

# **Celebrating 110 Years of Neighborhood House**

Mary and Helen Marston's Legacy



**A**s Neighborhood House commemorates 110 years of service, Save Our Heritage Organisation, SOHO, reflects on its enduring legacy and its connections to the Marston House Museum.

In 1870, when George White Marston arrived in San Diego, the community could not foresee the profound impact his family would have. George Marston's entrepreneurial spirit flourished, eventually leading to the establishment of San Diego's first luxury department store. Yet, amidst his success, George and his wife Anna instilled in their daughters, Mary and Helen, a deep sense of civic duty and compassion.

Born in 1879 and 1892 respectively, Mary and Helen Marston were exposed to social justice viewpoints all their life and during their education at the very progressive Wellesley College. Helen's experiences working with Jane Addams at Hull House ignited her passion for social change, inspiring her to replicate a similar model in San Diego.

With the support of the San Diego College Women's Club, Mary and Helen spearheaded the creation of Neighborhood House in 1913. Despite their privileged upbringing, they dedicated themselves to serving the less fortunate, witnessing firsthand the struggles of this community.

Neighborhood House quickly became a beacon of hope for the Mexican American community, offering vital services ranging from education to healthcare. The Marston family's influence rallied support from other philanthropists, ensuring the organization's sustainability.

In the 1920s, Mary Marston became the legal guardian of María, Laura, and John Gallo, the children of a blind man who sold newspapers across the street from the Marston Store; she and Helen helped raise these children, providing continued emotional and financial support at various intervals in their lives.

Helen went on to become an active member of the Socialist Party and was a founding member of the San Diego and Imperial Valley chapter of the A.C.L.U., providing continued support for the migrant workers through the years. She marched on Selma, Alabama, and assisted people there in registering to vote, and following her Quaker grandmother's belief system, Helen found herself on President Richard M. Nixon's enemies list for her organization of and participation in Vietnam war protests.

After Helen married and moved to Los Angeles, Mary became more heavily involved in the Neighborhood House and was a regular presence there fondly remembered by many of the individuals who both benefited and assisted in providing services over the years.

And what of young Laura Gallo, whose life changed dramatically when moving into the Marston home, and who viewed both Mary and Helen as equal to a mother?

Laura fell in love with David Rodríguez, a young man who became the Marston's gardener and chauffeur; they married and had a family and when a grandmother herself, she became a passionate activist for her community and is known today as the mother of Chicano Park.

Did it ever occur to Mary and Helen Marston that Neighborhood House, thrust into being at the time of the Mexican Revolution, would celebrate one hundred and ten years of service to millions of individuals from across the globe? Mary lived to be nearly 108 years old, so eventually, she probably had a pretty good idea that it would.

**Happy birthday Neighborhood House!** Your work is as important now as ever. Here's to another century of compassion, empowerment, and positive change.

Marston House Museum & Gardens  
3525 Seventh Avenue, San Diego 92103  
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Through education, advocacy, and stewardship SOHO's mission is to preserve, promote, and support preservation of the architectural, cultural and historical links and landmarks that contribute to the collective identity, depth, and character of our region.

Since 1969, Save Our Heritage Organisation (SOHO), a nonprofit organization has led the community as a powerful catalyst for preservation by raising awareness and appreciation of our region's architectural and cultural heritage. All donations to SOHO support our mission of preservation.