

Teacher seeks big dividends from small gifts: Easthampton woman leads scholarship effort for Salvadoran youth

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Victoria Cavanaugh displays items she brought home to Easthampton from her time spent in El Salvador. She leads an effort to help orphans attend college.

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EASTHAMPTON - It all started with a movie in the classroom eight years ago.

At Notre Dame Immaculate Conception School, Victoria Cavanaugh, who was 12 at the time, felt inspired to help after watching "Roses in December," which tells the story of how four American women - who were providing food, shelter, medical care and burial to the poor - were tortured, raped and murdered by supporters of the right-wing government in El Salvador on Dec. 2, 1980.

Cavanaugh decided she would be like the film's main character Jean Donovan, a young laywoman from Cleveland who kept a diary of her charity work in El Salvador.

Now, at 22, Cavanaugh lives in El Salvador and oversees Nuestro Ahora, a scholarship program she founded and funds to help orphans go to college. Cavanaugh shared her story while visiting her hometown of Easthampton this holiday season. She was on a break from teaching science and social studies in the fifth and sixth grade at the Panamerican School of El Salvador.

"I guess the movie sort of captivated me," Cavanaugh said. "She (Donovan) knew her life was in danger down there, but she did it anyway because of the kids."

Cavanaugh watched the film several times in her NDIC classes, affirming that helping children in El Salvador was what she wanted to do. After graduating from Holyoke Catholic, she applied to Boston College because the school offered "La Casa de la Solidaridad," a program that allows U.S. students to spend a semester at the University of Central America in San Salvador, El Salvador. Cavanaugh admits she did not speak Spanish very well, and her knowledge of the country's history and politics was slim. Like Donovan, Cavanaugh found her motivation in faith, she said.

"I wanted to know who these kids were and what it was that caused her passion," she said.

Learning from experience

After arriving on Central American soil as a college junior in August 2005, Cavanaugh learned that El Salvador is physically the same size as Massachusetts, with a population of 7 million, and that 100 or so families control 80 percent of the land, leaving most people in poverty.

"You have lots and lots of people with nowhere to go," she said. "They can't make ends meet."

Maria Magdalena Lopez, 21, lives in Zaragoza, La Libertad, with her mother and sister. At age 9, she was sent to a Salvadoran orphanage, La Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo, also known as COAR.

"Our parents see a necessity to take us there, especially for the economic situation," Lopez said in Spanish during a telephone and email interview, which Cavanaugh translated into English.

"My experience in COAR was to always work hard to improve my situation for the future. It wasn't easy, because one always wants to be with one's family; it was hard for me not to give up along the way and to always try to look at the future optimistically," said Lopez.

Cavanaugh met Lopez while spending two days a week volunteering at COAR. The orphanage, located in Zaragoza, is a 15-minute bus ride from Cavanaugh's apartment in Santa Tecla. Volunteering was not enough; she wanted to live with the orphans.

"I felt if I wanted to really comprehend what was going on, two days a week wasn't going to cut it," she said.

She stayed in El Salvador for the following spring semester, this time in the orphanage, where she shared a room with 10 kids. Together, they ate three meals a day, did chores and went to Mass every Sunday for five months. While she helped the orphans with their homework and taught some how to play the violin, they helped her improve her Spanish.

"It was a humbling experience, having 6- and 7-year-olds teach you Spanish," she said. The kids were good teachers because they were blunt with her, she added. "They have tremendous talent and energy in the prime of their life and they're not able to do anything (after the orphanage)."

Cavanaugh learned that most people try to make their money in the marketplace. An illiterate mother of three COAR orphans leaves her one-room, dirt-floor, brick home in Tigres to sell

beans, tortillas or "whatever she can find" at home in the marketplace, hoping to make at least a dollar to pay for her bus ride there and back. Finding a job without being able to sign her name is a difficult if not impossible task, so the trip itself is something to do, Cavanaugh said.

Somewhere to start

Nuestro Ahora, the scholarship program that kicked off in January 2007, costs \$3,000 per recipient, and includes housing, toiletries, school materials and university tuition. The housing is donated by the Panamerican School in San Salvador, where Cavanaugh teaches science and social studies in fifth and sixth grade. The tuition, which amounts to \$1,200 to \$1,500 a year per student, comes out of Cavanaugh's pocket.

"Investing so little in one person can pay off so big," Cavanaugh said. "They'll be able to do so much for families and societies."

Three people - Lupe and Reyna Isabel, who both study education at the Pedagogical University of El Salvador, and Lopez, who studies psychology at the University of Central America - participate in the program, which is in the process of becoming a nonprofit organization.

"Nuestro Ahora is a real blessing to those who don't have the means to continue with their studies in university," Lopez said. "I know I can do a lot to support my country, my family and all those who are near to me."

To find out more or make a donation, mail checks payable to Nuestro Ahora Inc. at 192 Park St., Easthampton, 01027 or visit www.nuestroahora.blogspot.com.

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