

# Then and now, this small El Paso school pulls people together as it provides opportunities

Since 1913, The Lydia Patterson Institute has been bridging the shared cultural history of northern Mexico and this part of the U.S. while channeling Spanish-speaking children from both sides of the border to universities in the U.S.



*A mural painted by students adorns a wall at The Lydia Patterson Institute. The institute opened in 1913 as a beacon for poor Mexican boys and girls. In divisive times, it remains a symbol of peace.(Christ Chavez / Special Contributor)*

By Alfredo Corchado  
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EL PASO — The region was in turmoil. Tens of thousands of people were fleeing Mexico, crossing the border into Texas. El Paso was dealing with racial strife and debating the construction of a border wall. Then came a pandemic, leading to the hardening of the border.

But it wasn't 2020 — it was the period from 1910 to 1918. Mexico was in the throes of revolution, the wall talk was because of fears of Chinese immigrants who wanted to work in the U.S., and the pandemic was from the deadly flu virus that swept the world starting in 1918.

In the midst of unrest, then and now, people turned to a small private school beloved by its community because it stands as a beacon of hope and opportunity thanks to supporters nationwide, including from North Texas.

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The small Methodist school for grades 7 to 12 has only 360 students, down from some 500 because of COVID-19 restrictions. But its impact is felt far beyond the families of those who attend class there: The school serves as an incubator for future leaders on both sides of the border.



*The modern campus of The Lydia Patterson Institute, which serves as an incubator for future leaders on both sides of the border.(Christ Chavez / Special Contributor)*

La Lydia “has never ceased serving and inspiring our region forward — an example of the better angels in us,” said artist Adair Margo, author of *Voices of La Lydia, the History of La Lydia Patterson Institute* and spouse of El Paso Mayor Donald “Dee” Margo.



Now, with the border region again sizzling as a flashpoint of a national polarizing debate about immigration — and the site of a high-profile hate crime — Adair Margo and others point to La Lydia as a way to heal divisions. The vast majority of the students cross the border from Ciudad Juarez.

That was the vision of Lydia Patterson, a Methodist laywoman from Kentucky and widow who moved in 1883 to El Paso, where three years later she married attorney Millard Patterson. She worked at a school for Mexican students during a perilous time in Mexico.

Lydia saw the need for education as she rode in her buggy through the streets of El Segundo Barrio, witnessing firsthand the poverty, lack of opportunity and political strife. In 1906, she began to set up day classes for youngsters in the homes of area Methodists.



*A portrait of Lydia Patterson hangs at the school. In 1906, Patterson set up day classes for youngsters in the homes of El Paso-area Methodists.(Christ Chavez / Special Contributor)*

She died in 1909 from cancer. But her husband knew his wife's passion and donated more than \$50,000 for construction of the building for the school she dreamed about. Construction began in 1913 and classes opened in the fall of 1914.

From the beginning, La Lydia was ahead of its time. In 1921, the school became one of the first in the country to emphasize the teaching of English as a second language.

Today, about 70 percent of the students are from Mexico, some from poor colonias, border communities that were started by low-income families and mostly lacked water and plumbing when they were founded.

Socorro Brito de Anda, the school's president for the past 35 years, stressed that the school's mission has grown in importance as the region deals with a humanitarian crisis due to the immigration crackdown, drug violence, hate language targeting Mexicans from President Donald Trump and a partial border lockdown caused by COVID-19.

The latter led to a drop in student enrollment and online classes, sending kids scrambling for reliable Wi-Fi across the border.



*A portrait of Lydia Patterson hangs at the school. In 1906, Patterson set up day classes for youngsters in the homes of El Paso-area Methodists. (Christ Chavez / Special Contributor)*

“Right now, with all that’s going on here and across the border, we all need to be reminded of the good things that have happened throughout the years, right here on the border,” said de Anda, explaining that families who have Wi-Fi invite other classmates to their homes to get their work done. “As border residents, we’re used to facing obstacles and somehow we figure it out and overcome them. That’s the kind of people we are. All we need is an opportunity. We’re resilient, luchones,” or fighters.



When de Anda asked Margo whether she or someone else might want to write a history of the school and its impact on the community, Margo jumped at the opportunity. She was so captivated that she spent eight years researching and writing. The book — including a 118-page special edition with portraits by Chicano artist Gaspar Enriquez — offers a historical overview not just of the school, but of the region's founding.

“It was printed in El Paso, Texas, on the border of the United States of America and Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos,” she said, pointing to the words in the book and describing a space caught between two countries. “This book is about the border, made on the border by people who actually live and know the border.”

North Texas United Methodist Church leaders have played a crucial role in the school's success.

“Dallas is so prosperous as a region and its Methodist community so generous, and we're better off for that,” Margo said, adding that proceeds from the book will go toward providing scholarships for students of La Lydia. The book will also be featured at the Oct. 31-Nov. 7 [\*\*Texas Book Festival in Austin\*\*](#).

Margo said people also can make donations directly to Lydia Patterson through its website.



*Adair Margo, author of Voices of La Lydia, the History of La Lydia Patterson Institute, a book about the Lydia Patterson Institute, a school in El Paso, Texas.(Alfredo Corchado)*

Tuition costs \$4,500 a year. Some students are from low-income or middle-class families. That's why 40 percent of the students receive scholarships to cover registration, bridge

tolls, passports, visas, laptops, even school supplies and shoes. Many are middle-class and affluent, from from both sides of the border.

The investment is well-spent, said Chuck Dedmon, 77, an aviation manufacturer from Dallas who serves as an emeritus board member at Lydia Patterson. One of the leading funders of the school, he met his wife of 54 years, Lynne, while attending Rice University. She's an El Paso native and through her, he said he came to know and fall "in love with the city, the border, the Hispanic culture and the institute."

"Lydia Patterson is devoted to educating people to make them be all that they can become," he said, explaining that education is fundamental for human transformation and reinvention. "Education is a huge contribution not only to Mexico, but to the state, Texas, and the nation because ultimately we share a border. I think that one thing we would say is that Lydia Patterson is dedicated to building bridges, not walls."

Many of the students are U.S. citizens with Mexican parents. An estimated 98 percent of the students go on to higher education and graduate, connecting many of them to United Methodist universities and colleges, including Southern Methodist University.

Take the example of Carmen Perez, a native of Los Angeles who as a teenager migrated south to Juarez with her family at her father's behest. She enrolled at La Lydia, an experience that she said transformed her life.

"I had never been in contact with teachers who were so interested, determined that I get an education, a place where a teacher constantly asked, 'What do you want to do when you get older?'" recalled Perez, a 1976 graduate. "That was the environment at the school where I was comfortable in telling my speech teacher, 'I've always thought about going to law school.'"





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By way of the University of Texas at El Paso, Perez eventually attended and graduated from SMU law school. Today, she's a lawyer at one of the city's leading law firms. Her children live in Dallas. One is a lawyer, another a software engineer. Perez also serves on La Lydia's board.

"I'm a staunch supporter of the school because it changed my life, my parents' life and now my own family because of education," she said.

The Rev. Andy Stoker is senior minister of First United Methodist Church in Dallas and president of the Lydia Patterson Board of Trustees. He's also an El Paso native, born and raised in El Paso and graduate of Burges High School. He grew up speaking Spanish and English, crossing into Juarez with friends for quinceaneras, weddings and funerals.

Stoker said he's seen plenty of disruptions and tragedies along the border over the years, but few compare to the massacre on Aug. 3 last year that was carried out by a North Texas man at a Walmart just blocks from where Stoker grew up. The shooter, Patrick Crusius, said he came to kill Mexicans and stop the "Hispanic invasion of Texas."

Recalling the shooting, Stoker became emotional and pointed to La Lydia as the answer to quell current racial tensions.



“Lydia Patterson can weather just about any storm because of her heart, and I’m talking about the school, because of where Lydia Patterson is, because you’re living on the border and the school is on the border, and when you live on the border you can’t take sides because you’re holding on to tensions,” he said. “Lydia Patterson is always in liminal space. It’s always in space between two countries, between two languages, between two worldviews. And when you live in that liminal space, you begin to see the world differently.”

Stoker paused and added, “And when the education of young people becomes your main focus, I believe that what happens is the institution, the school, even the faculty begin to transform and they begin to see themselves as people who are called to a higher purpose. Not to a specific side, not to a specific party, but to humanity, and that is what Lydia Patterson represents.”

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