

S.O.S. Children's Village in Honduras, Central America raises abandoned children

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August 1977



Sister Margaret with abandoned infant Note: This baby was found in the garbage

"Francisco was found in the garbage on the street when he was only a few days old," explains Sister Margaret, as she cradles a very tiny, frail looking baby in her arms.

The room is small, but clean and bright. About fifteen other infants are resting in neatly arranged rows of cribs. There is no sound of crying, or of laughter. These are abandoned children.

The country is Honduras, Central America. The room is part of a children's shelter referred to as the "S.O.S. Children's Village." The children have been abandoned by parents who, either for economic or personal reasons, couldn't or wouldn't raise them and were unable to provide a family which could give the love, security, nourishment and guidance the children need.

If it weren't for the work of the S.O.S. Children's Villages, many Honduran boys and girls would be left to an uncertain and probably miserable fate. It is not uncommon to see 8-year-old boys (Sometimes even younger) sleeping on the sidewalks of downtown Tegucigalpa, their only bed a piece of cardboard -- or at best, an old cardboard box.

Irresponsible parenthood

In a country where more than 50 percent of born out of wedlock, irresponsible parenthood is one of the most serious problems. Many fathers abandon their wives and children, leaving the family in a state of disintegration and without financial support. The breakdown of the family unit in Latin America is one of the major causes of many social problems such as juvenile delinquency, drug abuse and the disorientation of young people. It is a problem which demands an urgent solution.

One woman found an answer. That woman is Sister Maria Rosa, a Franciscan nun known to many Hondurans as "The Angel of the Poor" because of her accomplishments for abandoned children in Honduras.

She, too, was an orphan

Born Maria Rosa Leggol and orphaned at an early age, Sister Maria Rosa herself has experienced what it is like to grow up alone without the love and support of a family. From the age of 11, she lived with a group of Franciscan nuns in Comayagua. It was there that she took vows herself, and joined the Franciscan order. After studying nursing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Sister Maria Rosa returned to

Honduras and began working in the Policlínica Hospital in Comayagua. It was there that she took her first steps to establish a program to help Honduran young people.

Almost without money, she received the first infant. Marco Antonio was a newborn baby whose mother had died several days after his birth. Sister Maria Rosa fixed up a makeshift cradle and secretly cared for him in the hospital.

Soon afterward, she received financial backing from a group of Tegucigalpa businessmen, and purchased eight homes in Miraflores, a nearby suburb, where she received the next 14 children. She had found them living in Central Penitentiary with their parents, who were serving prison terms.

From that time on, the project grew and grew until today, when more than 1,000 boys and girls -- from infants to 18-year-olds -- live in the S.O.S. Children's Villages.



"Mother" with "brothers and sisters" in one of the village homes

A substitute home

The basic philosophy of these shelters is to provide a home-like atmosphere for orphaned or abandoned children. Instead of living in large barracks or institutional buildings, each child lives in a small modern "home" with eight to ten "brothers and sisters" and a substitute "mother" who cooks and cares for the "family." There is also an "aunt" present to assist the "mother" and help with household chores.

The Honduran program is affiliated with S.O.S. Kinderdorf International, which was founded in Austria and now has branches all over the world including Viet Nam, Bangladesh and the United States. It is a new concept in dealing with abandoned children. The directors of this program feel that in a family-like environment, the orphaned child can receive affection, emotional security, individual attention and the chance to develop his own personality and potential.

Like a little town

Kennedy Village, where most of the children are housed, is the largest children's village of its kind in the world. (The second largest is in Viet Nam.) It is like a little town with its own government. Located in a lower-middle-class suburb, its 40 homes are quite similar to the surrounding dwellings. If anything, the children's houses are brighter and more modern.

Substitute mothers are carefully selected and receive a special training course. In addition, each "mother" has constant access to the advice of specialists including a doctor, psychologist, priest and the program director. The staff members of Kennedy Village feel that the S.O.S. program is better than adoption for many children because of the constant supervision and the availability of experts who can help with the children's emotional problems.

It is very difficult to find suitable adoptive homes for abandoned children. Often the new family becomes discouraged by initial problems and, in some cases, even renounces custody of the child. This new rejection is overwhelming for the youngster, who soon loses all trust in adults.

A second adoption can prove even more disastrous. Finally, when the child is considered "difficult to educate," he is sent to a reform school.

S.O.S. children attend neighborhood public schools, which gives them an opportunity to make friends and prepare for a future career. In the village, they participate in group activities such as the Boy Scouts, Glee Club, Orchestra, Repair Crew and Sewing Workshop.

A second S.O.S. Village in Choloma was severely damaged during hurricane Fifi three years ago. The town of Choloma itself was completely destroyed by a flash flood. Miraculously, however, all of the children and personnel were rescued and the S.O.S. Village temporarily became an emergency center for hurricane victims. There are now 142 children living in Choloma Village. Vegetable gardens and animal raising help to defray food expenses.

Still another project is the S.O.S. Campesino (Peasant) Village in the Zamorano Valley, which began only two years ago. Under the supervision of a married couple, 16 boys found on the streets of Tegucigalpa are receiving new orientation in life and are being trained in agriculture. Activities include cultivation of fruit trees and vegetable gardens. To help finance the village, they plan to raise pigs and chickens. The boys are also learning beekeeping to produce honey.



Carpentry workshop for boys in Miraflores, Honduras

Career preparation

S.O.S. boys and girls are given the chance to prepare for a future career in a variety of apprentice workshops. These include: shoemaking, auto-mechanics, carpentry, wood-carving, plumbing, painting, tailoring, and sewing and cooking for the girls. The shoemaking workshop produces all the shoes for S.O.S. children some 2,000 pairs a year.

Esperanza Home (Home of Hope) is a big house where mothers live with their own children. Sister Maria Rosa feels that, if possible, the family unit should not be spilt up. Many children are abandoned for financial reasons. They come from houses abandoned by the father, who has left the mother and children without any means of support.

Esperanza Home was established to educate and motivate abandoned mothers so that they can re-enter society. At the same time that they are being rehabilitated, these women help in daily household chores, care for their own children and work to help support the project. Several small businesses were started right in the Home itself, including the fabrication of tortillas, tamales and peanut butter, and dressmaking. Courses in reading and writing are also given.

At a cost of half a million dollars a year (or \$50 per child) the S.O.S. Children's Villages in Honduras are giving new life to many young people. Supported by money from both Honduras and abroad, the program has now been in operation for 10 years.