguez has helped her office countless times over the years.

"The first time was a case we worked on together over 20 years ago when she helped a 3-year-old feel safe enough to disclose how her family member tortured her," Ms. Dudley recalled. "I adore and admire her as much as I respect her.

"Over the past 20 years I have watched her, innumerable times, free a child's voice so they could once again experience safety and their predator could be prosecuted."

While many may become cynical or angry in her shoes, Ms. Rodriguez said she has learned not to bring the heart-wrenching work home with her.

Instead she focuses on the positive.

"This is the beginning of healing. While it isn't therapy, it can be very therapeutic for a child to find their voice, and if I can facilitate that, then it's a good thing, because it is so important to maintain hope in this work."

Ms. Rodriguez said. "This is the beginning of a journey for the child and family toward healing."

Ms. Rodriguez credits her predecessor, Dr. Anna Kokotovic, for setting the groundwork that has led to the tremendous growth of the organization over the years, including increasing the organization's presence in the community, doubling the number of kids it serves, and expanding its clinical services.

CALM now has over 100 employees and serves communities all across Santa Barbara County, including Lompoc, Santa Maria, Guadalupe and Carpinteria.

"It has been the great honor of my life to have had such a meaningful, rewarding career where I have been able to honor my intentions to listen to children that were most in need of help," Ms. Rodriguez said. "I am deeply grateful for these years and to CALM for making it possible for me to help these children find their voices, heal their hearts, and give families a better future together."

Ms. Rodriguez believes perceptions of abuse have changed over the years as well.

"There were years when people did not want to hear about it. They did not want to hear about children being abused or taken advantage of," she said. "The subject has become less taboo to talk about in our culture. People began speaking out, and CALM put it in the public as an issue that needed attention and the community has responded. We are not burying our heads in the sand."

The organization began its "I will not be silent" campaign in 2012, which urges people to speak out against child abuse.

Ms. Rodriguez will retire in December. She plans to spend the next chapter of her life adventuring with her husband and spending more time with her children and two grandsons. Her exceptional work at CALM will not be forgotten.

"In my now over 25 years as a prosecutor, I have met people who I believe were the worst of the worst and I have worked with people who I believe were the best of the best — there was no one better than Cecilia Rodriguez," Ms. Dudley said.

CALM is establishing the Cecilia Rodriguez Child Abuse Treatment Fund to be used to treat victims of child abuse who don't have the means to pay for services.

The organization hopes to raise \$350,000 to enable the organization to serve more of the community's most vulnerable.

"I leave CALM with a sense of great pride in what we have accomplished together," Ms. Rodriguez said. "And equally important, I close this chapter of my life with contentment and complete confidence that our community will continue to walk with CALM on its important journey of taking families from healing to hope."

For more information about CALM and the Cecilia Rodriguez Child Abuse Treatment Fund, call 965-2376 or visit www.calm4kids.org.