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Kids Alive Guatemala: Caring for Children in Crisis

Kids Alive International is a non-governmental organization that specializes in caring for at-risk children around the world. The organization began in 1916 when a missionary couple in China, Rev. Leslie Anglin and his wife Ava, began to care for Chinese orphans in Shantung Province. Since then Kids Alive has become an international organization, caring for 6,500 children in 17 countries. The organization works with “children at risk” (“Kids Alive International”). By this they mean children who are orphaned and children who have been abused and neglected. The mission of Kids Alive International is to care for the physical, emotional, psychological, educational, and spiritual needs of children.

Kids Alive is not an organization that tries to fit one model of care to each country in which they work. Each country and situation is unique and is treated as such by the organization. They are a child-centered organization and tailor their work to the needs of the children. Their work in one country may be a children’s home and in another a school. In Guatemala, Kids Alive staff work with about 100 children in two different locations. They run a children’s home which offers residential care to 40 girls and they also run a non-residential care center which focuses on providing educational support and medical care for about 60 children in the village of Zapote (“Zapote”).

The girls’ home, called The Oasis, is located in the village of Chicaman, close to the town of San Lucas Sacatepequez, about 45 minutes from Guatemala City. In keeping with the

mission of Kids Alive to provide holistic care, the site consists of five houses where 40 girls, ages 3 to 18, live in family-style homes with Guatemalan house parents; 8 girls and a house-parent couple live in each house. The organization believes that Guatemalan children should be brought up by Guatemalans and while there are staff members from the US and England, the girls are primarily cared for by Guatemalans. There are also two “independence houses” on the site, where girls who are over 18 can live and participate in a special program to help them transition to an independent lifestyle. These young women are able to work, to take college courses, and to receive special classes in managing their finances and living independently (“Oasis”).

The girls who are cared for at The Oasis are girls who have been orphaned, abused and neglected. Most have been taken from their parents by the courts, primarily because of physical abuse or because their parents are drug addicts and cannot take care of them. They come to The Oasis malnourished, ill, physically and emotionally battered. They are brought into a loving, nurturing environment with structure, respect, and love. The work of the caregivers, both Guatemalan and foreign, is extremely difficult. Besides dealing with physical illnesses and malnutrition, staff must provide emotional and psychological healing for girls who, many times, resent being taken away from their families. As dysfunctional and abusive as their families may be, they are what the girls know.

Education is one of the most important aspects of the care that Kids Alive Guatemala provides. Most of the girls have never attended school and many have learning disabilities due to their mothers’ alcohol and drug abuse during pregnancy. Until 2006 the girls attended a private school in San Lucas, but most were not thriving. Their learning and behavioral disorders meant that they needed specialized educational opportunities. After much discussion it was

decided in 2005 that The Oasis would begin an on-site school. Patricia Hoeksema, a staff member who was a teacher in her “former life,” as she puts it, was made the new educational director (Hoeksema). She wasted no time in deciding upon a curriculum and hiring teachers. The girls began attending classes at the new school in January 2006 and it has been a great success.

I became involved with the organization in 2004 when I volunteered to do after-school tutoring with 4 girls. In 2005 I was promoted to Head Librarian at the school where I work and the increased work load made volunteering very difficult. I continued to support the organization in a limited capacity and kept in touch with many of the girls who had come to mean so much to me.

In 2007 the director of KAG, Jennifer Stead de Herrera, contacted me asking me to be part of a very special project. She had written a grant proposal to start a library for the school and had been granted \$25,000. She was thrilled but had no idea what to do with the funds! Jenny, Patricia and I met many Saturdays to design a library that would best suit the educational needs of the girls. We designed book shelves and furniture for the library. We created use policies and purchased a cataloging system. We decided on a classification system that made sense for their needs and ordered many thousand dollars in books. With the books we ordered and donations received, the library now has a collection of about 2,000 books.

Though the collection is small it is serving well the needs of the girls at The Oasis. They are able to use the resources to complete independent research projects and further their studies at school. They are also enjoying reading for pleasure, most for the first time in their lives. Patricia says she loves watching the older girls find time to read books with the younger girls in their house. What the girls need now, she says, is a librarian to teach them how to care

for the books, how to find non-print resources and evaluate the information they are finding. They have made a wonderful start, but there is more work to be done.

She believes that with a good education the girls will become confident in their abilities and able to “communicate and understand the world around them” (Hoeksema). They will be able to get good jobs and break the cycles of abuse from which they have been rescued. Through education, counseling, unconditional love, and daily care, they will be able to realize their dreams and become leaders in Guatemala.

Works Cited

Hoeksema, Patricia. Personal Interview. 16 February 2009.

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“Zapote Care Center.” *Guatemala*. Kids Alive International, 2009. Web. 16 February 2009.