

# The Press Telegram

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## **A passion for helping homeless children**

By Kelly Puente, Staff Writer

LONG BEACH – Dora Jacildo watches as two small children skip through a brightly colored playroom planted in a dreary industrial section of West Long Beach.

Soon, the children's parents will arrive to cart them back to nearby homeless shelters, but for now, the playroom is a small slice of stability in an otherwise chaotic life.

"These children have to worry about things that a typical child doesn't worry about," Jacildo says. "But here they have a place they can be rooted, a soft place to land."

For the past four years, Jacildo has served as executive director of Children Today, a Long Beach nonprofit day-care center and preschool program for homeless children. The "soft place to land" is Play House West, located in the city's Multi-Service Center for the homeless at 1301 W. 12<sup>th</sup> St.

Under Jacildo's watch, Children Today has doubled its annual budget to \$1 million. In February, it opened a second day-care center in North Long Beach at 1900 E. South St.

About 64 children, ages 6 weeks to six years, are cared for between the two centers. It may seem like a small number when compared with the city's estimated 700 homeless children, but Jacildo says the center focuses on top-quality, individual care.

"Do you serve 1,000 but not know their names, or serve a small number and know what you're doing will have a profound effect on their lives?" she asks.

This year, the preschool was accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young children. It is now one of only three homeless centers recognized out of 10,000 schools worldwide, said association spokesman Don Owens.

"The program should be commended because our accreditation is very rigorous and not easily obtained," Owens said.

Jacildo says her dedicated staff works to give the children a sense of community.

"We're trying to push the envelope that children who've experienced trauma deserve the best," she says.

When she talks about the children, Jacildo's voice fills with obvious passion and sincerity – an intensity that others say is downright infectious.

As a little girl in Guadalajara, Mexico, Jacildo knew one day she'd have a job helping others.

"I always knew that my life would be of service," says Jacildo, now 36 and living in Long Beach. "I was raised by my mother to believe I could have influence."

Jacildo emigrated from Mexico to the U.S. with her family at age 5. She grew up in South Gate, graduated from Paramount High School and worked as a Long Beach preschool teacher. She later served as vice president of the California Child Care Resource and Network.

In 2007, she received the Local Hero of the Year Award from Union Bank of California and was honored during Hispanic Heritage Month.

Recently, the petite Latina, who stands 4-foot-11 inches tall and admittedly loves teetering in sky-high heels, was listed in Long Beach Magazine as one of the city's "Most Eligible Singles."

It's a wonder Jacildo has time for anything, let alone dating. She's also pursuing a master's degree in human development and hopes to eventually become a professor.

For now, Children Today remains the NO. 1 passion.

"It's not a job, it's a lifestyle," she says. "You don't clock in and clock out."

"Dora's fuel is social justice," says Josh Lowenthal, president of the board of directors. "The board of directors is the brain, the staff is the arms and legs and Dora is the heart of the organization. You can't do anything without the heart."

"I think she's been incredible in terms of bringing our teaching staff to a whole 'nother level," says Theresa Bixby, who co-founded the organization with the late Jennifer Fitzgerald in 1998.

In the next three years, Children Today hopes to build a green child-care facility in Long Beach. Jacildo will likely be on board.

When asked what keeps her going, her answer is somewhat surprising.

"It's strictly selfish," she says, in a slight whisper. "It's selfish because it feels good."