



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Former St. Joseph Center Executive Director Rhonda Meister passed away on June 15th Surrounded By Friends and Family**

**Los Angeles, CA** – St. Joseph Center is sad to share that our former, longtime Executive Director Rhonda Meister passed away earlier this week. She was a cancer survivor, and her illness had recently returned.

Rhonda was the organization's first lay leader. She arrived as a case manager and less than a year later were asked to take over leadership when co-founder Sister Marilyn Rudy decided to step down. For nearly 25 years, Rhonda led St. Joseph Center with the same concern for the "dear neighbor" that had inspired Sister Marilyn, Sister Louise Bernstein, and other Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet to found the Center in 1976.

The agency Rhonda took over had 12 staff and two small storefronts on Rose Avenue in Venice. When she retired in 2008, the agency's nearly 100 employees worked at eight locations spread out across the Westside. As she stepped down, St. Joseph Center was on the verge of opening a newly-constructed headquarter in Venice. In an interview with the Argonaut newspaper, Rhonda said, "The new building brings a sense of... new vision and it seemed the right time to bring new leadership and really start everything new."

During her tenure as St. Joseph Center's Executive Director, Rhonda served on a number of regional boards and blue-ribbon panels that worked to address the immense challenges of poverty, housing, and homelessness in Los Angeles. In 2007, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recognized Rhonda's lifetime of service by naming her their Public Citizen of the Year for her "advocacy on behalf of

low-income children and families and those individuals who are experiencing homelessness or at risk for homelessness.”

Among the most important legacies, Rhonda left to St. Joseph Center is our Bread and Roses Café. Under her leadership in the late 1980s, the organization moved from distributing sack lunches on the beach to offering hot, freshly prepared meals in an inviting, newly renovated restaurant-style space that was far from a soup kitchen in both spirit and design. Perhaps the greatest tribute to Rhonda’s fundamental kindness, vision, and deep respect for the dignity of all people are the well over 600,000 nutritious meals that Bread and Roses Café has served to people experiencing homelessness since it opened in 1989.

St. Joseph Center’s current President & CEO Va Lecia Adams Kellum credits Rhonda with building the foundation that has allowed the agency to grow into a County-wide provider of life-changing services. She notes, “the Sisters started with heart and mission. Rhonda had a tremendous heart as well, and she turned St. Joseph Center into a professional, comprehensive social service organization that remained rooted in that founding mission. We wouldn’t be where we are today without her.”

Our Board Chair Kevin McCardle first joined the board when Rhonda was the Executive Director. He called Rhonda “a fierce champion” of those frequently marginalized and forgotten by society. “If you look up the word “compassion” in the dictionary,” Kevin said, “you will find Rhonda’s picture.”

We are eternally grateful to Rhonda Meister, for her 26 years of dedication and commitment to St. Joseph Center.

*St. Joseph Center is one of Los Angeles’ most prominent services for low-income and homeless individuals and families, serving more than 13,000 people per year. St. Joseph Center does not provide religious services or instruction and assists people regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof.*

Learn more about St. Joseph Center here: <https://stjosephctr.org>