

Letter from Julie Coyne

Dear St. Jerome Family,

While I consider myself to be quite optimistic most of the time, as December drew to a close I found myself feeling an increasing amount of dread. It is one thing to spend my days in Guatemala surrounded by hardship and need; it's been quite another experience to feel that be surrounded by that reality in the US as well. Everywhere I turned I heard stories of food pantries and homeless shelters experiencing record numbers of clients and not enough resources to serve them all adequately; the frustrations of the unemployed unable to find work; the fear of parents unsure of how they will feed their children. It seems that more people than ever are struggling to make ends meet. As a result, non-profits everywhere, are also finding it harder and harder to meet budgets.



Organizations that rely on the generosity of others are painfully aware of the reality of the economic crisis. Many, many people depend on the support Education and Hope provides, and yet at the same time, we ourselves are dependent on the ability of others to be generous. This dependency makes

it easy to get caught up in the fear of what a continued economic decline might mean for our program. But before I could get too swept away by the 'what ifs', on December 24th I was graced by an email that put everything back into place. Let me explain.



During the winter our program is closed for a three week holiday break to allow our staff to rest and spend time with their families. While everyone is undoubtedly grateful for time off, during these days many sorely miss the meals we serve at Education and Hope; mothers must now stretch their budgets to provide three meals instead of just one. And then there's Christmas. For poor families in Guatemala, Christmas isn't about exchanging gifts. It usually comprised of a traditional meal, and with any luck, accompanied by a few special treats of fruit and sweets. However, if you're struggling to put together a meal, these treats are a luxury out of your reach.

A few years ago I had the idea to offer our kitchen staff "Christmas baskets" as a way to offer our thanks to the women that give so much to Education and Hope, and ensure that each family had a meal to share on Christmas Eve. The basket is comprised of cooking staples (beans, rice, oil, sugar), as well as the traditional array of treats (red delicious apples, grapes, marshmallows, cookies, and chocolates), all in a plastic tub that the families can reuse. The baskets are always received with great emotion. However, my administrative assistant Lorena knows what a difficult time we have had fundraising this year, and she was afraid I might feel it was necessary to

forego the baskets this year. I realized, though, that continuing this simple tradition of good will was a sign of our faith in good things to come.

Lorena set out to do the shopping for all 18 baskets on her own, and then was joined the next day by Violeta to put the baskets together and wrap them up. The following day, Lorena, Violeta, Joel, and Oscar set out in Lorena's old compact car loaded up with baskets. Because each family was so excited, at every home they were invited in to visit, so much so that they had to continue with the distribution the next day. (Lorena's pictures of the happy families that day will be posted on www.educationandhopeblog.org)

At 6:00 on Christmas Eve, Lorena wrote an email to thank me for the blessing of this experience. "MUCHAS GRACIAS JULIA!!! was the response from everyone who received a basket. *Las señoras* received us with great happiness, overjoyed to feel so loved and supported during our visit." Our volunteer delivery team expressed their gratitude to be able to "offer a tiny bit in return for all the great things they have received." Oscar thanked me for "considering such small details that become something so great for each family." Violeta spoke of how fortunate she felt to witness so much happiness on the faces of the children, the excitement in their eyes that said, 'I can't believe this!' "To be a part of so much joy, so many smiles and hugs... it's priceless." Every family told how the basket had transformed their Christmas. One family was expecting to eat only tortillas, and Doña Diega could only afford to give her grandchildren a few bananas since apples were too expensive. Four-year old Alvin Daniel was so overcome with excitement that he tore into the basket for an apple, and then sat right down on the ground beside the basket to eat it. The grand cost of each of these baskets that brought so much joy to our families? Eight dollars.



Hearing this story on Christmas Eve was a powerful reminder to me that no matter how much fear, insecurity or suffering there may be in the world, there is also an enormous amount of anonymous goodness happening all around us, all of the time: people reaching out to share what little they have

to help others. Yes, there is a great deal of uncertainty in our future right now, but we have a choice. We can allow ourselves to be swept up by the fear of the unknown; or we can behold the moment before us, consider what we have to offer that might alleviate another's suffering and be empowered by the solidarity we create. When our resources are limited, it's hard to imagine that we have the power to make a difference, but we should never underestimate the power of even the smallest gift to create change in another's life. As Violeta realized that day, "Often we have so little to share; nevertheless, that little bit might mean a great deal to others who have so much less than we do."

The scope of our work has grown so much, and maintaining it requires an immense amount of support. Fundraising will no doubt continue to be a great challenge this year. Still, I know that I do not face this challenge alone. **YOU are the reason we are able to reach out to so many people in need.** I truly can't thank you enough for all that you so selflessly share to brighten the lives of people you have never met. Your generosity means the world to me.

Julie Coyne, *Education and Hope*

