

Village Updates March/April 2010



Problemas En Paraiso!

Friends, there is Trouble In Paradise...

Paraiso, or Paradise in English, is the district where we work in Honduras. Just when things are moving along so smoothly... Just when the teens are hitting their stride... Just when we feel things are going to a whole new level – bam! We are hit with another challenge.

Nevertheless, we have learned our lesson well. In our work, seldom does a good deed go unpunished - this is merely what we refer to as New-Levels-New-Devils time. Yet another opportunity for a miracle is born.

Late on a Saturday night a couple of weeks ago we received a rather distressing call from the directors of our work. In what felt like a scene from *The Godfather*, a lawyer representing the bus company that transported our center's teens to high school issued a solemn caveat. A la Don Corleone's Consigliere, we were warned that the homes of the directors and the Gringos were mapped out. He went on to say he would so *hate to see anything happen to us* should we continue the trajectory of seeking to contract the services of a new bus company... Cue violins and goosebumps.

The scenario was surreal to say the least, and might have even been laughable had this not been Honduras where these threats are carried out for far less economic gain.

Several days before the menacing phone call, the parents of our high school students were so fed up with the abuse their children were suffering at the hands of this bus company, they organized to protest. A large group from Linaca went to the offices of bus company and to other local officials in Danli to present their complaints. After their failure to get anyone to listen to them, much less address their concerns, the parents asked us to have a meeting with them in hopes of contracting a new service.

As you know, part of our work is to rescue young people from the blight of poverty and the misery of ignorance. In the past few years we have been able to rescue hundreds upon hundreds of children from resorting to menial labor (and becoming statistics in the abominable

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dropout rate of Honduras). Those who attend our center are among the most deprived of all the villagers, and yet these kids are some of the best and brightest children in the world. While school is mandatory to the Third Grade in Honduras, the law is not enforced. It is an ongoing battle to convince many parents to keep their children in school.

Our greatest challenge and achievement in this area is with the adolescents, who are most at risk to this terrible end of dropping out of life. Over the past six years we have been with them, we have raised the consciousness of their citizens. Many have adopted the need for higher education as a core value. Of our center children who have reached High School age, we have been able to rescue 100% of those that have come to us for help in continuing their studies.

A cruel fact in Honduras is that less than 25% of children who begin school will finish High School. The median age in Honduras is 20 years old, compared to the United States median age of 35! You quickly get the picture that for Honduras to survive, education of their citizens is one of the highest priorities. Often we find it is very small things that keep children from reaching their full potential and finishing their education.

What we supply is a great benefit to the not only to the children, but also to the parents and the community - and we pray to the nation at large in the future. What we accomplish in

Honduras largely depends on educating children past grade school. That is why the situation with the bus company is such an issue, not only for our kids but for everyone in the district serviced by this company.

The problem with the bus company has been brewing for a while. The company is seeking to monopolize routes in the area, and it has specifically violated the law on many levels. Our teens have been subjected to mockery and verbal abuse by the driver of their route. Some have been left stranded – the driver simply passed them by on purpose. Some have been forced off the bus at arbitrary places and had to walk hours to get home - through unsafe territory in the dark. This is especially dangerous for the girls that comprise the bulk of our teens.

Realizing our center transportation budget was stretched to the max, the parents tearfully offered to sacrifice what amounts to a day or two of their wages to contract a new bus so their children can safely get to and from school. This is an enormous sacrifice for the parents on so many levels. That these parents would agree to keep their kids in school at great personal financial loss is a miracle in and of itself - demonstrating the inroads we have made in a few short years in changing villagers views in regard to the importance of education. It would be far easier for them to pull their kids from school to work in the bean fields, rather than fight this fight and sacrifice household funds that are scanty at best.

Why, you might ask, would a driver who depends on our contract to make his living, abuse his charges? It is a question we have asked ourselves again and again. The teens, our staff, and the parents came to the conclusion this behavior was born out of prejudice and jealousy.

There seemed to be a disdain for these children of "bean-picking peasants." It was not only from the bus driver but also from the children of wealthier families who rode the bus with them. Children of their ilk don't go to High School. They don't deserve special scholarships or merit any attention from Gringos. They need to go back to the bean fields where they belonged – *definitely not* reach beyond their social class to graduate from High School.

Our kids were also different in other ways. They took their schooling and their work at the center seriously – often studying and discussing aloud the leadership principles of Jesus. Such teachings as defining their purpose in life as learning to love God, others, and themselves was a cause for mockery and cruelty. The bus driver, knowing these kids were going from school to volunteer at our center, would sometimes refuse to pick the teens up at all.

During our meeting with the parents we made it very clear that our dedication to their families is inviolable - their children are our children. We love them as they love them. We told them our friends are their friends and together we will not stand back and see their sacrifice wasted because of some economic interest of a company that abuses children. The parents, many through tearful sobs, thanked us for helping their children become more than they ever dreamed.

In the days following the meeting we made several attempts to contract other bus services. Once the bus company learned of our plans they intimidated other drivers into reneging on their contracts.

The bus company's behavior (and all other agencies the parents went to for help) not only causes us to question their commitment to the safety of children, but also their commitment to Honduran education. It has come to our attention that several layers of corruption among the officials in our district are complicit in this injustice. The officials who should be protecting the children refused to deal with the bus company, who not only abuses our kids but reportedly creates similar problems all over the valley. Apparently countless students have been denied passage to school because of this company's intimidation.

If we should back down from this confrontation, we would be giving these thugs the right to limit the number of young men and women to fulfill their dream of an education. Who knows how many children have already been left behind to wither in the state of miserable poverty because of the actions of these people?



It is one of the layers of corruption that keeps Honduras in such dire straits and its citizens too fearful to fight for their basic rights. It is an egregious problem that we will pursue.

Our young people and their families met this challenge head on - a real victory as generations of Hondurans have backed down when facing such forces of intimidation. We are so proud of our teens and parents who are willing to stand up and fight in the face of these threats. They need to be rewarded for their valor.

But here is the biggest danger as we see it - the desire of a near-destitute Honduran parent to keep a child in school can wear thin. There is a cost to the family in lost wages as well as the fear engendered by repeated threats. Eventually, parents may feel it is better to pull their children from school and put them to work to keep them safe. If we do not act quickly, we will be accountable for the downward spiral of these gifted children.

Through our friends in the states and in Honduras, the plight of our children reached the ears of the newly elected President Pepe Lobo. Outraged at what he heard, The President immediately arranged for us to meet with the Ministers of Transportation and Public Security to air our concerns. Both departments promised immediate measures would be taken.

The Minister of Transportation told us that our only remedy in the future is to purchase our own bus... That will cost at least \$15,000. He assured us all legal documentation needed to transport our children would be given to us immediately after we secure a bus. The documentation process could have taken months on end without this meeting.

In the meantime, we need a miracle to continue getting our kids to school safely and without eating into the budget of the other critical services we offer to hundreds upon hundreds of children every week.

If any of you know of a bus company willing to donate buses for a tax write off, please send those contacts to us. We also need a bus for our teens and children in the Jamastran Valley. There are buses for sale in Honduras and we have started a fund to purchase one. There is the option of a large down payment and financing of buses as well.

You can also help by passing this newsletter on to friends who might know of a company who could help us. Some of our biggest needs have been answered by faithful friends who were willing to pass on our newsletters. In fact, we would not be in Honduras today without some of the friends we made because our partners passed on our newsletters. You can also go to the website www.wrgnews.com and copy the link to email friends or share our link on facebook and other networking sites.

Though our lives have been threatened, we do not fear so much for ourselves as for the children and the mothers and fathers we have adopted. These treasures are not "The Poor" as we discussed in our last newsletter. They are our family. We are not hirelings that abandon sheep when the wolf is at the door. And the wolf is at the door. Who knows how many he has already devoured...

Together we must find a solution, and quickly, to restore justice and dignity - not simply for the teens we scholarship, *like the young girl pictured above*. We must give hope and a future to all the children of this country that we so love.

\$25,000 MATCHING GRANT PROGRESS

So far over \$22,000 has come in on our matching grant for the children's center! All designated donations - 100% - go to the children's work. Administrative costs are raised separately.

As you know from this newsletter we are in desperate need of our own transportation and are starting a fund to purchase our own bus. We also need \$5,000 to cover what we have spent so far for school supplies. February of each year is a time our budget is hit hardest because of these start up expenses. This year we helped almost twice the number of children as last year to stay in school! In some cases for the lack of a pair of shoes, or even something as small as notebooks and pencils, can cause a parent to keep a child home. It never ceases to amaze us how for the lack of some small thing, a child's life is doomed.

In addition to this we have another good problem of a growing teen population who also want to remain in school. It costs on average \$50 a month to support a student in high school. Their needs are comprised of bus fare uniforms, books, and miscellaneous charges that come up

during the school year for internships and special events.

We have scholarshiped more than 70 High School students. Volunteering with our team, they tutor the younger children and are the hands on help for needs arising in the community. They are the capable, future leaders of the nation. Not all teens will come to work with us in the future, but they will have received an education enabling them to get a better job. And they will be trained in a multitude of skills to help them advance personally and thus help their nation.

Our goal is to help more and more children but provide less and less financial aid to each family in the years ahead. As the families see the fruit of our labor they become believers that education and our services are actually their children's best hope for escaping poverty.

If you wish to donate to the matching grant fund – please write Teen Scholarship or Children's Center on the memo line of your check. All undesignated giving will go where our board deems the need is greatest.