

Voices from the Valley: Claudia Stephens

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | April 22, 2018



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Claudia Stephens is the strategic planning specialist for Ag Worker Health & Services in Billings.

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all.

Sitting down with Claudia Stephens, the strategic planning specialist for Ag Worker Health & Services, I feel, immediately, her earnest attention. Listening and being heard were some of the themes of our conversation, as were neighborhoods and the influence of mothers.

Sherri Cornett: Claudia, your mother, Maria, began the migrant clinic in 1972 and retired from being its executive director in 2015. How did you become involved?

Claudia Stephens: It is because of her that these services are here — she was such a fireball. One of her gifts is her innate ability to understand the motivation of others. I wanted to emulate her and you always want to help your mother. Since I was working on a degree in journalism, I offered to do some of the never-ending grant writing. It was 1987. I was also volunteering with Migrant Legal Services. It's like a string of things ... all of sudden I looked back and they all formed a path towards where I am now.

Sherri: Which is, as some people continue to call it, the migrant council or clinic.

Claudia: Our legal name is **Montana Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers Council, Inc.**, but we changed the clinic name to Ag Workers Health & Services, as many ag workers didn't see themselves as migrant or seasonal. Some of our patients come from other countries, but many have lived here for generations and have Russian and/or German origin.

Sherri: The term “migrant” is certainly full of assumptions in our current social and political climate. How does this play out with your work?

Claudia: A lot of my work involves educating people and hoping they will leave behind misinformation. Sometimes there are people you can't reason with, but sometimes there are nice breakthroughs.

I was with a farmer who believed ag workers make good money. We looked at how much he paid them and then added up their living expenses. He realized then that they do not make a living wage. I was thankful that I was able to do that exercise with him and he was open to it.

Sherri: What do you think gets in the way of reaching people?

Claudia: People, who are afraid that what they have will be taken away, can become unreasonable and they need someone to blame. It is maybe too generalized, but I really believe we need to start discussions with what we have in common: love for our families, basic human needs, feeling a sense of community. We need to start knowing our neighbors.

Sherri: And being kind. My grandmother told me to be kind and give back.

Claudia: Yes, I remember my mother and I discussing the fact that many children acted as if they were entitled. My mother said that mothers teach children how to relate in healthy ways and most mothers these days are too busy working outside the home to be their children's teachers and so these children don't learn how to parent their own children.

Sherri: With the suffering and alienation around us, how do you refuel so that you can continue the work you do?

Claudia: Crisis can be a gift. After my crisis, I began to practice my Catholic faith, fervently. As a result, everything is more manageable. Life is like a centrifuge. If the hatches aren't secure, if I am not grounded, everything flies out. My faith reminds me to be more compassionate and to be the friend I would want to have.

Sherri: What brings you hope, especially in Billings?

Claudia: I believe the basic character of Billings is the desire to be the best neighborhood everyone could have.

Sherri: And how could it be better?

Claudia: We have had some good responses from elected officials to improve things, but many decision-makers don't know what is needed. We need more people offering ideas to meet the needs they are concerned about.

I envision neighbors interacting in ways that build community and a sense of belonging, instead of looking for scapegoats to blame for what is happening in our world.

Sherri: I am reminded of the block parties in one of the neighborhoods of my youth — families bringing out their grills, sharing food, impromptu games.

Claudia: Such opportunities make us feel so good, don't they? We are made to connect and be social. Our annual fundraiser, which will be on Sept. 23, is a way we hope to build community among agricultural workers and the non-agricultural community. We dance together and laugh. Laughter does so much to bring us together.

Sherri: I look forward to dancing and laughing with you in September. Thank you, Claudia!



With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993.

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