

(Left to right) Sister Emily Jocson, Sister Fatima Santiago and Sister Carolyn Kosub, outside St. Anne Church, have brought the light of Christ to Pueblo do Palmas.



Ten years ago, the sisters arrived in Pueblo de Palmas and went door to door asking what the residents needed.



HOW CAN *We Help?*

Pueblo de Palmas, a colonia (or settlement) was in disarray after the tornado. Dilapidated trailers packed with families were scattered about. Remnants of damage from the tornado littered the yards. Perhaps most heartbreaking was the total lack of camaraderie or optimism among its residents.

“The colonia was a sad place,” said Sister Carolyn Kosub. “People didn’t know or trust their neighbors.”

So, the sisters set off to meet the residents. But the welcome mats weren’t out. Residents were fearful to meet anyone new. As the sisters knocked on doors, they were met with silence. So they’d call out, “We’re from the Catholic Church!” Doors started opening. The sisters introduced themselves to the reluctant residents and asked, “What do you need?”

The first responses were clear: “We need tutoring for our children. We need English classes. We need medical care.”

Eager to help, the sisters wanted to put down roots in the community and also build a community center. When they approached a local developer, Gary Frisby, to acquire some land, he asked them how much money they had.

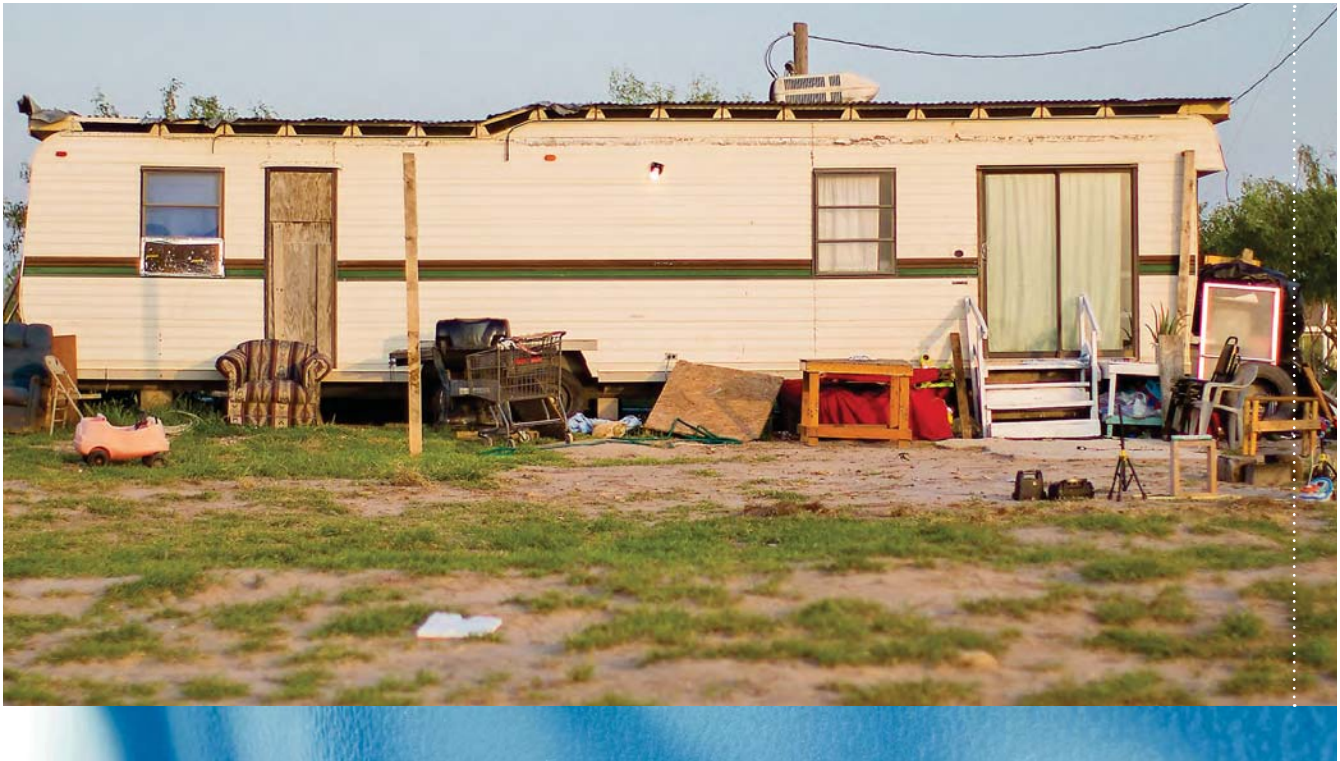
“We told him, ‘Not even a dollar,’” Sister Fatima recalled, laughing. So Gary donated two acres for a community center as well as a lot for the sisters to build their home.

Proyecto Desarrollo Humano

The sisters wanted a gathering place for the community. Gary donated another two acres. With financial donations and a slew of volunteers, the sisters created Proyecto Desarrollo Humano (Project for Human Development), an outreach center that opened in 2004.

The Center started by offering tutoring, English classes, and a medical and dental clinic where healthcare professionals volunteered their services. Over the years, it has become a hub of activity, with summer camps, youth groups, a clothing distribution center, a kitchen, space for large assemblies and a computer lab. The Community Center also offers special programs for women, including nutrition education, arts and crafts, sewing, massage therapy, and Zumba classes.

Outside the Center is a community garden. Sister Emily, who manages the plot, was not interested in gardening at first. But after learning about the health



Families in the community live in crowded conditions, often sharing trailers with others.

benefits of organic food and realizing how much the local residents needed healthy lifestyles, she became passionate. With volunteers and donations, a large garden and a well for irrigation were established. The garden features an array of fruits and vegetables including broccoli, carrots, chilies and zucchinis. She also helped families create 43 individual gardens at their homes.

Strengthening Women and Families

Before the Center opened, the women in Pueblo de Palmas had few activities and rarely left their homes. For them, the impact of the Center has been dramatic.

Maria Soto has lived in the area for 10 years. Her husband works in a grocery store, and she cares for their children. When the children went to tutoring at the Center, she accompanied them as a volunteer – which was a big step for her.

“When I first arrived in Pueblo de Palmas,” said Maria, “I didn’t know anyone. I didn’t leave the house. Now, with the Center, I have friends and I am part of a community. The sisters brought me in.”

A neighbor, Yaneth Uribe, agrees. “The Center is everything. It is a fuente de vida (source of life),” she said. “It has changed me as a person. I don’t have family here, so now, when the men go off for work, the women have

each other. We have support. The sisters help us with las ganas y las duras (the ups and downs).”

Yazmin Vargas moved to the area with her family when she was 14 years old. When her mother met the sisters and began volunteering at the Center, Jasmine saw her transform into a stronger woman. Yazmin, who graduated from college, is now married and has two children. Along with a full-time job, she also works part-time at the Center as a bookkeeper. She lives two blocks away and likes living in the community to encourage other women to imagine what is possible for them, including higher education.

“Growing up with machismo, women think they can’t do things,” Yazmin said. “Women need to believe in themselves because that will help them create stronger families. The Center has taught women what hope is.”



DIOCESE OF BROWNSVILLE, TX

Saint Anne's Church

Early on, after the Center was built, residents asked the sisters if they could provide Mass, since transportation was difficult to the nearest Catholic church in La Joya. The sisters were already providing faith formation classes and were happy to arrange Masses at the Center. However, soon attendance was bursting at the seams, exceeding the 100-person capacity of the hall space. Residents started taking turns going to Mass.

The sisters knew it was time again to ask Gary for more land. Thankfully, they received 12 acres in the middle of the community. Gary began formulating the church design along with Ruben Solis, a volunteer contractor, and Fabian, a volunteer draftsman. After securing donations, construction on the church began. It was not an easy process. The area in which the church was being built was an existing drug corridor. It was dangerous, and the drug runners were unhappy to have a church in their way. They repeatedly vandalized the church, breaking windows and destroying the air-conditioning ducts. So the sisters set up

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a night patrol, armed only with flashlights, to protect the church. “Finally, when they realized the church was here to stay,” explained Sister Carolyn, “they left us alone.”

The beautiful mission-style church, with a capacity of 300, was blessed in 2009 and served by visiting priests. The church has energized the families of Pueblo de Palmas and become their spiritual home.

Sister Emily, a civil engineer by training, played a big role in managing the church construction. It was stressful, but hugely rewarding. “One girl walked in for the first



Gary Frisby and his wife, Dawna, have made generous donations of land to build Proyecto Desarrollo Humano, a convent and St. Anne Catholic Church.

time and said, ‘Wow!’ I cried. I knew it meant so much to her. This is a humbling place,” she said.

Sister Emily also manages the church choir, which features singers of all ages and a few guitars. “Choir members have become a family,” she said. “Just by coming, they are part of something. We are helping people pray with their hearts.”

Saint Anne’s Church was given to the diocese in 2013, and Father Michael Montoya, a Missionary of Jesus priest, is its first pastor. Bishop Daniel Flores declared it to be the mother church of a four-church parish. Saint Anne’s has a new office building, and plans are developing for a parish hall to host religious education classes and community events.

The residents are grateful for Saint Anne’s. They clean the church, maintain the pews and make repairs. It is the center of the colonia and an easy walk for many. As a beacon of hope and a reminder of the Catholic faith that they share, it has invigorated their community. Anita Hernandez, a parishioner, explained, “To have the Church here is to have God here.”

It Takes a Village

Sisters Carolyn, Emily and Fatima are quick to say that volunteers have made their mission possible — not only volunteers from within the community, but also the endless volunteers that come from far.

Every year, the “Winter Texans” flock to the area after Thanksgiving and leave after Easter. They arrive with dishes, beds and furniture for the residents and with an eagerness to help. “They teach, they mentor, they even sweep the floors!” said Sister Carolyn.



Sister Emily talks to Yaneth Uribe and her children outside the home they built in Pueblo de Palmas.

Betty Skillings is 92-years old and an active volunteer. Her duties include serving the residents at the annual Thanksgiving meal held at the Community Center. It is a formal event, and all the residents get dressed up. In addition, some of her golfing friends hold an annual golf tournament to raise money for “Betty’s colonia.”

Young people by the droves also come to help. As Sister Fatima explained, “People from nearby Saint Paul Parish help with our community’s housing situation. A group from Indiana comes to paint, build fences or do whatever we need. Kids from Corpus Christi come to host Bible study classes, and a group from Abilene helps with construction.”

The project also has a strong Board of Directors. Lupe Gonzalez, the president, grew up in the area, picking cotton as a migrant worker. After a career as a school superintendent, Lupe offered his assistance to the sisters. “The sisters could have gone anywhere in the world, but they chose to help here. We are totally grateful,” he said. “They breathe new life into our lives and make us want to give, too.”

Filomena Leo, another board member, is also a longtime resident of the area and a school official. Before the sisters arrived, she was always concerned about Pueblo de Palmas. “The poverty and the need here was noticeably different from other areas in the school district,” she said.

“At school, we saw erratic attendance, misbehavior, lower academic performance and limited literacy among the students from Pueblo de Palmas.

“Through home visits, we saw very low living standards,” she continued. “Parents were at a loss to get help or know how to improve lives.”

A decade ago, when Filomena first heard about the sisters’ intentions to help the community, she didn’t think it was possible. “I knew their hearts were in the right place, but there were too many families and the needs were too great,” she said. “I did not trust completely that God would help the nuns do this project. But, once they decided on a mission and started pulling together resources to build, the sisters were on a path.”

Filomena has seen enormous changes in the colonia. “The sisters give people hope — not false hopes — but opportunities to achieve,” she said. “People in the community talk about kids going to college, no matter how poor they are.”

Gary, who has given so much to the sisters, appreciates their ability to foster ownership among the residents. “Their goal is to make this project self-sustaining and to create leaders who will take the baton and run with it,” he said.

Gary also pointed out that the sisters re-invigorate those living in the whole area, which is predominantly



Women gather weekly for sewing classes and camaraderie. The Proyecto Desarrollo Humano provides classes, meeting spaces and healthcare facilities.

Catholic, but has recently experienced many residents falling away from the Church. The presence of the sisters sparks a spiritual revival.

“We all take so much for granted,” said Gary’s wife, Dawna. “The sisters bring strength, security and a reminder that the faith is always here. Every time they break ground, they say, ‘This is holy ground.’”

Gary helps the residents improve their housing. Many have no money or credit and are unable to qualify for a mortgage. So, Gary came up with a different plan that enables them to take several years to build a house. Many residents have taken this option and live in their trailer while they gradually build a house next to it. They pour the concrete and put in the 2x4’s by themselves. Neighbors help as needed with plumbing, carpentry and masonry. Residents pay for everything out of their pockets.

“It’s alarming to see the conditions of the trailers where people are living while they’re building their homes,” said Dawna. “You see dirt floors, leaks in roofs and no insulation. Kids in a family have one pair of shoes among them, and each day they take turns as to who gets to wear the shoes.”

“But at the end of 10 years, a family has a house and no mortgage. They move the trailer off the land and have a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment,” said Gary. The community now consists of 2,000 families.

Neighbors also have been generous with each other. When Anita Hernandez and her family first moved to the colonia, they lived in a room that was 12’ x 16’, with no indoor plumbing. With a growing family, she prayed to God, “I don’t want to ask you for much, but our space is very small.” One day, a neighbor offered her a bigger house that would cost \$500. Anita couldn’t pay that much, so the neighbor said, “Pay what you can.” The family scraped together what they could and moved into the house. “The children are so happy here,” she said.

The Lumen Christi Award

This year, Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, nominated Sister Carolyn, Sister Emily and Sister Fatima for the Lumen Christi Award, Catholic Extension’s highest honor. He admires their devotion to people on the edges and their belief that “the burden of another is more important than my own.”

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He, too, believes in the importance of encouraging people, particularly young people, to aim as high as possible. Calling the sisters, “the glue that made this community possible,” he is particularly grateful for Saint Anne’s Church.

“The church needs to be present to provide the context of generosity, sense of purpose and hopefulness, especially in developing communities,” he said. “A church reminds us that we are not alone in this journey of life.”

Rosie Rodriguez, Director of Development for the Diocese of Brownsville, agrees. “This colonia was really poor, and the sisters saw something,” she said. “They have figured out a way to put the Scriptures to work.”

The three sisters are a unique group. Coming from three different countries and bringing three different styles, they collaborate perfectly as a team. For the past 10 years, Catholic Extension has supported their projects in Pueblo de Palmas. Receiving the Lumen Christi award is a big boost to their mission.

“This award is encouragement,” said Sister Carolyn, of San Antonio, who proudly wears a Texas t-shirt and has an easy laugh. “Catholic Extension has believed in us from the start. They said, ‘We will walk with you to put in place the basic operations of the organization.’ No one wants to pay for operational funds, but Catholic Extension understands what’s needed. The Lumen Christi award is the cherry on top of the sundae.”

Sister Emily, of the Philippines, is reserved and thoughtful. When she first arrived in the U.S., adjusting to a new culture was difficult, but she realized that God was preparing her for the challenges of the colonia. “When I see people that need help, there is a little voice saying, ‘You are not doing this alone,’ and it leaves me powerful.”

The Lumen Christi award is also a vote of confidence.

Sister Fatima is a teacher from India, a former missionary in Guatemala who speaks Spanish well, and now knows practically everyone in the colonia. “The needs of the community vary so much. They need basic things, such as refrigerators and gas for their cars, as well as psychological and spiritual help. Some need help negotiating a labor issue or paying for a medical bill,” she said. “But, once people here become aware that a better life is possible—they are determined to work hard. The Lumen Christi award is an affirmation of our work here.”

The colonia of Pueblo de Palmas is now thriving. Families are stronger. Women are developing new skills. Children are studying to get good grades. Decrepit trailers are being replaced by homes. Neighbors are reaching out to each other. Saint Anne’s Church is the center of the community. Faith is palpable. Hope has taken root. ●



Proyecto Desarrollo Humano features a computer room that helps students with homework and staying connected with the world.