

*Teenagers from  
a migrant town  
in the  
California desert*



For all practical purposes, there is only one way into Mecca, Calif.

You come north or south on State Highway 111 to the green and white sign pointing across the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, which mark the western boundary of the town. You turn onto 4th Street, maybe wait for one of the frequent lumbering freight trains to pass, and cross the double set of tracks into Mecca, a mile-square niche in Southern California's fertile Coachella Valley, where dates, alfalfa, grapes and other citrus crops are grown, picked, packaged and shipped out to supermarkets around the country.

Americans. It's a migrant town, and much of the work to be found is in the fields, picking grapes, cabbage and dates. Adults travel to Palm Springs or the equally upscale Palm Desert, finding work in construction or maintenance at golf courses and hotels. Some work for the region's packing companies. A few teach in the local elementary or junior high schools, or work in the handful of local businesses.

In a town like Mecca, families stick close together, and youngsters are brought up to do as their hardworking parents have done. Until they are bused 15 miles away to high school in Coachella — along with thousands of other students from surrounding towns — they don't frequently cross the railroad tracks. Most have never made

"We get them out in the world so they can see what it's like," says Sister Pat Shaffer, a retired chemistry professor and faculty adviser to the club. "These are good kids from good families, but they have a hard time seeing beyond high school graduation. We try to raise their hopes and show them more possibilities."

### Getting a Chance

If the Mecca Youth Group Project, as the Founders Club effort is known, ever needs a poster child, they can call on Lupita Coyte. Of the almost 200 teenagers from Mecca who have visited USD since the project's inception almost a decade ago, she's one who has brought the program full circle. Now back in Mecca after graduating from USD

last May with a double major in Spanish and theology, Coyte will mostly likely teach third grade next year at Mecca's elementary school. But she's not done with her education yet.

"I want to get a master's degree and a Ph.D. in theology," says Coyte, who was part of the first group of Mecca youths who visited the campus. "Eventually I'd like to be a university professor ... maybe at USD."

To Sister Shaffer and the USD students who participate in the project, Coyte is the ideal example of what a kid from Mecca can accomplish when given a chance. Before meeting with USD students, Coyte had considered college, but hadn't made it a priority. At best, she expected to attend community college in San Bernardino. Things changed when she met with USD students and saw



The off-season between harvests forces many of the adults in Mecca to await word of work, and men often gather in the town center to pass the time.

Alcalá Park. Coyte fell in love with the campus and the community atmosphere. Admitted through the university's Equal Opportunity Program, which supports disadvantaged students during the

# JOURNEY FROM MECCA

by Michael R. Haskins

*learn about life  
and themselves,  
finding hope  
for the future.*

The crops are fed by the Coachella Canal, which swings close to the eastern side of Mecca, separating it from nearby Joshua Tree National Park. The canal was constructed by the federal government in the 1940s as part of a larger irrigation plan for the region. It's a tributary of the All-American Canal system, which irrigates more than 630,000 acres with water from the Colorado River.

In Mecca, the Coachella Canal is pretty much the only evidence that the federal government exists at all. In contrast to the wide, tree-lined boulevards of tony Palm Springs, only 30 minutes to the north, Mecca's roads are mostly unpaved. There are no fast-food chains, gas stations or strip malls, only a small market and a sparsely furnished restaurant. California's famous car culture vanishes, as people walk the dusty streets, and small groups of men cluster under trees, talking or playing cards. Spanish is the language of this town, and English-speaking visitors are greeted with surprise and, occasionally, suspicion.

The mild distrust is not surprising. Mecca gets few visitors. Many of the town's adult inhabitants are first-generation Mexican-

the three-hour drive to San Diego or Los Angeles. In a town with only one way in, it can easily look like there's no way out.

But some USD students are changing that. Each fall, members of the Founders Club — an organization that keeps alive the spirit of USD founders Mother Rosalie Hill and Bishop Charles Buddy with community service and outreach — make a journey to Mecca, meet with teens and help them think about college, life and their place in the world. Every spring, those same teens come to San Diego to tour USD and participate in a two-day retreat that encompasses social skills, spiritual reflection, future aspirations and, especially, the practical aspects of getting into a university.

**RIGHT:** On a cold day in early spring, the fields near Mecca are covered, waiting for the growing and harvesting season.

**FAR RIGHT:** At USD, the process of cultivating young minds begins with a tour of Alcalá Park, the first college campus most of these teenagers from Mecca have visited.







Mecca is a small community, but the town is growing along with the area's agricultural businesses. Many residents build their own houses through a land-grant program, others move into one of the town's new apartment complexes.

admissions process and helps them through the first two years on campus, she found her calling when she took a class in Latino theology.

But her story is no fairy tale. At times, Coyte struggled to fit in on a campus where it often seemed that other students had the things — money, nice cars, fashionable clothes — she didn't possess. Although she twice went to Guadalajara, Mexico, for USD's highly regarded summer program, she also returned to Mecca for two summers to join her parents in the grape fields, picking fruit to raise money for school. And she's got

*"It's not so much a lack of interest in college, it's more a lack of awareness."*

Esther Gonzalez, Mecca volunteer teacher

plenty of student loans to pay off before she goes to graduate school.

Still, she discovered an academic discipline that's not common at other universities, and says she never felt like help was far away. Two professors took her under their wing, even traveling with her to Miami, Fla., for a theology conference. On campus, the students who convinced her to come to USD also were around.

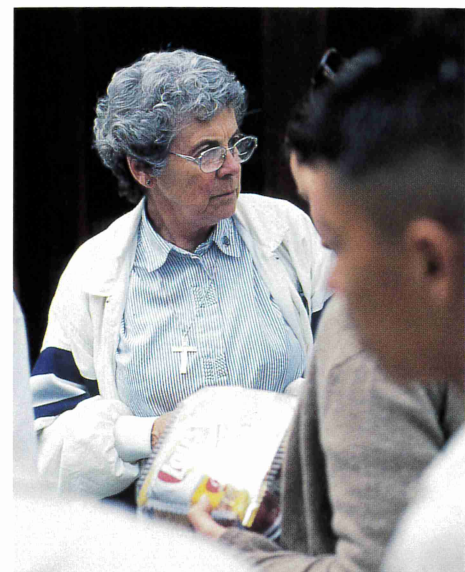
"One of the students who visited Mecca and met with me was Suzie Tweedy, and she turned out to be my residence assistant freshman year," says Coyte. "She was one of the first people to make me feel welcome, and after talking to her I felt like I belonged, that I wasn't so different."

### No Lectures, Just Talk

If Lupita Coyte is a child of the Mecca Youth Group Project, then Suzie Tweedy is a proud parent. Tweedy graduated from USD in 1997 and is now an elementary school teacher in San Diego, but on a

recent Sunday, she was on the floor among 15 or so boys and girls from Mecca, drawing a rainforest scene on a large rectangle of poster paper. The exercise is one in a full day of activities that provide time for creative thoughts about other places in the world.

Tweedy organized the first retreat for the Mecca youths, establishing many of the traditions that subsequent student leaders have built upon, and comes back every year. The retreat weekend starts and ends with academics, as the teenagers tour the campus on a Saturday morning and learn about financial aid, admissions and other practical aspects of university life before they return to Mecca the next day. In between, they hang out with the USD students at the peaceful Questhaven retreat complex, situated in the mountains northeast of the city. There they have fun with goofy activities such as musical chairs or charades, and also have the chance to get creative with skits about life and small group reflection.



Sister Pat Shaffer (left) spent more than 40 years educating students in USD's chemistry labs and classrooms. Now retired, Sister Shaffer keeps the Mecca Youth Group Project going — she still drives a van six hours



round-trip to pick up teenagers like these from Mecca and bring them to USD, and she's always on the lookout for caring students to recruit for the Founders Club.



The middle child in a family with five girls and one boy, Lupita Coyte '97 is the first to attend a university, but she's set the example for her younger siblings like 15-year-old Gabriella, who says she too plans a college career.

"We don't lecture them about college or push too hard to make them talk about what they want to do with their lives, we just have fun and let them open up when they're ready," says Tweedy. "After they see the campus and get comfortable with us, they start to think about what lies ahead for them, what their future might be."

That, in a nutshell, is the plan. Sister Shaffer heard about Mecca through a connection with a nun from her order, The Society of the Sacred Heart, who served the church there. When asked what could be done to encourage the personal growth of the children, she was pointed to the confirmation classes conducted by local resident Esther Gonzalez. While Gonzalez taught the children about religion and spirituality in preparation for their confirmation — the Catholic rite of passage into adulthood — she needed some help to get them thinking beyond their classroom and their town.

### Overcoming the Obstacles

"My students aren't exposed to many different types of people or points of view. For most, it's a big deal just to graduate from high school," says Gonzalez. "It's not so much a lack of interest in college, it's more a lack of awareness. The more they talk about it and learn what it takes to get into a university, the more interested they are."

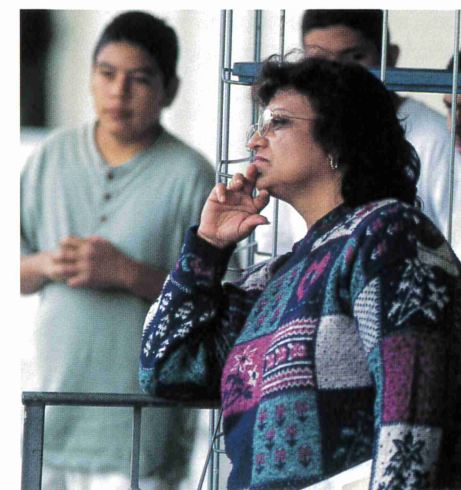
Or they *have* thought about college, and just don't know anyone else who's been

through the experience. Jammed into an overcrowded high school with thousands of students and few counselors, they get lost in the shuffle and lose sight of things like college prep courses, SAT reviews, application deadlines and campus visits. Without anyone paying attention, it's easy for them to give up or believe that finances present an impossible obstacle.

That's why Cristina Gonzalez, an assistant in USD's Equal Opportunity Program office, visits with every group of Mecca youths who come to San Diego. Gonzalez grew up in the town of Thermal, Calif., just down the road from Mecca. Her family still belongs to the church in Mecca, and Gonzalez returns twice a month to attend services. Although her friend Lupita Coyte was in the first Mecca Youth Group Project, Gonzalez was sort of an earlier test case for the project. She was among four students from Thermal who visited USD in high school, and the only one of the four to come to USD. After graduating in 1998, she stayed on to work at the university. She knows most of the families in Mecca, and the kids who visit the campus can relate to her experiences.

"I see most of them every other week in church, so I can kind of keep tabs on them and find out how they're doing," says Gonzalez. "When I came to USD, I didn't have someone from my own community to help me through the adjustment. Now they have me."

Seeing someone familiar like Cristina Gonzalez is comforting, but the students in Esther Gonzalez's confirmation class also enjoy meeting those who are different from themselves. Cynthia Galaviz, a 13-year-old who already knows she wants to be an



Esther Gonzalez works as an accounting clerk for a grape grower near Mecca, but on Sundays she's in class with her confirmation students. While the bilingual classes bring students closer to spiritual adulthood, the Mecca Youth Group Project shows them an adult education is possible as well.



*"It's not just about encouraging them to have goals, but also to let them know those goals aren't beyond hope."*

Jim Meyers '98

architect, says the older mentors from USD helped her find out more about herself and her peers. She hangs onto the *Road to College* booklet she was given, which helps her track her grades and academic progress toward a college career. Another student in the confirmation class, Teresa Diaz, enjoys talking about life and her future. Although she doesn't yet know what she wants to be, she's thinking seriously about coming to USD.

"It's great if they consider USD, but we hope mainly to broaden their horizons and let them know they will find support if they need it," says Jim Meyers '98, a former Founders Club member who returned for this year's retreat. "It's not just about encouraging them to have goals, but also to let them know those goals aren't beyond hope."

### A Warm Welcome

Only a handful of the teens who participate in the Mecca Youth Group Project attend USD, but many do go on to college. Some attend community colleges such as the College of the Desert, or enter the University of California system at San Diego, Irvine or Redlands. Others go to San Diego State or UCLA. Not all say that the students they met from USD were the deciding factor in their going to college, but to most the Founders Club visit and retreat make a big impression.

"USD wasn't a first choice for me until I met the Founders Club students," says Marianna Lopez, who graduated last summer and is working toward a master's in counseling at San Diego State. "Visiting the campus wasn't just like taking an ordinary tour. The students brought me here because they wanted me here, and they were so warm and welcoming. I got into all the schools I applied to, but something made me pick

USD. I think the Founders Club had a lot to do with it."

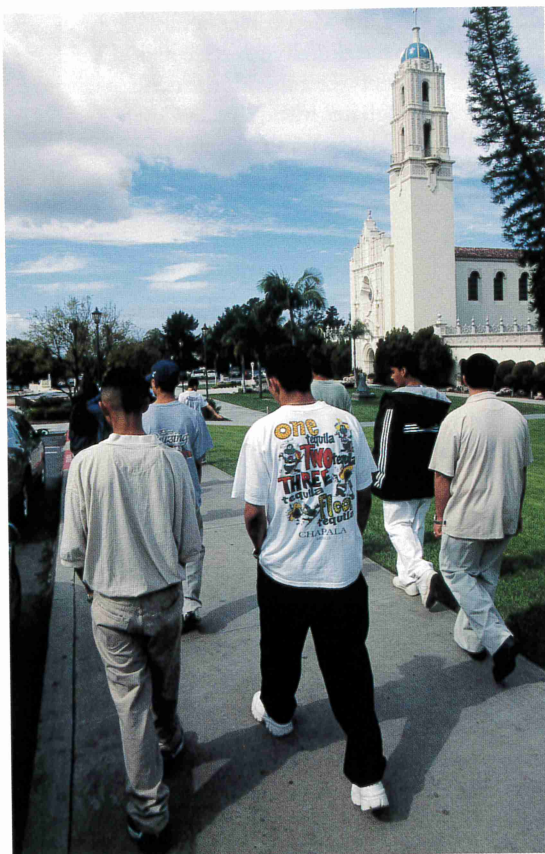
Stories like that keep USD students and alumni coming back to the project year after year. Most are recruited early by Sister Shaffer, who seems to have a knack for knowing which students will be interested in the club's activities, which have included flower deliveries to senior citizen's homes, house building in Tijuana, working with youngsters in San Diego's juvenile hall and tutoring projects. For sophomore Jacky Yoon, who coordinated this year's retreat, and freshman Erika Teutsch, who traveled to Mecca last fall, the connection was a natural one. Teutsch attended a Sacred Heart high school in Omaha, Yoon went to another in New York City. Yoon was one of Sister



Shaffer's chemistry students as well, and found that she liked the idea of being a friend to younger students.

"It's pretty amazing to see the amount of soul-searching that goes on at these retreats," says Yoon. "These students are raised as if they are going to stay in Mecca, and they haven't thought about many other options. To see them loving the idea of going to college and believing that it's possible, that brings a deeper meaning to their life ... and to mine." ♣

*For information on donations or assistance for the Mecca Youth Group Project, contact Sister Pat Shaffer at (619) 260-4034 or [shaffer@acusd.edu](mailto:shaffer@acusd.edu).*



**ABOVE:** Sister Shaffer recruits student leaders to lead activities for the teenagers from Mecca.

**TOP AND LEFT:** The spring trip to USD and a local retreat complex begins with tours of the campus and information on admissions, financial aid and campus life. At the same time they're exposed to college life, the visitors from Mecca learn about the city and think about their future goals.