

History of Viola Blythe

By Maryann Heskett

Viola Freeman was born in McComb, Oklahoma on Sept. 28, 1916, the ninth of ten children. At the age of four she was orphaned when her mother died while giving birth. When Viola was 9, Viola left the orphanage to live with her older sister, Lindy. Viola lived most of her young adulthood in Oklahoma.

In the 1940's she moved to California. While working at the Alameda Naval Shipyard she met a friend from her youth, Stanley Blythe. They were married in 1946 and moved to Newark the same year. They lived in a small house across from what is now the Viola Blythe Center.

Soon after moving to Newark, Viola began to help those less fortunate than she. Viola felt a need to do this because of her upbringing in the orphanage. She wanted to help all children and their parents who were in need. At that time, Viola and Mrs. Louella Kellerman were the only two people in the city helping people with emergency services. Each of the ladies worked out of their garages with Stanley having built a garage just for that purpose.

In 1953 their only child, Debbie, was born. In 1955 the Blythe family moved across and down the street. Within a few years, Mrs. Kellerman died and Viola was left to carry on the work alone. For the next ten years, Viola ran this service from her garage. People came to pick up food, clothing, to take showers and even to sleep on makeshift beds in the Blythe living room. One Christmas Viola turned over the entire Christmas dinner she had prepared to a family that came by needing food.

For the next twenty years, Viola worked with the Salvation Army. For five of those years she worked as their Welfare Chairman.

In 1989 the City of Newark offered Viola a building at Ash Street Park from which to operate. At that point, the Viola Blythe Community Service Center was born. With the help from the City, churches, schools, businesses, individuals and volunteers, the Center today provides emergency services to approximately 6,000 people each year. This includes Thanksgiving and Christmas programs and a Children's Christmas party for approximately 300 children. The kids each receive a toy, a visit with Santa, entertainment and refreshments.

Viola has received many honors over the years. The Others Award (highest award given by the Salvation Army), City of Newark Volunteer of the Year award (as a matter of fact, each year the outstanding Newark volunteer is presented with the Viola Blythe Volunteer of the Year award by the City of Newark), the J.C. Penney Golden Rule award, and the KRON TV For Those Who Care award. In 1995 Viola was presented the California Woman of the Year award by then State Senator Bill Lockyer at the State Capitol.

In addition to being a mother to Debbie (who is the current Program Director of the Viola Blythe Center), she is a grandmother to Danny, Demetria and Desiree.