

Esta vida triste, this sad life

Southwest Florida groups strive to deliver supplies, hope

By JANINE ZEITLIN

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Future is a concept that barely brushes tomorrow in rural Guatemala.

Girls' bellies bulge with babies when people would still consider them babies themselves. Mothers are as young as 10; the average woman will go on to have four more.

When teenagers in the U.S. are stressing about what to wear on their first dates, 15-year-old girls in Guatemala are in common-law marriages.

"If kids don't see a future, why not get married?" said Meira Neggaz, program director of WINGS, a family planning organization based in Guatemala that teaches about sexual health and offers birth control. "Just like it was in the U.S. in the 1950s ... If you've only reached sixth grade, there's nothing really stopping them from getting married and having kids."

Two organizations with ties to Southwest Florida - Miracles in Action and Adopt-a-Village in Guatemala - hope their work in Central America will improve lives and hinder the poverty that primes the country for trafficking.

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In rural Guatemala, success is getting through the next day or day after.

People often punctuate their sentences in these poor mountain villages with *esta vida triste*, this sad life, using those words like a period.

Mayan families who scrape enough together to pay for the pens, papers and uniforms for school are more apt to send boys than girls.

With futures tintured with suffering, Guatemalan girls give themselves to men who could be their grandfathers, hoping to set foot on American soil, residents say.

The worst that could happen often does.

Girls are forced to be sex or domestic slaves. Others are raped or abandoned, as told

in horror stories that filter back to the villages.

Human traffickers feed on those without options.

“What you need to do is to strengthen women and girls so they don’t feel they have no places to go and no options, and create a situation to gain some of their powers and have opportunities,” said Vivian Stromberg, executive director of MADRE, a New York-based human rights group that has worked in rural Guatemala since 1989.

About 80 percent of the estimated 800,000 people trafficked across international borders annually are women and girls and up to 50 percent are children, the U.S. State Department’s 2005 trafficking in persons report says.

The Guatemalan and U.S. governments and organizations are prescribing a host of remedies to fend off trafficking but many fear it will do little to hinder the crime.

Within a year, Guatemala hopes to launch a program in schools about trafficking dangers and weave a network of radio stations to broadcast similar messages.

An international nonprofit is training 18,000 police officers in Guatemala about trafficking.

Law changes are being proposed to provide protection for would-be victims and traffickers with tougher penalties.

Southwest Florida is an ideal spot to live for doing relief work in a country with canyon-sized needs, said leaders of both Adopt-a-Village and Miracles in Action. Guatemala is just a two-and-a-half hour flight from Miami.

Through education and projects to ease the day-to-day grind in their lives, volunteers with the nonprofit organizations want to make Guatemalans less vulnerable to traffickers.

“We’re hoping that by improving the quality of life in their own country, it would help them want to stay and not leave their family,” said Lois Werner, a 55-year-old administrative assistant who sits on the board of Miracles in Action, a Collier-based group.

“If we could educate them on that side of the world, then possibly they wouldn’t be so eager to come over here.”

Hope may be the most potent antidote to trafficking.

Adopt-a-Village in Guatemala

There’s one.

“France-ah.”

And another.

“France-ah, France-ah,” repeat the pair of Mayan children, peeking through the cracked window of the 2004 apple-red Toyota Land Cruiser.

A 64-year-old former Bonita Springs resident sits in the passenger’s seat.

Her white hair tossed in a bun, Frances Dixon is waiting for a driver of a pickup to change a tire that was pierced on this rocky road in the western highlands.

“These kids seem to know my name up here,” she said, digging into her bag for the hunks of bread she gives them.

Dixon, now a resident of North Miami beach, knows to expect the unexpected.

In 1991, she founded Adopt-a-Village in Guatemala, a group that for years was based in Bonita Springs and which still works in the poor, isolated region of Huehuetenango. A pair of possible trafficking victims in Southwest Florida are from this Guatemalan state.

The nonprofit agency is building a secondary school with vocational training. It’s slated to open in the spring.

On this summer afternoon when she got the flat tire on the rough terrain, Dixon and her driver were going to gauge the progress of the school’s construction.

Dixon carries a miracle-worker stature among the Mayans she stands heads above here. Her wide-brimmed straw hat is cocked to the side.

Most speak one of the 20-plus Mayan languages. Dixon relies on her staff to translate to Spanish.

They greet her as “Dona Frances,” or Mrs. Frances, and her staff escorts her like disciples.

When no one else dared, she was working in this region splattered by violence during the 36-year civil war that endured until 1996.

Rural Mayans here are among the most vulnerable to human trafficking because they are so eager to escape *esta vida triste*. They believe false promises that traffickers make to get them to the United States and become trapped as slaves instead.

After Dixon’s tire is replaced 30 minutes later, the trip is on.

Along the route, the Land Cruiser passes shoeless children with bellies swelling in hunger. Towns along this mountainous route are so cut off from society that people die without knowing how they got sick.

Medicines don't get there, but Coke products do.

Adopt-a-Village spent two years and \$125,000 cutting through the forest to build a road (few would consider it that) to the secondary school and money has been raised to finish the training center but the group needs more to build student housing and water and solar power system before classes can begin, Dixon said.

Volunteer housing - a cabin with bunk beds and a kitchen for supporters - near the secondary school site was built with donations from Rotary clubs in Southwest Florida and the morning Rotary Club of Bonita Springs, she said.

Educating Mayans, especially girls, for the future is one goal, Dixon said. This will give them options beyond housework, fields or emigrating illegally to the United States. Girls crossing into the United States in search of work are easy prey for traffickers, experts say.

"Culturally it's extremely difficult for the women. They're third-class citizens. They're on the bottom of the rungs," Dixon said of life for Guatemalan women. "I see them as being expected to be servants."

Only two of every 10 students in rural areas - where 60 percent of the school-age population lives - finish primary school, according to UNICEF. Relief workers in Guatemala estimate girls in rural Mayan villages are lucky to get three years of school.

This type of economic desperation in Huehuetenango makes the area enticing for traffickers.

People entrust their lives to smugglers. Smuggling can turn to trafficking if the smuggler doesn't let the person go free to work off the debt they accrued to hop the Mexico and U.S. borders.

One victim, Pedro Carmelo Juan, 48, is among los retornados, or returned Mayans, who came back to Huehuetenango after fleeing. He now does outreach for Adopt-a-Village and guards the agency's school property.

He left Guatemala in 1982 after getting word that the military was coming to burn his village, he said. He settled in a shack in a town in Chiapas, Mexico, where he was forced to construct roads in exchange for letting him stay there.

He wasn't paid for 10 years, he said.

He returned to Huehuetenango in 1991 to try to create a better future here. He's working with Adopt-a-Village and village leaders to push lawmakers to improve health care, education and the quality of life in his native country, he said.

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After a bone-rattling ride on the road Adopt-a-Village built, Dixon arrives at the source

of her new pride: the secondary school under construction.

It took three hours to arrive at the site from Dixon's home in the Land Cruiser, though it's only about 25 miles away.

The school will serve 30 villages.

Trudging through red clay, she gauges the progress of the skeletal wooden structure rising from the rain forest canopy. She sees promise in the spot graced by birds' songs, like in an aviary.

There would be the library, she said, pointing to open spaces in the rising structure, and rooms where girls could study midwife training and dental programs.

Brigido Berduo, her 32-year-old driver, leans near the Land Cruiser. He points to the mountains in view where smugglers and traffickers transport Guatemalans into Mexico. The Mexican border is less than 5 miles away.

"We need more teachers. We need more professionals," he said, estimating most villagers make about \$2 a day, mostly in farming. "The students from here could work inside, in an office and a job that wouldn't end up killing them."

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In the late-1980s, with the civil war raging, Dixon traveled to Guatemala on an adventure.

But she felt guilty toting her bottled water while touring villages where people were getting sick from drinking polluted water. So she pitched a mosquito net to sleep under and started to work there.

Her first project was a primary school built 10 years ago. It now serves about 25 families.

Yisenia Rivera, the 24-year-old teacher at the primary school Dixon built, said girls frequently drop out of school. Parents often pull them out.

"They suppose that the woman will be in the home, cleaning the house and taking care of the children in her relationship," she said. "They're waking up a little more but they believe the girls' value less."

Giving girls and women options will make them less vulnerable to traffickers who often tap their desperation to convince them to leave their native countries, advocates say.

Dixon has hope for girls now attending Adopt-a-Village schools.

"It's slow what we're doing," she said. "But we're doing something."

Miracles in Action

The girls refused the jump rope.

She offered them the handles.

She shooed the boys who tried to steal it.

Penny Rambacher, an East Naples resident who founded the Collier-based Miracles in Action, said the girls just shyly dropped the rope.

"I couldn't get the girls to do it so I finally just gave the jump rope to the boys," said Rambacher, a 48-year-old flight attendant who leads the nonprofit agency.

"They have no self-esteem, none," she said. "Women are the last on the totem pole."

The nonprofit organization corrals dollars for projects such as installing safe stoves that won't harm children, building schools, expanding a children's library and delivering wheelchairs.

Guatemalans may be less likely to risk their lives and trust traffickers if their basic needs are otherwise met, Miracles in Action volunteers say.

The nonprofit agency aims to shatter the idea of *esta vida triste* through projects to make life more bearable in Guatemala.

"I think they're closely related because the people over there in these villages, they really don't have much hope for helping their families or bettering their lives when they don't have running water or they don't have a good stove," said Werner, Miracles in Action board member.

"If we could make their village so good, they wouldn't want to leave."

Miracles in Action volunteers work with Sue Patterson to decide which projects to support with dollars from Southwest Florida donors.

Patterson is the founder of WINGS, the Guatemala-based organization that offers birth control. She also leads Behrhorst Partners for Development in Guatemala, which focuses on improving the health of rural Mayans.

She was consul general at the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala from 1989 to 1993.

"It's caused by desperation and lack of hope of a better life and by naiveté," Patterson said of trafficking. "It's an increasing problem because Guatemala's population is increasing significantly and jobs are not increasing and options are not increasing."

Traffickers are now coming to the country looking for victims, she said.

Rambacher's mother, Noreen, donated \$16,000 to build a primary school, School of

Miracles, and another \$5,000 to finish another primary school before she died.

At the school's January 2005 opening, her mother told the Mayan people to send their daughters to school.

"They think girls are good for cooking and cleaning and why does someone having babies need an education?" Penny said, referring to society's ideas here about women.

The group also tries to fortify Guatemalan female self-esteem through education, craft projects and selling their handicrafts.

Hope may be a strong remedy against trafficking, but it may also be hard to deliver.

"What choices do they have?" Rambacher said of Guatemalans who leave the country that these Southwest Florida residents are crusading to make better.



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