

A
COMMUNITY
CENTER
FOR
GUAYAQUIL

A UNITED THANK OFFERING STORY



"LOWER THE presser foot and sew along this line," were the instructions drifting through the open door and down the hall.

"Now place this block here and drive the nail in," another voice instructed in an adjoining room.

Moving up the stairs, a familiar word was overheard. "Table, t-a-b-l-e," with its corresponding Spanish pronunciation, indicated that the class in the upstairs room was learning to speak English.

Guiding the visit through the Community Center in Guayaquil, Ecuador, was Mrs. Billie Alban, a young American woman who with other Ecuadorians and American laymen helped organize the Center.

"Our English classes are very popular," she said, "because when an Ecuadorian can speak English he is able to get a better job."

A variety of good work seemed to be going on in spite of the inconvenience of the rented quarters. The faces of the men and women reflected the intensity of their desire to learn new skills and acquire new knowledge.

"We all look forward to the day when we shall have a place of our own," Mrs. Alban said. "We have discussed our plans dozens of times and it looks as if our dreams might come true, especially since we received the

\$30,000 grant from the United Thank Offering to purchase the property.”

When asked to tell more about how the project began, her eyes twinkled. “It began with baby layettes. When we heard that some of the poorer local women were taking their babies home from the hospital wrapped in newspapers, we couldn’t bear the idea, so we began making layettes. But after several months, the head nurse told us kindly that since word had spread about the free layettes the hospital had more maternity patients than could be handled. She suggested that a better way to assist would be for us to help people to help themselves.”

ECUADORIAN HISTORY

The wisdom of this advice can be better understood in the light of Ecuador’s political and social history. Until 1895 a feudalistic form of government existed. An upheaval in the latter part of the 19th century brought about a more democratic form of government, but even today most Ecuadorians have little interest in exercising their rights of citizenship. This is not too surprising when one learns the literacy rate is around fifty per cent and that there is a shortage of schools, equipment, and serious overcrowding.



Without proper education, they are likely to continue the old ways of dependent living and subsisting from hand to mouth.

“To make a long story short,” continued Mrs. Alban, “we rolled up our sleeves and went to work. But we didn’t do it all *for* them. The Ecuadorian nurse taught us that lesson.

“Now when the Center needs a new sewing machine or some other equipment the people have bazaars, or other fund-raising activities, to earn the money for the needed item. Then they know it is theirs.

“For years many parents had depended on others to provide Christmas presents for their children, but now with skills learned at the Center, they can provide their own gifts for their children.”

BUILDING PLANS

“Mrs. Alban, you spoke of building plans for the future. What do these plans include?”

“A new building to house the Community Center’s activities will be built in one of the numerous impoverished districts of Guayaquil. It will contain living quarters for a resident priest whose sole responsibility will be to work with the local people.

“All supplies and furnishings, including those in the chapel, will be made by the mem-

bers of the Center from whatever materials are easily obtainable. If a more expensive article is needed, members will organize a fund-raising project to obtain the money.

“Instruction at the Center will continue to include the most basic fundamentals of community improvement. Beginning with a study of family health (diet needs from foods readily available, garbage and sewage disposal, basic first aid) the study then moves on to the larger concerns of the community such as housing, road improvement, and insect control. We have learned in the Center’s program that people have not been accustomed to working co-operatively on projects for community improvement. We have been trying to train community leaders, as well as to teach the individual additional skills.

“Until recently our work has been primarily with adults. However, with the cooperation of the community and concerned parents, classes have been started for children of pre-school age. We also have a sports program for older children and even young people of wealthy families participate.”

“How many people are now coming to the Center?”

“Around forty to fifty per day. But these are not all the lives that we touch in the com-

munity. For example, in our nutrition program a woman works with five families. She helps them understand the value of a balanced diet and how to prepare it. The infant mortality rate is very high, largely due to malnutrition. Those who do not die carry the effects of it with them for the rest of their lives. The basic problem is lack of knowledge. Most children are not fed solid foods, even fruits, until they are nearly two years of age. Since milk costs are high and many mothers are unable to nurse their infants, these children literally starve.”

TRAINED IN NUTRITION

“The women of the Center became so interested in this problem that some volunteered and were trained in the essentials of nutrition. They now go out into the neighborhood and teach mothers how to care for their families, especially infants. The results of their ‘feed your baby at three months’ program has had a dramatic effect on countless starving vitamin-deficient children. Another important result has been that a group of local women are contributing constructively to the welfare of their own community.

“But back to our plans for the future. We hope to keep on doing what we are doing now,

but to expand it. We want the people to know that the Church is concerned in all that they are, all that they think, all that they do, and is here in their very midst to encourage them in their growth in becoming responsible citizens of their country.”

UNITED THANK OFFERING STORY No. 2

Our gifts to the United Thank Offering have made and will continue to make many such differences possible in many neighborhoods throughout our nation and our world.

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