

Master Gardener of the Summer 2021

By Ann Marie Caldwell



Jennifer Sierra, our Master Gardener for the Summer Season, has gardening in her genes. She began working in the garden alongside her mother, as a young child, and this gardening twosome continues to the present day. Much like the Old Testament prophets who tried to get out of their prophetic calling, Jennifer also tried to fit into other niches, but the call to till the soil lured her back until she finally found the slot that was carved out for her from her beginnings: working for Catholic Charities to feed the hungry and downtrodden through the use of her gardening skills.

Jennifer was born and bred in San Antonio but, as a young adult, she found the old city too confining. So she fled from what she found to be a stifling atmosphere for the mountains and outdoor adventures of Colorado, where she attended the University of Denver. As with most young people, Jennifer was not in tune with her true calling, so she majored in Computer Science while growing flowers in a window box in her dorm room.

From Colorado, Jennifer moved to Arlington, Virginia, where she worked in IT, while moving from growing only flowers to also growing vegetables. There, she gave birth to her daughter, an event that motivated her to return to San Antonio to be close to her family. After a few years, Jennifer missed the mountains of Colorado, so she headed back to beautiful Denver, Colorado. Upon returning, she began working for a Texas Oil and Drilling Company and then moved on to working for a Colorado-based Oil and Gas Environmental Company, while all along continuing to garden and expand her gardening knowledge.

During this time, Jennifer took a part time fun position teaching swim lessons to preschool children as part of a program at her daughter's preschool. It was this experience that helped Jennifer discover she had a gift for working with young children, and she discovered she loved teaching, so much that she returned to school and became a certified infant/toddler/preschool teacher. With certificate in hand, Jennifer obtained a teaching position with Head Start and Migrant Head Start in Weld County, Colorado, where she worked with children from 6 weeks to 6 years old. Jennifer enjoyed teaching, raising her daughter and gardening in her backyard.

Unfortunately, her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and as a result, Jennifer and her family returned to San Antonio to be with her father. After her father's passing, Jennifer and her family decided that San Antonio was where they needed to be. Jennifer was blessed to obtain a teaching position at St. Paul Lutheran, in San Antonio, where she taught pre-school. During this time, she was fortunate to help start a garden program for the children.

Evidently, Jennifer was not quite ready to listen to the little voice within, so she attempted to return to the IT field. The hand of God again intervened, and shortly after starting work with a small IT Company, the company began to struggle financially and decided to downsize its workforce, resulting in Jennifer being laid off. It was at that time that Jennifer and her mother decided to apply for the Master Gardener program. The fear that only one of them would be accepted into the Master Gardener program was real, but they feel lucky that both of them were accepted into the class. Completing the Master Gardener Training, together with her mom, is one of Jennifer's most loved and memorable life experiences.

Upon completing the course, Jennifer spoke with Ruby Zavala who oversaw children's programs in Agrilife. She asked Ruby to keep an ear out for a longshot, anyone that might be looking to hire someone for a position working with children as a gardener. To Jennifer's disbelief, a short time later, Ruby forwarded to Jennifer an email from a company looking for just such a person. Jennifer felt extremely fortunate to find her dream job working as a contractor for the PRE-K 4SA program in San Antonio, where she taught gardening and nutrition to 2,000 preschool children. When Jennifer's position with PRE-K 4SA ended, another door opened.

Jennifer is now exactly where she is meant to be: She is the Master Gardener for Catholic Charities at The Guadalupe Community Center on the west side of San Antonio. Jennifer manages a community garden, where she relies on the help of volunteers to help her grow and harvest fresh produce. The produce is distributed from St. Stephens Care Center on Zarzamora St. to the mostly Hispanic, low-income residents of this west side neighborhood that have limited access to fresh produce. The program has been so successful that Jennifer is now establishing a second garden at St. Stephen's Care Center, which will allow more fresh produce to be served to the local low-income westside community.

While her focus has been on her job with Catholic Charities and her calling to feed the hungry through the use of her gardening skills, Jennifer has not neglected her commitment to the Bexar County Master Gardeners. She has combined her gardening and teaching talents to help with various children's programs and volunteering to assist Angie Gutierrez with programs for Family and Community Health, such as container gardening presentations for seniors with limited gardening space and limited mobility.

Jennifer now enjoys a life of gardening and teaching which she loves. With her mother working beside her, she has combined her gifts of teaching and gardening in a setting she finds extremely rewarding and fulfilling. She has learned many things, primarily to have faith in God and the gifts He has given her and her family and friends. She has also learned there are no absolutes when it comes to gardening. Sometimes you can do everything wrong, and yet your garden can thrive and grow to be amazing. Through personal experience, she has also learned the value of trying new things. She started as an IT major with a window garden in her dorm room and evolved into a Master Gardener with two community gardens that feed the hungry of San Antonio. Her advice to others is to be always be open to new challenges and to new opportunities, and to trust God to help you find the path you are meant to take.