

Altruism at the Orphanage

By Melanie Threlkeld McConnell

They are the children no one wants. Several have AIDS, others have bad livers, two are autistic. All have some disability. The youngest is less than a year old.

But they are the children with whom a group of Boise State University students fell in love during a volunteer work week at the St. Joseph Orphanage for Children in Tijuana, Mexico.

The four students, who are affiliated with Boise State's St. Paul's Catholic Student Center, drove the 15 hours to the orphanage in January. The students were led by Ralph May, the project coordinator, from St. Jerome's Parish in Jerome, which has adopted the orphanage.

May has spent nearly six weeks out of the last 18 months building new structures and repairing others at the orphanage.

"My wife and I have always felt that giving of ourselves is critical," he says. "We had the ability to make a real difference for this orphanage so it just seems like the right thing to do."

May was contacted by Sister Mary David Hartse of St. Paul's after she read about his involvement. "I saw it as an opportunity for our students to help," she says.

The group laid tile, reroofed the orphanage's main house, laid concrete blocks to shore up security walls and painted walls. But perhaps more important, they became friends with their tiny hosts.

Me Epifania Iosefo, a Boise State student from American Samoa, relished the week of hard labor and play time with the children.

"They needed people who would just come in there and love the children and support them as if they were their own," she says. "You can easily send money down there, but if you can't see the real thing then you don't really know how they live, you can only imagine."

Student Eric Stroschein, Rupert, was moved by the orphanage workers' devotion to children with special needs.

"None of the other orphanages would take these kids because of their disabilities, and that's what really inspired me," he says. "The Mexican government doesn't back them whatsoever. These kids have no chance to begin with. They don't realize what the world is all about."

He tells the story of a young girl with AIDS who lives at the orphanage. Her mother and a sister died of the disease. A younger brother who does not have AIDS lives in another orphanage. Their father picks them up on weekends and takes them home for a visit. "He can barely make ends meet," Stroschein says.

The orphanage, run by two nuns, had no regular financial or maintenance assistance before St. Jerome's parish became involved. Stroschein hopes that changes.

"I think the United States has an abundance of resources and we take a lot of things for granted," he says. "There are a lot of people out there who need the support of people who have everything." □



PHOTOS COURTESY ME EPIFANIA IOSEFO

Eric Stroschein and Tracy Wagner helped build security walls, left, and Darlene Wagner from St. Jerome's parish makes a new friend, below.

