

Delphine Rodriguez FAMILY & COMMUNITY



Delphine Rodriguez

One thirsty night in 1984 proved to be the turning point for Delphine Rodriguez.

And the decision to stay parched instead of reaching for the bottle she desperately craved put her on a path that led her to positively influence the lives of others.

Since then, Rodriguez went on to earn two degrees, hold teaching and administrative positions in the public education system and puts her minister's license to use by ministering to incarcerated women, many who come from the same background of poverty and despair that Rodriguez knew all too well growing up and living on the reservation.

In her darkest hour when she was craving a drink and the luxury of a peaceful slumber eluded her, Rodriguez says she prayed to God to help her get through the night without one. The fact that she was able to fall asleep without giving in to temptation meant her prayer was answered and from that moment on, she dedicated her life to Christ and helping others find him too, regardless of their situation.

"I go to the jails not because someone pays me or because a church tells me to, but because the women need someone to encourage them, to tell them that Jesus loves them," she says. "There is that cycle of poverty, alcohol, drugs and despair. But there is a happiness out there away from all that."

Born and raised on the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation by a single mother after her father died when she was 3, Rodriguez and her five siblings always worked to help put food on the table. She recalls getting excited when they were allowed to work in the fields in Bowie each summer

"We worked from sun up to sundown and that's when I learned the value of earning money from a hard day's work," she says.

That job stopped when she got older and her mother got a job at a local café. Rodriguez eventually got a job as a waitress there and her brothers worked at a truck stop. Her mother was eventually able to purchase a small, rustic house from the railroad company for \$800.

When Rodriguez looks back on her childhood, she realizes they were poor. But that was a fact that never crossed her mind at the time.

"I never thought I was poor because I was rich in family. We had a home so I thought I was rich. When I look back, we were dirt poor," she says.

Poverty, alcohol and feelings of hopelessness were prevalent on the reservation and Rodriguez was not exempt. However, after that fateful night in 1984, she went back to school at the age of 38 and earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in educational leadership from Northern Arizona University.

In 1995, Rodriguez earned her minister's license and has been ministering to the women in the jails faithfully each week ever since. She holds church services in her home – the same little old railroad house that was owned by her mother.

Rodriguez was the first Native American teacher at San Carlos Junior High and moved up the ranks, holding assistant principal and principal positions before taking the reins as the

school improvement administrator for the San Carlos Unified School District.

And just like the women she visits in jail, Rodriguez has been able to reach her students because she knows what it's like to be in their shoes. The fact that she doesn't fall for the excuses that often trip up teachers who are not from the reservation, helps.

"If they would give me excuses, I could say, 'You can't tell me poverty. You can't tell me I don't have this or that.' I lived on the reservation and I know you can succeed. Maybe I made them strive more. They couldn't give me those excuses because I came from that," she says.

The fact that the Native American way of life is in her heart and soul also provides invaluable incentive that outsiders lack. She recalls several teachers over the years who have swooped in, thinking it would be so simple to transform the schools and students into the Anglo way of living. Their efforts were met with rebellion and those educators with good but unrealistic intentions ended up running away faster than they arrived.

But no matter how many degrees she earned or what administrative title she held, that was never part of Rodriguez's plan.

"I've seen people come and go. But I stayed because I love the kids. I told them, 'I'm not going anywhere.' I think the kids appreciated seeing someone they knew," she says.

Rodriguez hopes to one day earn her doctorate and teach American Indian Studies at Arizona State University. She wants to pen a book and already has the title in mind: "I'm Just a Little Old Indian Lady in My Garden Shoes, But Oh I Serve a Mighty God."

In the meantime, she aspires to lead by example and remind others that no matter how many obstacles life throws their way, the same light that found her on that lonely night decades ago also shines for them.

"When I look at them, I say, 'I will never tell you that I will never end up sitting beside you. But by the grace of God, I'm not with you right now. Otherwise, I probably would be,'" Rodriguez says. "It warms my heart to know that I didn't give up. Nobody gave up on me and I'm not going to give up on them either."