



FARMWORKER

Empowerment Champion Earns Sapphire Award

*Cancer Network Partner
Labors To Reduce Gaps In Health Care*

By Michelle Bearden

*In her little corner of the world
in Dade City, Florida,
Margarita Romo is a
bona fide rock star.*

But forget the bright lights and flashy cars. This is a celebrity focused solely on helping others in one of Pasco County's poorest communities, nicknamed "Tommytown." Since she founded Farmworkers Self-Help, Inc., in 1982, Romo hasn't veered from her relentless mission to better the lives of seasonal and migrant farmworkers with education, advocacy and organizing.

"Giving a voice to those who don't have one," Romo says of her nonprofit. "And once they get that voice, empower them to use it."



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Romo’s selfless work has earned her honors and accolades across a wide and diverse spectrum. Among them: being named to the Florida Civil Rights Hall of Fame for making significant contributions to improvement of life for minorities; winning the Sapphire Award from the Florida Blue Foundation for making a positive impact on health-related outcomes for at-risk people; and being honored as a community hero by the Lightning Foundation for her efforts in enhancing the lives of immigrants. Tampa Hispanic Heritage, Inc., named her Hispanic Woman of the Year.

And there’s no measuring how many lives have been saved through Romo’s partnership with the Tampa Bay Community Cancer Network (TBCCN), an initiative funded by Moffitt Cancer Center and the National Cancer Institute. Farmworkers Self-Help (FSH) is one of 28 TBCCN community partners in the three-county network (Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas) that brings together local programs with medical and academic professionals to find solutions to health disparities and that brings health equity to under-resourced areas. FSH was one of the founding agencies when TBCCN was established.

“Margarita is an individual who is going to make things happen,” says Moffitt’s Cathy Meade, Ph.D., R.N., one of the network’s leaders. “She doesn’t take no for an answer. She’s a true champion of her people.”

Not bad, for a woman just months away from her 80th birthday.

All this recognition makes Romo a little uncomfortable. She prefers being in the trenches rather than the limelight. She just wants to get things done.

“It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a village to win an award,” she says. “It’s always a group effort. We’ve accomplished a lot, and we see improvements in so many areas. But there really is no time to sit still and pat ourselves on the backs. We’ve got so much more to do.”

No one understands the hardscrabble plight of the farmworker better than Romo. It’s in her blood.

She’s from Dallas, the daughter of Mexican-American migrant workers. Her parents traveled seasonally from Texas to Michigan, picking vegetables for sub-poverty wages. Even at an early age, she knew it was a hard, hard life.

“No matter how much you make, you’re always behind,” she says. “Nothing was fun about it.”

When she was 3, her mother died of cancer. Her father had no choice but to place her and her three brothers in an orphanage. He visited often, but it wasn’t the same. When he remarried a Lithuanian woman who only spoke to her in English, Romo had to abandon her native language.

“It was like an eraser just wiped everything out I had ever known,” she said. Even her name was changed to “Margaret.”

She doesn’t have fond memories of her stepmother. After briefly moving back home, Romo ended up spending her teenage years in a convent.

The next decade of her life was a tumultuous one. At 17, she married a World War II veteran after he and her father cut a deal. Romo found out soon enough that her new husband was an alcoholic who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

After three children she raised mainly on her own, Romo got a divorce. When she was 25, she made the plunge again. That marriage would last 18 years and produce three more children. It also was a time of personal torment, when a severe depression led to several suicide attempts and drinking whiskey straight up. At one point, she committed herself to psychiatric care for three weeks and underwent electroshock treatments.

Romo credits God for lifting her out of her fog in her mid-30s. She began meeting with a group of women in Tampa for a weekly Bible study, finding solace in the spiritual discussions. Finding that faith built the sturdy foundation she would need in the years ahead as an advocate for the underserved.

“It’s taught me to never give up because you never know what’s around the corner,” Romo says. “And trust in God. I can tell you he’s been very good to me.”

In the early 1970s, she became a translator for evangelists who visited migrant camps in Tampa. One thing led to another, with Romo taking on the responsibility of accompanying workers to medical clinics and helping them register for Social Security, and starting a support group for farmworkers in Pasco County.

She always knew about the inequities and challenges that migrant workers face. But the needless death of a little girl is what propelled Romo into her life’s work.

Not quite 5, Norma was in a Bible study class taught by Romo at one of the migrant camps. The teacher was smitten by the sweet child, the daughter of farmworkers who didn’t speak English.

Tragedy struck in the winter of 1981 when Norma fell out of the passenger side of a pickup truck that her mother was backing out of a convenience store parking lot. Norma was taken to the local hospital where she lay in a bed in a hallway but was

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refused care due to not having insurance, even though her family pleaded for her to be treated and promised future payment.

After several hours, Norma was transferred to another hospital, but it was too late to save her life. The second hospital thought she had head injuries, but her injuries were internal. After finally being treated for the internal organ damage caused by the truck having run over part of her abdomen, she seemed to be recovering, but she took a sudden downturn and did not return to consciousness.

After a few days, her father and mother had to make the decision to unplug the machines that kept their child alive. The family donated her organs.

“Never should have happened,” Romo says, still visibly upset to this day.

Romo would not allow Norma’s death to be in vain. She led the effort to raise funds for the funeral and the tombstone. She helped the parents sue for negligence, which resulted in a partial settlement.

More important, it became the genesis for FSH. From its modest beginnings on Romo’s front porch where she offered assistance to migrant newcomers, FSH has grown to a sprawling complex of converted homes, housing multiple programs and services aimed at helping farmworkers. They’re all lined up along Lock Street, which also bears the name “Calle de Milagros.” Romo went to the Pasco County Commission to get that done, making her case for the “Street of Miracles.”

Indeed, it is a miraculous vision for the impoverished community. There’s a main office, a youth recreational center, a thrift store, a barber shop and an educational center. There’s also Resurrection House Mission, a Lutheran church pastored by Romo’s son, and a park, where local children play soccer and families meet for picnics.

The free health clinic needs a volunteer doctor. She promises herself that by fall, she will have one in place.

When Romo isn’t bustling around the neighborhood, she’s likely in Tallahassee lobbying for a bill that will benefit her clients. She usually brings along students, so they, too, can learn the art of advocacy.



FSH volunteers like dance director Londa Edwards (top) work with Margarita Romo to help empower the underserved. FSH vice president Jose Amateco (center) recently graduated from Saint Leo University and aims to attend nursing school at USF.

This thrift store is one example of the numerous self-development programs and services that FSH facilitates (bottom).





Romo and Ana Limas (right),
FSH administrative assistant

“Information and education are critical. With this mutual back and forth, we can learn from each other,” Dr. Meade says. “For example, we can teach people in communities why a Pap test is critical, and they can help us develop a program that is friendly and relevant.”

Romo concurs. “They bring the medical smarts, we bring the street smarts. Together, anything is possible.”

The partnership has produced several successful initiatives so far. Moffitt sent a bus to Tommytown, bringing on-site mammograms to women who had no transportation. It helped with a health fair last year organized by the farmworkers, and it assisted with an educational video featuring a breast cancer patient and her journey. A prostate cancer screening program is now underway to reach out to the male population, and a health ambassador program aims to get the word out about cervical cancer and Pap tests. These highlight just a few TBCCN collaborative initiatives.

The operation has a \$200,000 budget, with funding from grants, churches and individual donations, and a thrift store. The staff is small, supplemented by volunteers, and no one earns big money, including Romo.

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She’s come to the conclusion that she’s better off single. A third marriage in the 1980s only lasted a few years because her husband didn’t get why she was so passionate and committed to this cause. Now she can devote as much time as she needs to the issues at hand without answering to anyone.

“I’ve simplified my life, in some ways. I don’t own a car or a house,” she says. “Possessions don’t mean anything to me. Why should they? You can’t take it with you.”

Romo has a knack for cultivating relationships from all walks of life. Moffitt’s Cathy Meade is grateful she’s part of that wide circle.

Farmworkers Self-Help was one of the first partners to join the TBCCN alliance. Members meet formally three times a year and attend an annual retreat. In between that, there are plenty of phone calls, emails and other conversations, all with the same purpose: To focus on the medically underserved.

“You can’t offer these programs from afar. You have to be in the communities where they’re needed,” Dr. Meade says. “And who knows these communities better than our partners?”

Some unexpected benefits have come from this union. Romo says if her people had ever heard of Moffitt Cancer Center, it was an “unreachable” place, certainly not available to them. Now they see the cancer center as a place of hope for their cancer-related health issues.

And once attitudes are changed toward institutions that provide medical care and promote healthy habits, “we’re going to save a lot more lives,” Romo says. “They’re training us on how to take responsibility for our own health. This is how you change the system. And it’s starting right here, right now. I’m just so happy to be part of it.”

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TBCCN Has Long History Of Building Community Partnerships For Better Health

What would you call a dynamic force that creates and implements community-based partnerships with health centers, nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, adult education, literacy groups and Moffitt Cancer Center?

This collaborative network is the Tampa Bay Community Cancer Network (TBCCN). TBCCN was initially funded in 2005 by a grant from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) as one of its 25 Community Networks Programs.

The goal? To create and implement sustainable and effective community-based interventions to impact cancer disparities in the Tampa Bay area.

“Rather than assume those in the ‘ivory tower’ know what is best for the community, TBCCN was established on the principle of community-based participatory research, allowing the stakeholders to define the priorities and inform the approach,” says Thomas Sellers, Ph.D., MPH, center director, Moffitt Cancer Center.

Today, TBCCN includes 28 partners, including Farmworkers Self-Help, Inc. (featured in this issue of Moffitt Momentum® magazine), Catholic Charities Mobile Medical Services, Haitian American Foundation of Tampa Bay, Latinos Unidas por un Nuevo Amanecer (LUNA), Suncoast Community Health Centers, University Area Community Development Corporation, Inc., Faces of Courage, Tampa Family Health Centers, Premier Community HealthCare and many others. TBCCN is now expanding to other counties.

“Moffitt has a long history of seeking to meet the needs of the community,” Dr. Sellers says. “To that end, Dr. Cathy Meade has championed efforts to build community partnerships for better health under the auspices of TBCCN.”

Working with a larger team, Dr. Cathy Meade and Dr. Clement Gwede — both members of Moffitt’s Health Outcomes & Behavior Program — are the energetic motivation behind TBCCN.

Dr. Meade’s research and education interests involve finding innovative ways to impact health disparities, producing culturally and literacy relevant cancer communications and creating sustained community-based education and outreach initiatives for medically underserved populations. She has served in NCI work groups designed to increase awareness of the impact



Romo (right) with Moffitt’s Cathy Meade, Ph.D., R.N.

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of literacy in healthcare. Additionally, her work focuses on developing cancer training programs that increase the number of underrepresented scientists. She leads Project LINK (Leaders In New Knowledge), an NCI-funded year-round research training program, housed at Moffitt for underrepresented high school and undergraduate students.

Dr. Gwede’s research centers on these broad goals: reducing cancer disparities through community-based interventions to promote informed decision making and early detection for prostate and colorectal cancer, increasing participation of racial-ethnic minorities in clinical research and symptom management interventions to improve quality of life. Dr. Gwede recently was appointed as one of 15 members to the Florida Cancer Control and Research Advisory Council (CCRAB). CCRAB was founded by state statute in 1979 with the intent of advising the Legislature, governor and surgeon general on ways to reduce Florida’s cancer burden.