

The knock at the door

First orphanage of its kind in Mexico will provide a life of dignity

– By Donelle Manton

It may be difficult to imagine, and not something the average person thinks about when they arrive in the paradise Mazatlan offers, but annually, over 32,000 children between the ages of 8 and 12 are victims of sexual abuse and commercial trafficking in Mexico, according to the July 2008 issue of *Proceso* magazine. That's a staggering increase from nine years ago when a UNICEF study revealed 20,000 children were sexually abused in Mexico. In Latin America, that amount soars to 2 million children forced, sold into prostitution or sexually abused in their homes.

As the director of Orfanatorio Mazatlan, Mazatlan's first orphanage that began in the early 1900s, Cristina Pena de Herrera knows the situation all too well. Well, enough, that it prompted her to do something about it.

"These girls have been knocking at our door the last couple of years wanting us to help them," Pena explains. Since that first knock at the door, Pena says, "More and more girls have come to us asking for help, for protection, to come in."

Although Pena and her board of directors welcomed the girls, they realized the circumstances weren't optimum.

Citing the abused girls "destroyed childhoods," Pena says, "These girls need to talk about what happened to them, to clear their souls of these tragic experiences. They need psychological assistance to help them sort through everything because they cannot keep the terrible acts that happened inside of them."

"At the same time," Pena shares, "the innocent children living in the orphanage who haven't suffered these terrible types of abuse, should not hear about these things. For them to hear about these horrible acts frightens and introduces them to information they don't need or deserve to know."

Pena kept thinking someone else would step forward to create the orphanage needed for the girls but no one did and the girls kept knocking on the door.

Last summer, Pena realized she could wait no longer. She contacted women she'd worked with on various philanthropic projects whose professional backgrounds would lend them to support such an orphanage.

It didn't take much convincing for 15 women to step forward, including Gabriella Perez Jimenez de Rojo who will serve as president, Carmen Magana Valdez de Banda, secretary and Eloisa Torres de Sarabia, treasurer. Pena will serve as vice-president.

A building in south Mazatlan was offered rent-free for two years so a home could be started for the girls. While considerable improvements are necessary to convert the building into an inhabitable home, many of the improvements made will be moved to a permanent home once one is found.

The board is appealing for help to support the new orphanage, which they expect to house 14 girls. They are starting from scratch and need everything to set up the girls' new home.

The Tres Islas Orphanage Fund has received donations to purchase the girls' food for the first six months and provided two sets of new sheets for each of the beds, a six-month supply of shampoo, conditioner, toothbrushes, toothpaste and soap.

The board has received several items, including a refrigerator, washing machine, mattresses and ceiling fans from Mazatlan residents.

To help, contact Pena in Mazatlan at 105-5100 or 0446699180670, by email at floreser.iap@hotmail.com. If you want your donation to be tax-deductible in the U.S., visit the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund website at www.orphanagefunds.org printout a donation form, designate your contribution for the new orphanage and mail it to the address on the donation form. One hundred percent of all donations are used to help the children, with nothing taken for administration.

Providing the orphanage a meaningful name was paramount to the board. In Spanish, the name FloreSer means to flower, blossom, thrive and flourish. It was a unanimous decision FloreSer would be the best name for the inspiration will represent to each girl as she enters her new home – a place, Pena says, “that will allow each girl to live a life with dignity.”

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