

Boerne Star

High-profile Sisters find quiet 'place in the universe' on tiny Waring Farm

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Nudged against the golden browns of a Waring hillside, across the deep cut of a slow running creek, Santuario Sisterfarm seeks to accomplish in its own gentle way what massive church systems and influential enviro-groups have not.

On the Sisterfarm, two Dominican nuns are attempting to persuade South Texas residents how life attuned to a distressed planet's needs and how love between dissimilar cultures can be happily intertwining objectives.

Dominican Sisters Carol Coston and Elise Garcia use a language that's rapidly becoming mainstream, even clichéd - words like "biodegradable," "locally grown," "recyclable" and "reduction of carbon emissions." As well, to hear them comment on such topics as "understanding our place in the universe," it would be easy to classify Coston and Garcia as tree-huggers or wayward theologians, as New Agers or just a couple of well-meaning dreamers living an obviously cheerful and worn-out pattern.

But that would be wrongly dismissive since these two are not lightweight romantics. A peek into their curricula vitae reveals women who have long played significant roles in worlds of big finance and social justice.

Coston and Garcia, while committed to free-form and philosophy, are keenly aware that change, necessary to the individual heart, must also crack open the husks of large-level institutions.

Garcia, once management and communications consultant to such status nonprofit organizations as NETWORK, Bread for the World and Democracy 21, came to San Antonio to be director of communications and development at St. Mary's University School of Law before dedicating herself to Santuario Sisterfarm.

Coston, Garcia's co-founder and friend of many years, is a recipient of the distinguished Presidential Citizens Medal - one of the nation's top two civilian awards.

In 2001, Coston stood with a cadre of other honorees including Hank Aaron, Ruby Bridges, Muhammad Ali and Elizabeth Taylor as President Bill Clinton shook her hand, thanking the nun for her work with the poor, her national-level lobbying on behalf of social progress, her role in the nation's Community Reinvestment Act and her founding work in Partners for the Common Good, an alternative, multi-billion dollar investment fund focused toward inner city needs.

First take reveals Coston as the older of the two nuns, although time seems to have hushed to a stop on the Sisterfarm. Garcia, born in New York, raised in the Near East and Latin America, doesn't share the rich whiteness of Coston's hair, but both women have sharp, direct eyes. They understand both high-tier and bottom-level worlds. Both practice an activist way of life that they call "a right way of living" - not life as dictated by political party or as stipulated by their Church or Greenpeace, but as they discover it to be on a day-to-day basis.

"We both have been involved in social justice work for 30, 40 years or more," Garcia said, "and we see this as an expansion of that. Ecojustice - our concern for justice - includes the whole community, and not just two-legged, but four-legged and winged ones, and trees. Basically our mission is one of a total interconnectedness of all life on earth, of really coming to understand our place in the universe."

"We were both interested in Latin America and lobbying," Coston said. "I'd always had a dream of living on a place in the country that would be a women's center, organic, with some cultural events connected with it."

When the two nuns found that they shared these dreams, they founded Santuario Sisterfarm as a nonprofit organization in 2002.

The farm's purpose, the women explain, is to promote peace among people as well as peace between people and nature. They call it cultivating "biodiversity and cultural diversity."

Santuario Sisterfarm has three separate, though interconnecting emphases: Living Rightly on Earth, Latinas in the Borderland and the Sor Juana Press.

"I always wanted to study permaculture," Coston said, leading the way around the seven-acre site, between worm habitat and compost area, from asparagus bed to tiny fruit orchard.

Coston and Garcia have installed water catchment and gray water dispersal systems, composting toilets and solar energy harvesting as they're able to afford them. But as they struggle toward environmental sustainability, the Sisters also find themselves struggling to sustain their way of life. They're continually caught up in a cycle of writing grants and securing funds. The Catholic Church, they said, does not offer financial support for the work they've undertaken.

Coston heads up the gardening aspect of the Sisterfarm, picking up compostable discards from cooperating groceries and cafeterias, seeing to her energetically seething family of earthworms and managing the tidy little greenhouse where seedlings of all sorts wait snugly for the final threat of this year's frost to pass.

Coston is the one who moves ahead with gardening and herb-healing and developing a system of agriculture in which one facet profits from the other - all on a small enough scale, she said, that anyone can do it in their backyard.

Garcia, though clearly comfortable with the outdoor aspects of the Sisterfarm, seems to be the partner most tied to computer, paper and pen. It was Garcia's vision to establish Latinas in the Borderlands, an arrangement that both networks and provides respite for Hispanic women in the San Antonio area who, according to Garcia, "are on the front lines of working with communities on issues of domestic violence, of AIDS, and political work."

The farm, Garcia said, is a place where "they can restore, rejuvenate, and find ways of sustaining themselves in the struggle that they're engaged in - while making links to living sustainably on earth."

In addition to the Latinas, Garcia oversees the Sor Juana Press, a publishing entity dedicated to promoting works of religious and minority women on topics of "Earth and spirituality." To date, Sor Juana has seven books in print.

"In some ways," Garcia said, "we're living in a monastic tradition of yore. Before it was the monastery that served as a place where knowledge was kept, and where there was teaching, and where people

had a rhythm of life of work and prayer and rest."

"We're trying to be a demonstration," Coston added. "We talk about how our role as humans - we're the ones who've messed up the earth, pretty much - is to now act in a positive way. Not to put on a guilt trip, but to see where we are and where we should be."

As Adrian Dominican nuns, Garcia explained, they are trained "to live in ways that actually model what we're trying to do. We're trying, in our own small way to live what we preach and offer it for those who are interested as a place where they can come and see things and also teach us the things that they've learned."

And it's in this way that the Santuario Sisterfarm lends itself: as a learning site, a meeting place and a retreat space. "We're hoping that people will come," Coston said.

"We have this sense that we're living in very perilous times right now," Garcia said. "It's calling us to shift the ways in which we live - to shift into ways that are much more like our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents."

For more information, visit www.sisterfarm.org.