

Ministry empowers Honduran girls for life

By Lynette Wilson, March 01, 2011



[Episcopal News Service – San Pedro Sula, Honduras] Ministerios Nuestras Pequeñas Roses began 25 years ago in a three-bedroom rental house in this gritty, factory town four hours from the capital, Tegucigalpa, because its founder, Diana Frade, recognized the need to educate and empower at-risk girls.

"I visited a boys' home in Tegucigalpa, and could see the girls on the street," said Frade, the founder, president and executive director of Ministerios Nuestras Pequeñas Roses, or [Our Little Roses](#) (OLR). "I thought, if the church is doing this for boys, why not for girls?"

Adhering to protocol, Frade introduced a resolution aimed at helping girls at a diocesan convention, but it failed -- but she'd already promised judges (the court system manages child placement in Honduras) in Tegucigalpa a home for girls. So with \$80,000 – part memorial gift, part matching grant – she rented a house and took in the first girl. By the end of the first year, there were 23 girls, a cook and two tias, or aunts, who at OLR handle the everyday needs, rearing and discipline of the girls living in the home, she said.

There are an estimated 200,000 orphaned children in Honduras, according to government statistics. Honduras, a Central America about the size of Tennessee, has a total population of about 8 million, close to 50 percent under the age of 18.

The first building, in Villa Florencia, was built in 1992 on property donated by the city's mayor on two conditions, Frade said: OLR would be the legal name and listed on the legal documents, and the buildings would be designed in the style of San Pedro Sula. The home came first, and then came the infrastructure -- water, sewer, electricity -- and the neighborhood, she added.

Today, OLR covers 2.5 acres in Colonial Villa Florencia, five minutes from the central city, and includes Holy Family Bilingual School, serving the surrounding community; a residential home, where currently 56 girls, toddlers to teens, live together with their tias; and an off-site transition home for girls who have left the residential home and who are working and/or studying at a university. OLR Ministries also includes a medical clinic, a dental clinic staffed by Dr. Jensey Maldonado, who came to OLR with her sister when she was 9, and a recently completed mountain retreat and conference center, Our Lady of the Roses, in Santa Barbara, about an hour outside the city. OLR also has a Spanish-language school, offering instruction for students and housing on a weekly basis.

It was United Thank Offering, Episcopal Church Women and Daughters of the King who backed OLR from the beginning and it has been women, who recognize that "when you educate women you can change the future," who have continued to support OLR, said Frade, who is married to the Rt. Rev. Leo Frade, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida.

"The women were so excited and got behind it," she said. "This ministry is really quite unique, putting women and girls first; when you put women and girls first, you're changing the generation to come."

OLR operates on a \$500,000 annual budget and is registered as a non-governmental organization in Honduras and as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) in the United States for fundraising purposes; it is not a project of the Episcopal Diocese of Honduras. The medical and dental clinic, Holy Spirit Bilingual School, the Spanish-language school and the retreat center are set up for self-sufficiency. OLR also has relied on individuals and parishes throughout the Episcopal Church, and also on ecumenical and Roman Catholic support. Over the years individuals and parishes have invested in the girls and their futures by providing sponsorships at \$720 a year.

The medical and dental clinics provide fee-based services to the community and Holy Family students pay tuition. The school grew out of a nursery school that was started by volunteers.

"You can't turn your back on the community; your ministry must project and be a part of the community," said Frade, referring to the neighborhood's request for a school. Of the 220, students enrolled in Holy Family, 200 come from the neighborhood and 20 from the girls' home. The other girls attend nearby public schools.

The long-running economic recession in the United States has affected OLR's operating budget, with donations and sponsorships declining. And changes in the country's leadership -- the military forced the former president to leave in 2009 -- have decreased the number of parish and diocesan groups participating in the hospitality ministry.

Family life

There is a pattern to life at the girls' home, which shares the campus with Holy Family School -- including all the things you might expect -- shared meals, homework, Saturday tutoring, fútbol practice and games, playtime, crafts, pizza nights, computers, chores done in exchange for television privileges, laundering of school uniforms, and church on Sunday (there also is a chapel on-site). The home is designed in a square, with a courtyard and fountain in the middle

The older girls help with the younger girls. Each has her own unique tragic, often horrific, story, and each girl receives the help she needs to get on with life.

From the beginning, Frade has demanded that the people working at OLR take the attitude that it doesn't matter where the girls come from, or what their past has been.

"Each has their story, and each is blessed," Frade said. "They know that God loves them and sent them to a home that is providing them with the best of everything for their future. That's how they are able to keep going.

"[Whatever happened] that's in the past, it doesn't make any difference any more. Let's move forward."

The first thing to happen when a girl comes to OLR is she is given a bath, her hair is cleaned up, and she gets new clothes.

"We start from the outside and work in," Frade said, adding that the girls also work with psychologists and counselors.

Forty girls from OLR have graduated from high school with many of them going to university. Some have studied law or engineering; many have become social workers, teach in the school or work in the home, and many remain involved in the ministry. Dr. Jensey Maldonado, 25, the dentist, runs the new nearby dental clinic and is in charge of the group home.

When she moved into the home, Maldonado said, it took some time to settle into the rhythm of the home and having to share the tia's attention with other girls, but she adjusted. She spent 15 years there, and she now lives in a transitional home while she completes her 12-month dental internship and gets the clinic off the ground.

"When I came, there were 37 girls and I wanted that personal attention from someone, but things just go on and you adjust," she said. "And the girls have a lot of privileges and opportunities, an education, good medical care, good food, things that a lot of people don't have."

When Maldonado made the decision to study dentistry, she had to prove to Frade that she really wanted it. While she went to school, she worked nights at OLR, helping the little ones with homework, getting them ready for the next day, bathing them and putting them to bed around 9 p.m., and then it was time for her to study, she said.

"Now I can appreciate what I've done; it took a lot," she said during an interview at the dental clinic. "It took me a while to understand what Ms. Diana wanted me to do. Now I understand."

Extended family

Hospitality plays an important part in OLR's ministry, where the extended family model is applied, with groups visiting and staying on the OLR campus.

"The more people involved in the girls' lives, the better," Frade said. "It is healing to have people who help to lift them up. It gives them someone to write a Christmas card to ... these are children who've lost the nuclear family.

Larry and Jo Hodgin, members of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Annandale, Virginia, first visited OLR in 2003 at the urging of the church's then-priest associate, the Rev. Lauren Stanley.

"She said, 'You need to go to Honduras,'" Jo Hodgkin said, adding that since that first visit, she and her husband visit OLR, on average, twice a year, most recently the week of Feb. 21. They also lead group visits from their parish.

"We made a commitment that we would be like aunts and uncles ... extended family," she added. "They are like little magnets -- they keep drawing us back."

Larry Hodgkin described his commitment to the girls this way: "I asked myself, as a dad, would I want that happening to my daughters? We keep coming back to let them know that we do care for them," he said.

In addition to regular visits, the Hodgkins are on their second sponsorship. And OLR has become part of their family. The Hodgkins have two grown daughters, one of whom has visited OLR, and two grandchildren.

"Being involved with OLR has enriched us as a family," Jo Hodgkin said, adding that instead of adults in the family exchanging Christmas gifts, they make a donation to OLR.

The OLR campus is surrounded by concrete walls and electric fencing, a common sight in San Pedro Sula, and for the girls, visitors are a welcome distraction.

"The girls enjoy when groups come," Maldonado said. "We are all inside walls ... when groups come our routine changes; we get to know and make connections with people.

"Some of them love us like their own kids," she said.

-- Lynette Wilson is an editor/reporter of Episcopal News Service. She recently spent a week at Our Little Roses Spanish-language school.