

Newsletter January 2015

In heartfelt appreciation to our friends, our brothers and sisters, and everyone whose kindness and support has touched us this year, we greet you with the spirit of the season. We pray God's blessings over your lives. We take this moment to wish you a Merry Christmas and the most blessed of New Year 2015.

As many of you know, it has been a year where we have been tasked, and honored to answer the call, of helping the numerous thousands of people that came through our doors. The various ministries of the Good Samaritan Project, in all their capacities, rose to the many challenges. Once again we were humbled by the incredible grace and humility displayed by our staff, our volunteers, and our visitors. As another year comes to a close, we recall the joys and hardships that were faced not only by our organization, but by our refugee brothers and sisters, whose journeys and experiences reminded us of the many reasons that we do what we do. We have been witness to the blessing that has poured forth as a result of answering that call.

This year saw a rise in the number of political refugees that came our way. We remain thankful that, due to our strong relationship with the local and state immigration offices, we were entrusted with many of the refugees released from their compounds. This often changed much of the dynamic related to the aid they required. There was a great need not only for the basics of human survival, but also for pro bono legal counsel. We were tasked beyond the norm of room and board, transportation, and spiritual outreach. Because of the differences within immigration laws based upon the different countries of origin of our refugees, the changing political climate, and the changing immigration laws, we were certainly kept on our toes. A great number of our refugees arrived fleeing political persecution, torture, prison and certain death. We also saw a considerable rise in the number of unaccompanied minors, mothers with minor children, and single adults. Particularly heartbreaking were the phone calls at all hours from desperate mothers, seeking the children they'd not heard from, hoping that they were in our care.

As always, it is an incredible honor to serve as a safe haven for our refugees. We are a literal place of physical, mental, and spiritual rest. So many come to us with more than just the need for survival, they arrive with the trauma of the journey. Recent cases have included a large number of Cuban balseros, rafters on homemade boats, lost at sea for weeks at a time. It is said that the dangerous waters of the Florida straits are "Cuba's personal burial ground", as statistics put the number of lives lost at a conservative estimate in the mid-hundreds of thousands. Many of the Cubans that arrive to us do so because the strong currents take them southward into Gulf waters, disorienting them, making it impossible to navigate. This, topped by extreme hunger and malnourishment, dehydration and hallucinations, and the drinking of their own urine for lack of water, constitutes for the fragile state in which they arrive. Many also set out farther south towards Mexico, Belize and Central America. Often, however, the rustic boats they travel aboard aren't sufficiently capable of bringing them to safety. Those that don't perish arrive on foreign shores with no inkling of where they are. Those that arrive alive are frightened, weary, and understandably, with nerves on edge. We make every effort to provide them not only with shelter, but with a listening ear and counseling. We are called to mourn with those who mourn, and often the mourning is great. The vast number of lives lost, and the guilt of survival often pose barriers to their new lives in a new land. We inadvertently become part of their healing, and it is something we do not take lightly. We have one particular Cuban young man that arrived to us via Mexico after being adrift at sea for 20 days. While his dream was of reaching American soil, there was much fear and trepidation. He'd heard horror stories of mistreatment of immigrants. He had been led to

believe that everyone that crossed the border into the United States was an unwelcome nuisance, a dreg of humanity, the most unwanted of the unwanted. He was told that everyone was racist and to expect mistreatment and physical violence. He shared with us that upon being detained, he was treated with kindness by the immigration authorities, and was fed. He was in shock at the grace and kindness that was shown to him. We are happy to report that he has been granted political asylum status, and is in the process of making certain all is in order to go forward and create a bright future. We remain blessed in the effectiveness of our outreach programs, which have seen expansion and growth in quite a number of areas. Of note, our Lilies of the Valley program for women has contributed to the growing skills of many local single mothers, widows, and ladies who have been unable to further their education. Classes include English as a Second Language (ESL), cooking, sewing, and general office skills. For all of them, this is serving to prepare them for the workforce, with the primary goal of making them self-supporting and sufficient. In addition to this ministry, the beautiful legacy of our beloved brother, the late Mike Sleight of the North Texas Area of the Southwest Region, continues to be carried out by his son Mark. In memory of his father, and his grandfather Hank Sleight, Mark tirelessly spearheads the annual toy drive that brings the needy children of South Texas, refugee and local, as well as the children of the orphanage across the border, Christmas gifts they would otherwise not have. This year the Good Samaritan Project was generously gifted upwards of 2,000 toys. The joy and delight in the faces of these children is always marked by their humble spirit, and Mike's Kids is an intrinsic part of making sure smiles are put on the faces of those precious little lives.

Speaking of our orphanage, Casa Hogar Bethel, we report that there are currently 43 children in residence. These are children that have been abandoned, abused, or placed because they were partially orphaned and the living parent was unable to care for them. The orphanage continues under the directorship of the wonderful Lorena Garza. Alongside the vital support of Good Samaritan, her leadership and excellent administration has been key in its longevity. I would like to share with you that the situation with Mexico's orphaned children is critical. The government does not apportion or allot monies for these institutions, and they must rely on organizations such as ours to carry out their work. In Mexico, a child's education is, in theory, "free" until the 6th grade. However, there are many costs incurred through uniforms, books and supplies during those years. Past the 6th grade, public education is tuition-based. We stand proud in our stance that no child at Casa Hogar Bethel is denied an education.

Our children receive scholarships through the 12th grade, and should a child wish to continue their education post high-school, we support them there, too. We do everything possible to secure them scholarships and benefactors, and allow that they continue to live at the orphanage through their university years. These children are so extraordinary and grateful, that we currently have three, whom of their own volition, are paying back the cost of their studies though they've been explicitly told this is not a requirement. It is an honor to help form the lives of these very deserving young men, women and children, and it is our heart's desire that you know how key each and every one of you are via your time, your prayers, your love and your donations.

Another of our Mexico-based ministries is a daily meal service to roughly 300 families that live in the immediate area surrounding the Matamoros land fill. These are families that have settled there intentionally, given that a method for their survival is the scrounging of the land fill for food. The indignity of the situation is met with proactive compassion in the form of the Rev. Abel Cardona and his wife Andrea. He is a local Matamoros-based minister that we support, and who stands at the helm of the 250 plates of food that are handed out daily in this community. The hunger is so extreme, that for most this is their one sure meal of the day. We are blessed to be able to support this outreach via the Disciples Rice program, so graciously donated primarily by churches of the Coastal Plains Area of the

Southwest Region. This year we were beneficiary to 45,000 lbs. of rice thanks to them, and 15,000 lbs. of beans from the Disciples Pinto Beans Program, graciously undertaken by multiple-Area churches throughout the Southwest Region, and many across the United States, including private individuals and churches. The grace we have seen as you've shared in our vision and its implementation encourages and lifts us.

It goes without saying how thankful we are for the new friends we make every year by way of the numerous youth and young adult groups that join us for their mission work trips. We enjoyed 20 groups this year. Every single Disciples group that came through was outstanding. Their willingness to repair and remodel homes for so many local people in need was genuine and sincere, that love was certainly felt. Even our complex benefitted from minor repairs, and we remain ever-indebted for the grace and goodwill in those great number of smiling, exhausted, and ready-to-help faces.

A very special thank you to the following group of people whose dedication, incessant support, love and prayers have carried us through the years:

- The Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, General Minister & President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), US & Canada
- General Office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Division of Homeland Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Office of Refugee & Immigration Ministries, Disciples Home Missions-CCDC
- Week of Compassion
- Southwest Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Raquel García, Administrative Assistant SWGSM (Retired)

In closing, I count the endless number of faces in my heart, and the trove of Good Samaritans that impacted our lives this year. In their willingness to donate time, money and goods; gracious, heartfelt calls and letters, I am reminded of the story of the Fourth Wise Man. Legend has it that there were originally four, not three, Wise Men enroute to meet Jesus on the night of his birth. The fourth Wise Man, however, got a late start because upon embarking this important journey, he stopped to help an ailing man along the way. By the time he caught up, the other three had already departed for Bethlehem. When he met up with them there, Mary and Joseph, fleeing King Herod, had just left for Egypt. So too, the Fourth Wise Man sets out for Egypt, but not before he, once again, stops along the road to help another person. He arrives only to find that the family has left for Nazareth. As so it went. The fourth Wise Man spends 33 years in pursuit of his Messiah, always one step behind because he'd stop to aid someone in need along the way. The story goes, though, that he did finally catch up to the Master. In Jerusalem. At the cross. And he realized in that moment that he had already met the Saviour-not at the manger, and not at the cross-but in the faces of all the people he'd stopped to help along the way. If you have done it to the least of these, my brothers, you have done it unto Me. (Matthew 25:40). May 2015 find us as living examples of that fourth Wise Man. May we, like the Wise Man and the Good Samaritan, never hesitate to help when help is needed.

Thank you for the grace and kindness that defined all of you this year. We invite you to join us once again at the table, and ask that you continue to be an integral and important part of the Good Samaritan family. We trust that the forthcoming New Year will be prosperous and blessed. You remain in our prayers.

Your brother in Christ,