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Little Store, big dreams: Mom's passion serves Wrangler Ranch community

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By Susan E. Swanberg Special to the Green Valley News | 0 comments



Photos by Susan E. Swanberg | Special to the Green Valley News

Little Store

Eddie Garcia, Tereza Garcia and Joe Hernandez Jr. stand near the cash register in The Little Store, which is a gathering spot for the Wrangler Ranch neighborhood.



West of the Asarco Mine, in a tidy, yellow building at the corner of Wrangler Road and Avenida Stallion you'll find one of Sahuarita's hidden treasures. "The Little Store," owned by Tereza Garcia and her partner, Joe Hernandez Jr., is the heart and soul of the small desert community called Wrangler Ranches.

Step through the front door of The Little Store, and you'll be greeted by Garcia, who works behind the counter from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. every day except Sunday when she works from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Garcia's handiwork is visible in every corner of the store, from the sign behind the cash register that says "Believe" in big, bold letters to the meticulously arranged dry goods and cans on the shelves.

Opening The Little Store was the culmination of a life-long dream for Garcia — the dream of owning her own business. With the help of the

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son of the store's prior owners, Garcia's business partner and her brothers, the dream has become a reality.

Meeting the challenge

Life was not always so neat and tidy. On July 15, 1975, when she was only 8 years old, Garcia's father was killed by a drunken driver in California and Garcia's widowed mother was left to raise seven children without a husband. Garcia never forgot the

lessons she learned while helping to raise her brothers and sisters — lessons like lifting up those you love rather than letting them fall by the wayside.

Eventually, Garcia grew up, married and had two children of her own. When her marriage didn't work out, she followed two of her brothers, Eddie and Juan, to Arizona. The three siblings all bought lots in Wrangler Ranches — a testament to the close relationship they still share.

When Garcia first moved to Sahuarita, one of her brothers got her a job with Borderland Construction where she did heavy physical labor. Garcia, who called herself a "jackhammer girl," lasted 10 or 12 years.

"That's where I got my muscles," she says, showing off her healthy biceps.

Working construction, Garcia was able to support her two children, but she was always exhausted. She'd often wake up at 2 in the morning to make her children's lunches and take care of the housework before she went to her construction job. She'd come home dirty and often too tired to spend quality time with her son and daughter.

With tears in her eyes, Garcia recalls the night her then-13-year-old son, Francisco Flores, expressed concern about his mother's difficult life. "Mom, I promise I'll graduate from high school and go to college, but you need to get a job where you're not so tired at night so you can spend some time with us," she recalls him saying.

Moved by his words, Garcia promised to get a job more compatible with family life. It wasn't long before the corner store became available. The former owners, Helen and Mitch Mitchell, had died, the store had been vacant for over a year, and one of Helen Mitchell's sons, Michael King, offered Garcia a deal. She could lease the building and open her own business, giving the little corner store new life.

To save money for her share of the store, Garcia made and sold burritos, tamales, menudo and other homemade food items at a stand on the corner of Pima Mine Road and Avenida Stallion. Garcia's brothers helped make the stand a success, lending a hand whenever they could. Finally, when they had saved enough money, Garcia and Hernandez filed articles of incorporation with the State of Arizona.

On March 24, 2012, The Little Store had its grand opening. It's been going strong ever since.

Carrying on a legacy

The little store on the corner, originally known as Mitchell's Corner Carry-Out, was owned and operated for nearly 35 years by the Mitchells. Beloved

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members of the Wrangler Ranches community, they were known for their kindness and hospitality. If a neighbor needed something in the middle of the night — milk or diapers for a new baby, for example — Helen Mitchell, who lived in a house behind the store, would open the doors for the customer in need.

“She was a wonderful lady,” Garcia says. “She worked 24/7.”

Garcia carries on Helen Mitchell’s traditions. Many of her Wrangler Ranches neighbors have Garcia’s home phone number and know that, in an emergency, she’ll open the store for them just as Helen Mitchell used to do. In her motherly way, however, Garcia sets some boundaries for late-night sales. She won’t open the store in the middle of the night for someone to buy a six-pack.

Garcia also will not sell hard liquor.

“It’s too dangerous,” she says.

Sense of community

On a recent Friday afternoon, The Little Store had a steady flow of visitors. Garcia’s brothers and partner stopped by to confer about the store — what supplies did Garcia need and what upkeep needed to be done?

Customer Ted Dorman dropped by for a few items. Dorman has lived in Wrangler Ranches since 1978, was a loyal customer of the Mitchells and is now a fan of The Little Store. Dorman recalls that Mitch Mitchell opened the business for his wife so she’d have something to do, then the store grew to be an important fixture in the community. Having a store in the neighborhood was a real convenience. During the year or so after Helen Mitchell died and before Garcia and Hernandez re-opened the store, customers missed having a market in the neighborhood north of Helmet Peak (Sahuarita Road) and west of Mission, behind the mine.

“We’d have to drive to Tucson or Green Valley if the store wasn’t here,” Dorman said. “It’s super handy — a lifesaver. I like to buy milk or oatmeal cookies. I love the oatmeal cookies.”

Tracy Wilke stopped by for a few items.

“It’s terrific,” she says of the store. “It’s so convenient. I’m here a lot.” Wilke’s 15- and 17-year-old children frequent the store, too — often for snacks or ice cream.

The Little Store is more than a grocery store, it’s a hub of information.

According to Wilke, “Tereza knows everything that’s going on.”

The importance to Garcia of friends and family is palpable. Near the cash register is a wall of photos—primarily images of Garcia’s relatives. On a shelf across the room is a collection of photos of deceased friends and family members. A photograph of Garcia’s father, a relatively young man at the time of his death, dominates the display.

A sense of community is important, too. There’s a bulletin board where neighbors post notices or business cards. When a young family was burned out of their home a year or so ago, neighbors put together a box of clothing and household items for the young people and left the box at The Little Store. For holidays, Garcia often holds a raffle, giving away a turkey for Thanksgiving, a ham for Christmas and a plate of party treats for New Year’s. All of this binds

the little community together.

Believe

Garcia might run the store, but her brothers and her partner are indispensable, too.

Her partner is the “Go-Get-It Guy,” says Garcia — the guy who buys new inventory for the store when needed. Her brothers the guys who repaired the roof of the store and added the fresh coat of yellow paint that makes such a great first impression on new customers.

With the store humming again, the hole left in the neighborhood when the Mitchells died is healing. Garcia does a good job of honoring their legacy, but she wants to do more. Some neighbors miss the homemade burritos, tamales and menudo that Garcia used to sell on the corner.

Garcia has a new dream. She wants to add a drive-up window to The Little Store — a window where she can sell homemade food again. Her brothers recently built a concrete pad for a new propane tank — the first step toward making this new dream a reality.

Garcia and Hernandez believe in the little store with a big heart, and so do the people of Wrangler Ranches. Stop by if you're in the neighborhood and get yourself a cold drink. While you're there, ask Garcia when her drive-up window will be open for business.

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