

Hobbies.

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# For The Carotas, Life Is Most Important Art

By Margaret Koch

"Look for a red and white mail box on Valencia road, turn in there and follow the driveway. You'll find a houseful of kids at the end of the road."

These were Mario Carota's instructions; I followed them; I found the house (set in the middle of five acres of apple trees) and the kids (17 of them—it was raining and a lively game of softball was in progress in the kitchen).

I also found some of the most interesting art work being created in the area. The Carota family (even 3-year-old Louise helps) is working with inch-thick stained glass in "delicious" colors, combining it in several ways with massive pieces of carved redwood, rocks and pebbles.

They make doors for homes, churches and public buildings, and structural or decorative wall panels which may be used in many ways.

"Right now we are working on two projects: a door for a Carmel home, and a church scene of Mary, Joseph and Christ," explained Carota.

But don't confuse their work with the usual leaded stained glass window type of work. It is very different.

"We aren't artists — neither Estelle nor I have had any art training," he pointed out.

They got into the stained glass business because they built a church at Fowler (near Fresno).

They were at Fowler building the church because they had gone to Mexico (all 19 of them) to build a school for farmers' children near Mexico City.

To start with, they adopted 11 children — they also have had six of their own. But nobody in the Carota family knows whether he's adopted or not. Estelle brushes off the question with "That's not really important."

Then she adds: "But of course when birthdays fall within a few months of each other, the children know that SOMEONE was adopted. But they don't know who," she smiled.

Younger ones are taught at home by her (she operates as a private school) until they enter the 8th grade at Mora Catholic high school.

When Carota left his job in 1961 the family traveled (all 19 of them) to Mexico on savings. There they joined with Mexican university students and Yale University students in building the first school for Mexican children.

What with?

"Oh donations, mostly," Carota said a big vaguely. "Even some people up here donated to it. You know the Big Creek Lumber company up near Davenport? They gave all the redwood for the school roof."

This was after a Stanford University student had borrowed a truck, picked up the lumber, been halted at the Mexican border and forced to transfer the load to a Mexican truck. When the lumber finally reached Carota in Mexico City, he was desperately wondering where the money was coming from to pay for it.

"Our children all understood that we were building the school to help the Mexican children," Estelle said.

States, bringing back a group of Mexican students to work on an exchange project — building St. Lucy's Catholic church at Fowler. The Carotas lived, rent free, on \$150 per month while constructing the building.

"That was our first experience with stained glass. That's how we got started," Carota said.

When they finished St. Lucy's, they came home to Aptos, savings gone, no work in view. This prospect would paralyze the average parents. But not the Carotas — who have 19 mouths to feed.

"We'll manage," Mario said.

"The Lord will provide," Estelle added. They meant it.

Carota, who was a Naval aviator during World War II, had \$10 to his name when he and Estelle were married in 1942. Since then they have gone broke trying to raise apples on five acres, they have spent money they borrowed on his life insurance, cashed in retirement funds and used up a small legacy of Estelle's.

Their big home, with its rows of beds in dormitory-like rooms, was built on weekends by fellow lab workers from UC. A bus serves for family transportation.

A Watsonville produce dealer donates all the family's fresh vegetables. Carota buys other food wholesale. They eat well — but it's expensive, even while cutting costs every way possible.

"But we are really fortunate," Estelle pointed out. "We have managed to sell one piece of our glass work each month — and that keeps us going."

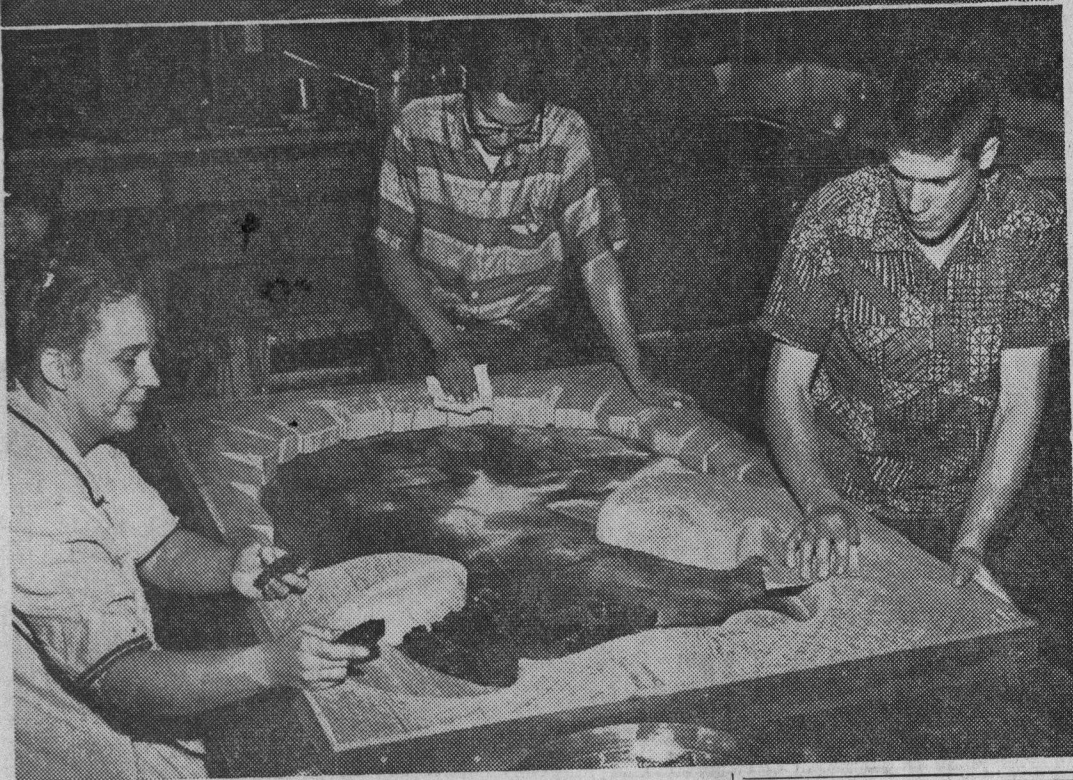
The stained glass is expensive. Estelle chops it into pieces suitable for their work, using a heavy hammer. "There's no other way to break it up — it's so thick," she said. Once in awhile a whole square accidentally shatters into un-usable pieces.

The redwood is expensive too, since they must use heavy, clear boards without flaws or imperfections. They work together on designs which may be either entirely impressionistic or of recognizable subjects. They have developed a method by which they can finish both sides of panels paved with mosaic-like rocks and pieces of glass. They also have made a handsome experimental lighting fixture for their own living room.

"Now we must find other uses for our stained glass work," Carota observed confidently.







"Belonging" is a way of life with the Carota family. Deeply reverent, Mario and Estelle Carota are raising their family with "love, understanding and the will to work together to help others." They built two schools in Mexico recently and St. Lucy's Catholic church at Fowler, near Fresno. Here they are shown with doors they are making, which will be set with stained glass. Left (from top down) Joseph, Paul, Martha, 12, and Marie, 5. Looking over the door is John, 18. Left "candle" is Benedict, while two top center faces belong to David, 8, and Lawrence, 10. Lower center are Gregory and Vincent, both 10. Peeking through the lowest apertures are (left) Louise, 3, baby of the family, and Mark, 7. Over on the right are (top) Michael, 18, Mary Rita, 15, Peter, 15, and Charles, 12, who is kneeling.

Everybody works on the family stained glass project at the Mario Carota household on Valencia road, Aptos. Here Estelle Carota places pieces of the heavy glass to create the design while the older boys, Joseph 17, (left) and Michael, 18, sand the massive redwood frame smooth.

to Mexico (all 19 of them) to build a school for farmers' children near Mexico City.

But before they built the school for farmers' children they had built a school for slums children of Mexico City. And so the story of the stained glass leads back and back and back.

The whole thing really began because ideas are more important than anything else to Estelle and Mario Carota. Even more important than a regular pay check coming in.

"We wanted a project the whole family could work together on," explained Estelle. As Roman Catholics they are active in the Christian Family Movement which originated in the church. "Doing for others" is part of their creed.

Estelle, who is 41 years old, holds a teaching credential from DePaul University in Chicago where she also filled her practice teaching requirements in the public schools.

Carota is a graduate in ceramic engineering of Alfred University. He worked as an atomic engineer at University of California radiation laboratory at Berkeley until about three years ago.

"I could go back there anytime, but I don't really want to," he said. "We want to do something different with our lives."

So what have they done?

that we were building the school to help the Mexican children," Estelle said. "It's important for family members to work together—but for outside causes. In this way each one grows and develops into a whole person."

In May of last year the Carotas finished the second school in Mexico and returned to the United

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Mario Carota inspects stained glass fixture.