

The History of Hogar San Pablo Orphanage

Overlooking the beautiful bay of Olas Altas, Hogar San Pablo Orphanage is located on Paseo de Centenario, a street atop Mazatlán, Mexico's most southern hill, Cerro del Vigia.

Now a boys' orphanage, at one time, the property was a Carmelite convent. The nuns who once resided there maintained a medical dispensary for impoverished Mazatlecos (Mazatlán citizens).

In 1975, Hurricane Olivia slammed into Mazatlán with such force it virtually destroyed the convent. The frightened nuns abandoned the site for another location and for several months, the property remained vacant.

About that time, Father Pedro Tovar Cortes, a kind and gentle Catholic priest who has devoted much of his life to caring for abandoned street children – specifically boys – was praying and searching for a location where he could create a home for the growing number of youngsters residing in his modest parish home.

A prayerful stroll one day took the goodly Father up Cerro del Vigia where he saw the remains of the once-flourishing convent. This was the answer to his prayers and searching! Immediately, Fr. Tovar knew this was where he would establish his boys' home, the destiny of his life's devotion.

The Catholic church gladly allowed use of the devastated buildings and land for Fr. Tovar's orphanage but for years, the finances to feed, clothe and educate the boys as well as maintain the property in a sanitary fashion would plague the gentle priest.

With a little help from friends and acquaintances, Father Tovar slowly began the never-ending endeavor of making Hogar (Spanish for "family life" and "hearth") San Pablo (Spanish for "St. Paul") habitable for abandoned boys who, prior to Fr. Tovar coming into their lives, never knew family life or an authentic father figure.

When Fr. Tovar first established his orphanage, the sons of convicts sentenced to the penal colony Islas Marias located 90 miles south and offshore from Mazatlán, were sent to Hogar San Pablo. Although the inmates are allowed to have their families live with them, initially there were no schools at the penal colony. Father Tovar opened his heart and orphanage to those boys as a place to live, enabling them to attend school on the mainland. When schools were finally built for the children of inmates at Islas Marias, Fr. Tovar established his Hogar San Pablo as a home solely devoted to boys he rescues from the streets.

Hogar San Pablo houses between 25 and 40 boys, usually ranging in age from 9 to 20 years old. The orphanage compound consists of two dormitories with 24 beds each, three dormitory-style bathrooms and showers, a dining

room, kitchen, reading and computer room, family room, one-time basketball court, laundry, chapel, Fr. Tovar's office which adjoins his bedroom and the living quarters for the nuns that are located just off the kitchen and dining room area.

One of the nuns, Sister Amalia, is Father Tovar's primary assistant.

She shares that the boys have special needs; the most immediate is getting an education.

"In Mexico," she explains, "you cannot attend school unless you can produce a birth certificate. Many of the children here don't have one. The second problem is that having lived on the streets so long, some cannot read or write, even at age 13 or 14."

The nuns provide educational beginnings, from basic reading and writing to shop mechanics. When they lack the expertise needed in a given area, they search for knowledgeable volunteers to help. For boys attending school, Fr. Tovar gives them a school allowance — 5 pesos (approximately fifty-cents) a day for primary students and 20 pesos (approximately \$2.00) for high school students. With this "allowance," the boys pay for their bus fares and school snacks. Several of Father Tovar's boys have attended college and returned home to Hogar San Pablo to visit.

Now in his 70s, Father Tovar shares that his health has begun to fluctuate. That does not deter him, however, as he still devotes the majority of each day to tending to the boys' needs.

In 2003, Tres Islas Orphanage Fund donors Bob and Janet Schmitt, who help purchase food for the orphanages each week, toured Hogar San Pablo and discovered the deplorable living conditions — including the lack of consistent nourishing food. They immediately contacted the founder of the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund, requesting the Fund please help purchase food for Hogar San Pablo just like the Fund assists Orfanatorio Mazatlán and the Salvation Army Orphanage.

While Fr. Tovar's friends pay the utilities, water bills and property taxes as best they can and several Mazatlán organizations and individuals give sporadic assistance by way of clothing and bedding donations, finding nourishing food each week for between 25 and 40 boys was a significant challenge.

Thus begun another rewarding relationship between Tres Islas donors and its' fourth Mazatlán orphanage.

Thanks to the benevolence of its donors, each week the Fund purchases \$100.00 U.S. dollars of food for the boys.

Sister Amalia recently said, "Thanks to Tres Islas donors, for the first time in 17 years, we now plan a nourishing menu each day for the boys."

"Before Tres Islas began helping the orphanage," she continued, "there were more times than not when there was little or no food and certainly, not a nourishing amount each day like there is now."

Also in 2003, thanks to Bob and Janet Schmitt calling the plight of Hogar San Pablo to the attention of Tres Islas Orphanage Fund, all donors were

asked to help restore the orphanage, which had not been in good-shape since the hurricane hit in 1975.

The underground storm sewer had broken and sewage flowed randomly on the property, windows were broken because of the hurricane and rusted open – allowing rain, rats, flies and cockroaches to enter at any point, floors lacked tile and allowed entrance for cockroaches and rats, only a few toilets flushed and those had to have water poured into them to force them to flush, many showers didn't work, the oven and stovetop burners didn't work properly and did not cook food efficiently, it also cost more to cook food due to their lack of efficiency; the freezer and refrigerator didn't work properly, tiled counter tops were bacteria-laden, all the roofs leaked, there was no furniture nor study tables in the family room, the orphanage needed paint and the boys had no designated play area.

Thanks to the generous benevolence of Tres Islas Orphanage Fund donors, all that has changed. For two years, necessary health, safety and welfare updates have taken place at the orphanage under the voluntary direction and excellent business guidance of Mazatlán resident Lenda McKay, without whom the project would not have been completed and certainly not in the excellent, quality fashion it was done. Lenda secured the volunteer time and expertise of Mazatlán's highly respected and talented architect, Armando Galzon, to restore the orphanage. Armando and Lenda made sure every improvement was completed per spec and implemented with the highest standards of building codes. Also each week, Bob and Janet Schmitt, Tres Islas Orphanage Fund facilitators, verified the work at Hogar was completed as outlined and wrote the Tres Islas checks to pay for the work completed.

The underground storm sewer has been completely repaired and now no-longer leaches on the orphanage grounds.

The once bacteria-filled kitchen has been replaced with a commercial-grade stainless steel kitchen, including stainless-steel counter tops and complete, for the first time, with a hot water heater so dishes may be sanitized when washed. It also boasts a new refrigerator and the freezer and oven have been repaired. Two new stovetops and a kitchen exhaust fan have been installed as well as new ceramic floors and walls throughout.

The majority of roofs have been sealed with three coats of roofing sealant and no longer leak. All doors now have screens and properly open and shut. The floors are all tiled and cockroaches no longer have access to rooms. The majority of broken and rusted-open windows have been repaired.

The family room is painted and for the first time, the boys have couches and chairs to sit on, foot stools to rest their feet on as well as an area rug and pillows to snuggle on and tables and chairs on which they may do homework or play games.

And, for the first time, Fr. Tovar has a chair to sit in which has decent back support and arm rests to help him get in and out of, where before, he needed assistance from a cane or a helping hand.

Thus far, \$13,000.00 U.S. dollars has been donated by Tres Islas donations and has been spent upgrading the orphanage.

Yet remaining are door jams and cupboards throughout which need replacing due to termite infestation, the front doors and some windows in the church need replacing as well as a few miscellaneous windows. Most important to the boys is their need of a designated play area.

While there is a basketball court, there are no hoops or bleachers and over the years, cement from various projects has been dumped in the “back yard” – forbidding any type of play area for the boys such as basketball, soccer or baseball.

The estimate for the remainder of the needed repairs is \$7,000 U.S. dollars.

In addition to the monetary contributions by Tres Islas donors to make repairs, once a year Tres Islas donors gather in Mazatlán in what has become known as the “Sisters-and-Brothers-By-Heart” spring volunteer restoration mission, a hands-on restoration.

Tres Islas donor Laura Morrow, who organizes and spearheads the annual May event, brought this to fruition. From much-needed painting to sealing of roofs to making electrical repairs and re-grouting, Tres Islas donors gather for one week each May to improve life at the orphanages and work one-on-one with the children of the orphanages. The children are always eager to assist and learn a new trade, such as how to paint. Most important, the children love the attention and value the time donors spend with them. Language is no barrier: smiles and laughter are the same in any language.

The Tres Islas Orphanage Fund needs your help. We invite you to participate in continuing to improve the boys’ lives.

A minimum of \$100.00, and preferably \$150.00 U.S. dollars is needed each week to feed the boys nourishing food. The boys want to learn to speak English. English is not taught as an elective in Mexican schools, but rather, must be learned (and paid for) outside regular schooling. And, you’re invited to participate in the annual restoration trek each May.

The benevolent local Legion organization donates 1500 pesos (approximately \$150.00 U.S. dollars) quarterly and Friends of Mexico, a Mazatlán charitable organization comprised of Americans and Canadians living in Mazatlán, donates school uniforms and supplies.

Your help is needed every day and in many ways. Because 100-percent of all donations made to the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund go to feed and help the children in Mexico’s orphanages with nothing taken out for administration, you may deduct your entire donation on your U.S. taxes.

Thus far, approximately \$140,000.00 U.S. dollars has been devoted to helping orphaned children in Mazatlán, Mexico, including Orfanatorio Mazatlán, Hogar San Pablo, the Salvation Army Children’s Home and Alburgue Infantil.

Please feel welcome to make a positive difference in a child's life by sending your tax-deductible donations to:

Tres Islas Orphanage Fund
3717 Monroe Avenue
Cheyenne, WY 82001

We'd appreciate you visiting the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund website at www.orphanagefunds.org or, phone the Fund at 1-888-459-TIOF – TIOF for Tres Islas Orphanage Fund – (1-888-459-8463) to learn how you can make the difference of a lifetime.

With your help, Hogar San Pablo will always be a safe, welcoming haven for the street kids of Mazatlán.

Thank you and May God Bless!