

"¿Quiere ayudarnos?"

by Karen Telleen-Lawton

"¿Quiere ayudarnos? (Do you want to help us?)" I asked Julian in my halting, rusty Spanish. "Sí, sí, sí, sí, sí, sí!" He had been hovering hesitantly around the work site and leaped to the dry rocky plot we were leveling. For the remainder of the time, Julian and his nephew Hector were indefatigable in working with Colorado teenagers to construct a home for his family in Juárez, Chihuahua. On a sizzling late June afternoon, physical exhaustion gave way to cheers as the final splat of stucco completed the tiny house. That evening, when we returned in skirts and clean jeans to present Julian and his family with a signed Bible and a home of their own, we were moved to tears.

Senior high youth from seven Episcopal congregations in Boulder, Golden, Longmont, Westminster, and Vail took part in the week-long Mexican mission trip. "Humbling and awesome," was how Emily Houlik of St. Mary Magdalene summed up the experience. The trip was organized by Youth With a Mission (YWAM) through *Casas por Cristo*, a program similar to Habitat for Humanity. Forty-four youth and

leaders were divided into three groups. One group taught Bible school at Fr. Ambrosia's church while the others built two 7x10 meter "palaces" among the bed springs and building discards that often pass for houses in this Mexican border town.

The group at the church taught Bible school for 35 preschool children in the morning and labored on building projects in the afternoon. The high schoolers put together a game plan of crafts, active games, and Bible skits that they instituted over the next several days.

St. Stephen's, Longmont, funded and constructed a house in fields on the outskirts of the city, an area teeming with the constant influx of migrants from the country. The rest built an identical one with the Rev. John Guernsey and his family, whose church in Virginia had raised the required \$2,100. Neighbor children, whose clean clothes and neat appearance belied their surroundings, curiously watched the proceedings and often demanded to be part of the action.

"It was a lot of work and a lot of fun," said Peter L'Orange of Louisville. He learned that his Spanish skills were not up to



"Putting up the walls." Builders from St. Mary Magdalene, Boulder, pose during construction of a home in Juárez, Chihuahua.

understanding whether he was supposed to cut lumber in five two-meter lengths or two five-meter ones. In the end, gestures were indispensable.

The Juárez trip was not for the weak in mind or body. Our bodies were tested by tiredness, the sweltering heat, and dusty, shadeless environment, and by *tourista*, which attacked most of the group at one time or another. Surrounded by tiny shacks built of flattened cardboard boxes and

shreds of plywood, it was easy to be discouraged by the minuscule effect of our efforts.

But when three dozen preschoolers tearfully bid *adiós* to their teachers and when two families gratefully accepted their new homes, we knew that God's hand had been in our work. We came anticipating adventure and fun but returned feeling proud of our accomplishments yet humbled by the attitudes of people who live graciously with so little.

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