Laura Perez turned the pages of her black leather Bible. Running her hand over the words, she stopped at a verse she underlined in 1990 when she and her husband, Sal, first came to Tucson. The passage speaks about loving the poor, the brokenhearted and comforting all who mourn.

'This verse has helped me for many years and I only share my past to help others overcome difficulties,' she said.

Laura and Sal Perez, both 54 years old, co-pastor the Victory Outreach Tucson City Church at 3999 S. Mission Road and run a 'Victory Home' for men at 220 S. Prince Road.

Their path to Tucson and helping others - has been aided through the good will of Christmases past. It wasn't easy at all, starting in rough California neighborhoods decades ago.

GANG WORLD
Laura Perez was 5 years old when her parents started working for the Spanish Christian community in Compton, California.

The awkwardness of her teen years, combined with a curiosity for danger, landed her in the midst of the South L.A. gang world. At 16, she was dating and dabbling in drugs and the gang scene.

'I wasn't gang but that was my choice of friends,' she said. 'The gang world was different and exciting.'

One night, she went to a play at a local church about gang life, addiction and the brokenness they bring.

'You either stay or get out, but it was clear you have to decide,' she said.

Sal was one of the stars of the production. 'He was different from other people, and I wanted what he had,' Laura said.

At 16, Sal and Laura started dating. They married at 18. Everything happened so fast, marriage and then children, two boys and a girl, within five years.
Sal had a history with gangs and soon began to get lonely for his old life, with his old friends, Laura said.

'It was Sal's anger for his father that drove him to the gangs,' she said. Living with abuse from his father, Sal sought an escape by becoming involved with drugs, violence, martial arts and kickboxing, she said.

'Sal had to hit something, because he had all that anger inside,' she said.

As a stay-at-home mom of three young children, Laura started drinking heavily to ease the pain of loneliness and depression, she said.

'We almost divorced and I felt shame from going against God,' she said. 'I thought God wouldn't want me.'

Then, Sal's mother unexpectedly died of cancer at age 42. 'It hit him so hard that he decided to end his life,' Laura said.

REVOLVER TO HIS HEAD
Sal went into his room alone and put a .38-caliber gun to his head, Laura said. Desperate and feeling alone, Sal remembered what his mother said: 'If you don't know what to do, cry out to God.'

'He put the gun down and walked away from his old life. He came out of his room a changed man,' Laura said.

Life took a turn, and Laura and Sal spent the next few years in the Victory Outreach ministry in California before a brief stop in Phoenix. Then, in 1999, they moved to Tucson, becoming full-time pastors working in high-risk areas.

Most of their time is spent at their new men's home, which opened in May.

Eva Robles, a longtime member of Victory Outreach and a friend of the Perez family, said the co-pastors are making a difference.

See PASTORS, B3
'Although the neighborhood is tough, people who are on drugs or getting out of prison or in gangs know to respect the house, and stop in daily because they want help,' Robles said.

The priority is to create a family atmosphere.

'Everything is like a family,' Laura Perez said. 'The younger generation is missing family connections and they are often disrespectful to themselves and others. We even have meals for the men when they are doing cleanup activities. The women cook and it's more like a family that way.'

BOWED IN PRAYER
Laura Perez sat quietly at the head of the table. It was 9 a.m. Thursday at the Victory Outreach Center. Twelve women, four children under the age of 5 and two babies gathered around coffee, pastries and fruit at a large meeting table. Natural light filtered through the room.

Laura was simultaneously praying for the women and greeting latecomers with a warm smile. Her waist-length black hair, sleek and shiny, matched her black-rimmed reading glasses.

'I've known the Perez family for over 20 years and I seen 'em go through storms and battles and the community knows they can come here,' Robles said.

Kassarah Garcia remembers when she and her husband, Andrino, walked into the center for help.

Kassarah, 24 at the time, said she was a stay-at-home mom with three children, bound by depression and suicidal thoughts.

'We were all sick, even the children were sick because we weren't good parents,' she said. 'The attraction of a nice house and material goods was more appealing than getting sober,' she said.

That ended when Andrino realized he needed help and entered the men's rehabilitation center.

While the men helped Andrino, Laura and others from the church were able to help Kassarah. Victory Outreach provided support, mentorship and tools to change old habits.

'Through unconditional love and a soft demeanor, Pastor Laura challenged my idea of what a strong woman is,' Kassarah Garcia said. 'She's my spiritual mom. She taught me how to be loving and supportive for my family and husband.'
Youth pastor Lynette Ochoa also recalls Laura Perez’s quiet demeanor, which she said was in conflict with her own outgoing personality. But watching Laura showed her that it was OK to be quiet, Ochoa said.

Laura Perez said she listens to what God wants her to do as she works in tandem with her husband, walking the streets in search of those in need.

'Teamwork makes the dream work,' she said.

Since leaving the gang life and becoming pastors in high-risk neighborhoods, she said, the Perez family has experienced many miracles. She said she hinges her life on a passage found in the Bible where before crucifying Jesus, Pontius Pilot asks Christ about the meaning of truth.

Christ answers, 'For this cause I was born, and came into this world to testify to the truth. I too believe that is my purpose in life,' she said.

Through past Christmas donations, the Perezes were able to make the down payment for the Victory Outreach Church in January 2018.

They are now raising funds for a new women's home with a capacity for 17 women. Christmas miracles do happen, she said. 'We were given exactly the amount we needed.'

Rebecca Thompson is a University of Arizona student. This article was originally written for a UA journalism class.