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"Mother" Onedia Branch and Lena Dorsey

## Fires and floods can't stop her ministry to the poor

By Loretta Green

Times Tribune staff

In 1945, Onedia Branch was in Chicago handing out food and clothing to the poor.

In 1955, she moved to East Palo Alto with her husband, the late Rev. James Branch, founder of St. John the Baptist Church, and together they set up a small community services center in their garage to help the needy.

By December, 1971, Peninsulans read that "Mother" Branch, as she is known, had moved the operation to the Nairobi Shopping Center. By then her East Palo Alto Community Service Center had been going for 14 years.

In May, 1978, Peninsulans learned that Mother Branch desperately needed new quarters because the center and all of its emergency food, clothing and household goods had been destroyed by arson.

By the 1980 holidays Mother Branch, in a tiny room at 1489 E. Bayshore Road, was still giving away food and goods was but severely feeling the squeeze of a tightening economic situation.

Today little has changed about her mercy mission, although family-wise

there have been several changes. The Branches reared five sons and a granddaughter from the age of 3 weeks. One son, Nate, is a member of the Harlem Globetrotters. Then in the early '70s, the Branches were divorced. The Rev. Branch died in 1978. Today, in her mid-60s, Mother Branch has 19 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.

Twenty-seven years have passed since she first started her work and struggle has never left her small center.

Times are harder than they ever were, people are in more need and help and adequate funds go begging most days.

Still, if a person has nothing, the crowded little shop has something to offer and it offers it free.

Though it is located in predominantly black East Palo Alto, people from many ethnic groups come seeking help.

On a recent visit, a strapping white man who appeared to be in his late 20s came in.

Lena Dorsey, Mother Branch's long-time volunteer helper, recognized the customer and greeted him.

"Oh, I think I found what you needed.



Times Tribune staff photo by Bob Andres

"Mother" Onedia Branch (left) has been helping the poor of East Palo Alto since she moved to the area in 1955. With her is her faithful volunteer helper, Lena Dorsey. P.A.T. 7/6/82

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MOTHER BRANCH & LENA DORSEY

## BRANCH

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Extra large, wasn't it?" she said, picking up a pair of pants and a white dress shirt.

"These are just right, a little long but, awww right," he said with clear delight. "Thank you. It sure is a help."

He started out then paused at the door.

"Could I get a tie to go with the shirt?"

Dorsey went over to a wall of cardboard boxes, all carefully marked and then she and Mother Branch wrestled out a large one marked "ties."

"There," Dorsey said. "You can pick you out a tie."

"He's out of a job and been looking for work," Mother Branch said when the man had left.

Branch receives no funding other than what the public is willing to send her in the way of goods and money. She says she just "scrapes, scrapes, scrapes here and there"

to pay the \$95 a month room rent and to buy food for the needy.

She imposes no limit on the number of items people may take and offers clothing in good shape. She will not give people in true need of clothing "trash," she said.

Those who come find warmth and a maternal air.

When a girl came in looking for shoes and said her feet were size 7½, she heard Mother Branch say, "Baby, you stop right here (at a box marked shoes, 7½) and get what you want."

"All we say to people is don't take that which you don't need," said Mother Branch.

But a new sign on the wall is a sign of the times. The hand-lettered message says, "If possible, please give a donation to help defray the expenses."

Her ultimate dream is that someone will donate a room where she can run a temporary shelter.

"Just a place where a person can take a bath and get a hot meal," she said. "I be-

lieve it will come true because I've struggled long and the Lord sees my struggle."

In the meantime, she feels fortunate that Dorsey has been such a faithful volunteer.

"I came here in need a couple of times," Dorsey said. "I consider her as a mother and sometimes when I'd have problems we'd kneel and pray and cry together. You aren't going to find any more like her. She never turns anybody away."

Dorsey has helped out on the Thanksgivings when Mother Branch has given food baskets to needy families and the Christmases when she has handed out toys.

She was there when an arsonist destroyed the center and everything in it. She was there volunteering the winter it rained so hard through the roof that boxes of goods were submerged in water. The women worked side by side wading in rain boots.

When she gets the time, Mother Branch says she is going to write a book about her life and her struggles to keep up her ministry to the poor. Its probable title? "From the Fire to the Flood."