Gardens & Dreams

DeZavala teacher gives students gift of the great outdoors

By Gary Smith Special to the Record

— All teachers teach about subjects and about life, in one way or another.

Spring follows winter. Easter follows winter.

My wife Pam surprised me recently by volunteering at the school where she teaches to help a second-year teacher named Omar Gomez on a garden project at school. Omar, in his 40s and a new teacher at DeZavala Elementary School, was building a school garden. The students were going to plant flowers and vegetable plants, tend to the plants, and watch them all grow. I thought it was a great project — for Pam and Omar.

Pam tends to gravitate toward good dogs, good people and good projects. I selected four dogs in our marriage and each dog was a disaster. She picked the last two — perfect pets.

Then she dropped the line to me. Omar needed my truck and some labor two weeks ago. So I met Omar and hauled a truck-load of dirt — in the snow.

A week later, on the first day of spring which was a cold Saturday, I was looking forward to a “me day” — a day of watching some NCAA March Madness men’s basketball, fireplace, do nothing. After I served our family homemade waffles (a 34-year Saturday morning tradition) my wife asked what I had planned and I asked her what she wanted. That is marriage.

She asked me to call Omar. I did. He wanted to meet me in 20 minutes at school so I could haul some dirt and plants from nurseries in the area for the new De Zavala School garden.

I went out into the cold. In the cold rain and driving winds, I spent hours with Omar again. We went from nursery to nursery in the area, picking up plants, visiting with nursery owners, and picking up broken bags of garden soil, all donations to the new school garden.

Spring follows winter. Spring is Major League Baseball, Easter, and gardening.

Omar is in his 40s and is living out his dream of being a school teacher. He teaches third graders Math, Science, English, Probability and other basics. He believes he can teach the needed subjects while also teaching the students about agriculture and the basics in life. He says he has one student who does not know the difference between fur and a feather.

Omar grew up in Venezuela. Dirt poor. By age 16 he was scared to death of his future. He became driven. By 19 he had put himself through college, earning a degree in Agriculture. He then got another degree in Education. He ended up going into the corporate work force world, married, had a child, rose up in the corporate world, moved to the United States, and raised his daughter with his wife.
Three years ago he went back to college in his 40s, got his Texas Teacher Certification, and now lives out his dream of teaching. He dreams of some day writing his own book. He told me that Pam should write her own children’s books. He inspires those around him.

The garden will be beautiful. The students and faculty are so excited about the beautiful and visible flower and vegetable garden that Omar is heading up building — with his degree in Agriculture, his love of teaching, his love of students, and his love of this country. He told me that we have no idea how poor his country is where only the cities have hospitals and grocery stores. He rewards the kids: They do their work and he rewards them with time in the garden. He wants them to get their hands dirty and learn about the earth and food.

A few months ago in the earthquake in Haiti, an American United Methodist missionary was killed in the earthquake. He lived and spoke years ago here in San Marcos when his wife was an Associate Minister here at the United Methodist Church. Folks still recall his sermon.

He said, “Americans dream of hitting the lottery. We already have hit the lottery by being born here. We are blessed beyond measure. We hit the lottery at birth.”

I am labor. I am the truck driver. I hit the lottery at birth. Can you imagine the kind of good impact that Omar and his dream of teaching and his dream of a school garden are having upon the students in his class?

On my way back home that cold Saturday evening, I got a call to go visit a person in our church who had just been hospitalized. Life is short. Each day is a gift.

I am labor. I am truck driver. Life is a gift. I lost my Saturday. Oh well. Spending time with Omar reminds you what makes life worth living — spring and Easter, kids, gardens and dreams.

Gary Smith is a retired Air Force chaplain, minister at Christ the Redeemer Church in San Marcos, and author of the book “Letters from Boerdon.”