



El Paso Groups Continue to Provide Homes, Meals and More to Area's Needy

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I am sitting in the church-slash-cafeteria of La Iglesia La Santa Biblia de Ciudad Juarez in Anapra; a bustling neighborhood just across the border from El Paso's Westside and Santa Teresa, New Mexico.

The room is full of rambunctious boys and girls, eating lunch. For some, it's the only meal they will have today. The teachers try hard to quiet them so a group of visitors may deliver a lecture. The lecture – given by a group of psychologists – covers grief, and the loss of family members. Sadly, many of these children know loss and grief all too well.

Yet here, children are happy and having fun. They enjoy their days here. Learning, playing, and getting to know the wider community around them. Over the noise, you can hear hammers, saws, and American voices.

Not too far from the room, a group from East Lansing, Michigan, is building a small house. It will be the first house that family has ever had. This church group has been here before, building houses.

Above the laughter and saws, another, more ominous sound now dominates the landscape: an Immigration and Customs Enforcement Helicopter flying just above the border fence; itself a little more than seventy-five feet from the school.

With all the noise and action, I turn inward and ask: *What has brought all of us to Juarez?*

A few years ago, I was working at Mt. Carmel Cemetery out on Zaragoza. Most days – because of where I lived – I would walk to and from work. It was during these walks that I discovered an older collection of buildings, and a church. All painted white.

Most days it would look as if nothing was going on. The parking lot held a few cars, and that was it. From time to time an 18-wheeler should show up, and unload a shipment of boxes, furniture, and more.

But, there were other days where the parking lots were jammed with cars. So many, that they would often spill out into the streets, and park wherever there was space. Oh, and the people!

There were people everywhere. They were lining up at two buildings, collecting bags, and boxes. They were going in and out of an orange-ish building. There were even doctors and nurses talking to people. Every other Saturday, as I walked to work, this beehive of activity would greet me.

Then, from time to time, there would be two, or three vans, full of people, loading up, and heading out. I was curious. It's that kind curiosity that one has to give in to, and follow.

The church is San Pablo Lutheran Church. The mission that operates out of the same location is Ysleta Lutheran Mission (YLM) Human Care. I would come to learn that the motto, for the latter, is "Changing Lives Through Simple Acts of Kindness." The mission implied in that motto is one they strive to live, and accomplish every day.

Rev. Stephen Heimer, one of the directors of YLM says that it is a faith-based, non-profit organization that reaches out to meet people where they are at – in their time of need – on both sides of the border. Just from watching, they do work hard to meet those needs.

"We address the needs people have," he went on, "Body, mind, spiritual."

He explained to me that groups of individuals will come down, for a week at a time, and work on projects, such as building homes in Juarez. Other times, they will work on projects the community has identified: building a carport for an ambulance, or additions to buildings. The aim is to serve the community.

“One thing that sets us apart from other servant event organizations, is we don’t take a cookie cutter approach,” Rev. Stephen says. “A group gives us a call, and we have these skills, and want to use them to help, then we will find a place for them to serve.”

Doing what he could is what Dr. Gary Kanemura, DDS, who spent a week addressing the dental needs of individuals in both El Paso and Juarez. To do it, Dr. Kanemura traveled to the region from California.

YLM works hard to help, and connect to others in Juarez, and the Texas colonias, like Sparks.

Living out that mission is a collective effort, says Rev. Dr. Karl Heimer. “It takes all of us to help.” He’s right. What YLM, and San Pablo does, is not just a localized effort, or mission. It is global.

“It’s important to help people, because they need help,” says Dr. Heimer. “There is no philosophical reason. If someone asks for help. Do what you can.”

Above all, YLM strives to meet the physical, and spiritual needs of the communities it serves. There are weekly food baskets. A daily hot meal program. They also host RotaCare, and the doctors from Texas Tech for a weekly, free medical clinic.

Even toys and coats are given at Christmas.

They also host “servant events.” These are groups of people, from all over, who come to the area to build houses or provide care.

So, I’m in Juarez, witnessing the work first hand.

I spoke with Anyssa Schember and Matt Champion, group leaders from Martin Luther Chapel from East Lansing, Michigan. I asked them why it was important for them to come to El Paso and Juarez, to build houses. Matt answered the question. “I think it’s important because to these people a simple house means so much to them.” Anyssa agreed.

“The person we are building the house for, this is their first house,” Matt said. And as the group worked, the woman that was receiving the house was there, doing what she could to help. You could see the excitement in her eyes, and the way she carried herself.”

Ivonne, the woman receiving the house, says it will give her, and her family a sense of stability, of belonging.

On average, for the past fifteen years, YLM has coordinated the building of 26 homes per year; that number – at times – has increased to 40 a year, depending on the help and supplies available.

Speaking with a woman and her daughter, I learned that if they were not able to receive the food baskets provided by the Mission, they would not be able to make ends meet. But the help goes beyond food, as well.

“It’s the doctors,” said Jose (who asked that I not use his real first name) “The doctors and the box of food. Because if these peoples [sic] I am still alive. I can’t make money because my health...I can’t pay for doctors and most foods. This is God working.”

Jose says that he was diagnosed with diabetes, hypertension, and gout. He credits YLM and RotaCare with saving his life.

In the RotaCare Clinic, the waiting room is full; and while they’re open Saturday’s from 9am until noon, the patient list fills quickly. In this neighborhood, this is the only free clinic. It is also the only way many receive any sort of medical care.

Speaking with Betty Gallegos, RN, the manager of the clinic, I learned the history of the RotaCare clinic at YLM. The clinic is both a service of the Downtown Rotary Club, and a way to mark their 100-year anniversary in 2014- it’s the first RotaCare Clinic to open in Texas.

The clinic provides basic medical care. “It’s a stop-gap measure,” Betty says. When a patient visits them, they will connect them to a social worker that will then help to provide a primary care physician for further care, as well as additional studies. They also provide prescriptions, if needed, using the \$4 prescription lists at various pharmacies.

The mission hopes to expand their programs. They want to connect the community, businesses, and families so the work they’ve begun may continue.

“Love is just a word until you put it in action,” Dr. Heimer. “Love is something that needs to be given meaning by what we are doing.” If love were an action verb, YLM would be the definition of love, and service.

Both the [Ysleta Lutheran Mission](#) and the RotaCare Clinic are seeking volunteers. If you would like to help, you can reach the Mission at 915-858- 2588. The clinic can be reached by contacting Betty at 915-873- 0519