

Photo: Kelli Uldall



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Photo: Randy Tunnell



Monterey's Nancy Costello begins her day at dawn by collecting food from grocers like Safeway and Trader Joe's, then personally delivering it to labor camps in southern Monterey County. She has enlisted the help of students at All Saints Episcopal Day School in Carmel Valley (upper left) in bagging beans to be delivered to the farmworkers and their families.

# Saint Nancy

For Nearly 40 Years, One Woman Has Sustained  
The Lives of Thousands in South County

BY ROBIN LITTLEFIELD

She exists.

There are those who believe Nancy Costello is not a person at all, but some sort of movement. To most she lives on the wind — a metaphor for self-actualization; the rare individual who is actually as good as she can be, who lets change begin with her, and who saw something 36 years ago that she has not let herself un-see, though it would have been far easier to do so.

She is more a concept — something we'd like to be if only we had the time. Few have actually seen her, and for good reason. Invisibility is part of the equation. To be this good, one must not seek to be congratulated.

You don't know her because she doesn't think of herself as someone who should be known.

Plus, the public's collective skepticism can be understood. I mean, would you believe in a Peninsula woman, the wife of a newspaper executive, who one day heard about astonishing poverty in the same land of abundance in which she lived, went to witness it for herself, and has literally gone back and stared into its teeth every day for nearly 40 years?



Photo: Kelli Uldall

**Thirty-six years ago, Costello saw poverty in a land of abundance that she has not let herself forget, though it would have been easier to do so.**

Would you believe that for all the rhetoric about helping the poor in Monterey County, there is one woman with no public funds upon whom literally hundreds of families in the Salinas heartland depend for their survival?

Would you believe it if you heard this woman is an 87-year-old great-grandmother with a bad heart?

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Nancy Costello is that she actually does exist. She is not just an aspiration or apparition, but true flesh and bone. Educated, beautiful and not without resources, she could have chosen any life. And she chose this one: up at dawn, to bed well beyond dusk, 200 miles a day in her truck in between, all to help a

community largely unable to even thank her in her own language.

Why? "Let's talk about justice!" she exclaims. "These people grow our food!"

This all began over swimsuits.

It was the summer of 1970. Her late husband, Jimmy, was the editor



**Costello delivers food six days a week, resting on Sundays, and allowing herself just one week off between Christmas and New Year's Day.**

of the *Monterey Peninsula Herald*. He assigned several interns to cover the labor camps in South County.

One Stanford student came back with a story about a grower's above-ground pool that he said could be used by workers and their families. But the families rarely partook, because the children didn't own bathing suits.

"I was indignant that the children didn't have anything like that," Costello said.

Armed with outgrown bathing suits from her own six children and those of her neighbors, she went looking for these families. But she never found the pool.

"I knocked on a door and here was this grandmother in a room with all of these cots, and each one had a baby on it," Costello said. She walked further and saw abject poverty, which astounded her considering she thought of her county as bountiful. These people grew food for the world, but had difficulty feeding them-

selves. "It got me by the throat," she says.

The next day she went to the League of Women Voters and asked for clothes. She filled up her station wagon, and was in business.

First, she went one day a week. Then two,

### **The 87-year-old's day begins at dawn and ends well past dusk, with 200 solitary miles in between.**

then three. Soon she was going six days a week, resting on Sundays, and allowing herself just a week off between Christmas and New Year's.

Otherwise, she has supplied food, clothing and gifts to 2,000 people a month for 36 years.

What happens when she gets sick? "I don't get sick," she says. "I can't."

Costello's day begins at dawn, as she pulls her flatbed Ford into the loading dock at Trader Joe's in Pacific Grove. She piles barely-expired or otherwise unsellable food into the truck, stacking it scientifically to maximize space.

The staff at Trader Joe's knows her well. "Handsome Jack," as his nametag reads, is ready for her with carts of produce and packaged goods.

There is plenty of colorful produce, pita bread, dried fruit, packaged goods and some slightly wilted flowers. She's thrilled at a package of Tabouli: "My Arab families will love this," she says. And she's grateful for the healthiness of it all, as she avoids all sweets. It is a 45-minute process; one she repeats with other grocers throughout the day.

Safeway is a major donor. On one occasion, the new store manager with whom she'd be dealing turned out to be one of the children she'd helped years before.

Costello has other sources, too.

One of the valuable staples she provides consistently are pinto beans, a nutritious part of the Mexican diet. These are donated from several sources, including the children of All Saints' Day

School in Carmel Valley, who weekly bag beans into family-size portions to ease distribution. Last year, the school reached a milestone, a half-million pounds of beans, and plans to keep on going. The National Charity League, a mother-

daughter philanthropic organization, bags beans and collects clothing. The children of Santa Catalina School have collected books. Another couple have dedicated themselves to bagging rice for the laborers and with the help of other volunteers and friends, offer about a ton and a half of rice a month to Costello's cause.

Costello roams from store to store, school to school, for hours, eventually securing her take in the flatbed with an elastic cargo net. She returns to her home in Monterey for lunch and a nap.

Meanwhile, donations of clothing and other items have arrived, as they often do, at her house.

**She was a comfortable person on the Monterey Peninsula. But once she saw their plight, she could not unring the bell.**

She is particularly delighted by the baby clothes and some children's books she'll give a teenage boy who has started his own lending library.

She leaves for her day's second leg, not to return until 7:30 or 8 p.m. While she gets a fair amount of help in collecting items for the families, she does the delivery almost entirely alone.

It is solitary work, but not lonely.

As she heads out on her afternoon journey, past the pastoral landscape of the Salinas Valley with workers dotting the greening fields, Costello relaxes at last.

This is not a chore, at least not today. It's a long drive to see friends, and she anxiously anticipates the men, women and children she expects to greet in Soledad and Greenfield, 50 miles south of her home. She talks about children who have managed to excel at school, who have come back to her and asked how they can help the cause.

Costello is concerned about a woman who



Photo: Kelli Utball

**An anonymous donor recently gifted a new truck to Costello, whose old one had more than 200,000 miles on the odometer. All Saints students gathered to bless the new vehicle.**

was evicted from her home: "I felt so bad because I could have helped her. I've done it before. One hundred dollars to be evicted!" She's thinking about a woman who has children with special nutritional needs: "The mother is very sharp and she will not take what they cannot eat. I try to have what she needs."

Costello's first stop is a home in Camphora, an encampment in the shadows of Soledad prison. She honks her horn, and women emerge silently with plastic grocery bags, which Costello fills as she unpacks her larder.

Out come the parsley, peppers, oranges, broccoli and lettuce; the frozen fish, eggs, beans and rice, as well as Valentine cookies to make them smile (an uncustomary sweet treat.)

Though it is their only sustenance, the recipients are patient. Costello, who didn't speak the language when this all began, calls out to each of them in Spanish. She asks "*Quantos niños?*" (How many children?) to those faces that are unfamiliar.

Costello notices one woman is missing. She is told the woman is nursing a child who was badly burned. Costello makes sure a bag is delivered to her.

She continues the dialogue: *And where is Maria? Oh, working.* Nancy thought she didn't begin until June. And here is a toddler she knows, growing so big!

It is a reunion and routine. It is evident why Costello prefers to make this part of the trip alone.

"You have to know their social language," she

says. "And you need not to care about (your own) dinner hour."

The drops continue for hours.

At 87, Costello has little desire or incentive to be understood. She does not rationalize her actions, but rather simply performs them with-

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out consideration for their nobility. Why does she do this? Because someday, someone would eventually help these people, and look back at others who'd witnessed this poverty and wonder how they could not have.

Her aura is one of an indomitable force. But when she lets her guard down for just a moment, the correlation between these families' existences and her advanced age are clearly on her mind.

Three years ago, a quadruple bypass and valve replacement felled Costello for nearly three months. During that period, her friend Leonore took over the delivery.

Costello says she would be her ideal successor: "If I won the lottery, I could set her up to take my place," Costello says.

Leonore was once one of Costello's beneficiaries. She and her husband have since moved into their own home in Greenfield. Leonore became involved with Costello after she lost a son to gang violence.

"That would be devastating to some parents," Costello says. "But what got her on the road to recovery was getting involved. She takes toy guns away from children; gives them the cards and marbles that I give her."

Costello eases her truck into Leonore's driveway and begins to unpack the remainder of the truck for storage. The two friends embrace and speak in Spanish about who needs what.

"I have known Nancy since my children were babies," Leonore says. "She fed and clothed them all."

With the flatbed unpacked and the sun set three hours hence, Costello gets back in the truck for the day's retreat. She is silent, but for one final story about Leonore. It is the closest Costello will come to a proud indulgence.

Leonore's son was studying his heritage in school. The students were asked if they had grandmothers. "Yes," he said. "I have two in Mexico, and here I have Nancy."

*To donate money or clothes to "Nancy's Project," please call 831/372-1408. To donate to the All Saints' Day School Beanpot Fund, please visit [www.asds.org/community.html](http://www.asds.org/community.html) or send funds to 8060 Carmel Valley Road, Carmel, CA 93923. Please make checks out to All Saints' Day School and indicate "BeanPot" on the memo line.* ■