It’s one thing to safely advocate for society’s most vulnerable from the sidelines, and another entirely to jump onto the field and play the game.

Dawn McCarty, LMSW, associate professor of social work at the University of Houston-Downtown, knows this firsthand and has chosen to make her home with the city’s poorest and most disadvantaged. Each week, she spends three to four nights in her 500-square-foot apartment at Casa Juan Diego, a house of hospitality for disadvantaged women, and the rest of the week at the house she shares with her husband in Galveston.

“I subscribe to the Catholic Worker model that you really can’t know the specific needs of a population unless you live side-by-side with them,” said McCarty. “Living with these women is a joy and honor, and is in no way a sacrifice for me.”

When McCarty first began working with the women’s home of Casa Juan Diego in Houston, she thought she would live with the community for three months to provide support and serve as an example for her social work students. But three months turned into four years and she has never looked back.

In addition to eating meals with the guests, she weaves herself intricately into their lives, helping them attain legal documents, file police reports, gain government assistance and work with Child Protective Services. She also works closely with the Houston Food Bank and Harris County Hospital District to arrange appointments for the residents. Many women in the shelter are undocumented immigrants, victims of human trafficking, pregnant, or mentally or physically battered. Other women have left their families in Mexico and Central America, traveled to the United States with their children and remained after their husbands were deported.

Casa Juan Diego provides a free medical clinic for the community, language classes for non-English
It’s one thing to safely advocate for society’s most vulnerable from the sidelines, and another entirely to jump onto the field and play the game.

Dawn McCarty, LMSW, associate professor of social work at the University of Houston-Downtown, knows this firsthand and has chosen to make her home with the city’s poorest and most disadvantaged. Each week, she spends three to four nights in her 500-square-foot apartment at Casa Juan Diego, a house of hospitality for disadvantaged women, and the rest of the week at the house she shares with her husband in Galveston.

“I subscribe to the Catholic Worker model that you really can’t know the specific needs of a population unless you live side-by-side with them,” said McCarty. “Living with these women is a joy and honor, and is in no way a sacrifice for me.”

When McCarty first began working with the women’s home of Casa Juan Diego in Houston, she thought she would live with the community for three months to provide support and serve as an example for her social work students. But three months turned into four years and she has never looked back.

In addition to eating meals with the guests, she weaves herself intricately into their lives, helping them attain legal documents, file police reports, gain government assistance and work with Child Protective Services. She also works closely with the Houston Food Bank and Harris County Hospital District to arrange appointments for the residents. Many women in the shelter are undocumented immigrants, victims of human trafficking, pregnant, or mentally or physically battered. Other women have left their families in Mexico and Central America, traveled to the United States with their children and remained after their husbands were deported.

Casa Juan Diego provides a free medical clinic for the community, language classes for non-English speaking women and food and clothing centers that serve 300 people each week. All full-time staff live in the community and donate their services to the approximately 20 women and children who reside in the shelter.

“By living at Casa Juan Diego, I’m able to offer a unique perspective of service to my social work students,” said McCarty. “They’re able to see the ‘real world’ of their chosen careers and witness my failures, as well as my successes. Many of our students also volunteer at the shelter, providing an excellent high-impact service learning opportunity to complement their classroom learning.”

One of her students happens to reside at Casa Juan Diego as well, where she moved with her family at age 10. Wendy Ramirez is a junior and secretary of UHD’s Student Government Association. She graduated at the top of her class at Cypress Ridge High School and aspires to be a doctor. McCarty made a promise to Ramirez years ago that she would find a way for her to attend medical school, though as an undocumented immigrant, she faced many challenges. But with the country’s recently passed deferred action legislation and a sponsor from Casa Juan Diego, Ramirez applied, paving the way for her future medical education.

“Casa Juan Diego and Dr. McCarty have been invaluable for me as I’ve earned my education and sought to improve the academic and educational opportunities in front of me,” said Ramirez. “I’m confident that – without their help – I wouldn’t be in the place I am today, working toward becoming a U.S. citizen and accomplishing my dream of becoming a physician.”

According to McCarty, Ramirez and many of her other students are much more engaged and excited about pursuing public service as a result of her choice to live and work at Casa Juan Diego. She believes that by seeing the challenges faced by this vulnerable population firsthand, they also are exposed to the trials and rewards of the social work profession.

“I wouldn’t teach anywhere but UHD,” said McCarty. “Because of our university’s diversity and urban nature, our students aren’t afraid of tackling tough economic challenges and they embrace change as a way of life. I expect my students to leave UHD and become the leaders of the community agencies that partner with Casa Juan Diego on a daily basis. And I know that they will!”