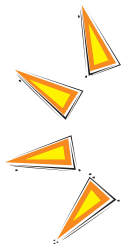




In the village of Lindero, Mexican girls wait in the doorway of the church for the priest who will celebrate Mass for the feast of St. Joseph, village patron.

SOUTH OF THE BORDER, HEARTS EXPAND



What does it mean to spend spring break on a service project in Mexico? The images and captions tell much of the story: hard work under a desert sun; building new relationships and strengthening old ones; experiencing reciprocity and friendship among people whose lives are starkly different, both culturally and economically.

Those who took the leap in late March were sixteen young women, juniors, from Villa Duchesne, and four young men from St. Louis Priory School. They accompanied Mary Patricia Rives, RSCJ, and her co-project director, Mary West, to a group of villages just outside San Miguel de Allende in central Mexico, where they spent a week in service and reflection. They were the sixteenth group in sixteen years to do so.

continued



Annie Martin exchanges smiles with a young Mexican girl.

Accompanying high school students to Mexico is just one of the activities that engages Sister Rives, a veritable legend for her efforts over the past three decades to support people in developing countries. In addition to working full time as a school nurse at Villa Duchesne/Oak Hill School in suburban St. Louis, she raises money for solar ovens to be distributed in Mexico, Uganda, Kenya, the Dominican Republic and Haiti (and has distributed some herself). She has been a major booster of a new Sacred Heart school in Uganda and of a Mexican/U.S. student exchange.

Sister Rives has lifelong ties to Mexico. Her mother, daughter of a mining engineer, was raised there, and Sister Rives lived in Mexico City and Tampico for the first five years of her life, until her father, a banker, was robbed and killed. Those were tumultuous post-revolutionary times in Mexico, so her mother moved north, to San Antonio, Texas.

Sister Rives holds a bachelor's degree in education from College of the Sacred Heart, Grand Coteau, Louisiana; a master's degree in education from St. Louis University; and a bachelor's degree in nursing, which she earned in 1981, at age 56, also at the St. Louis school. She has taught in Sacred Heart schools in St. Louis, New Orleans and Cincinnati, and served as headmistress at Duchesne Academy in Houston and at the academy in Grand Coteau. She received the Servant of the Poor award from the Archdiocese of St. Louis in 1999, the Women of Conscience Award from Associated Alumnae/i of the Sacred Heart in 2003 and was honored as an "ageless-remarkable St. Louisan" in 2005.

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Meghan Henkel of Villa Duchesne joins children from the village of La Petaca in an afternoon of coloring, using books and crayons brought from St. Louis.



Sister Rives looks on as Irma Brito distributes pesos to Mexican women, matching funds the women have saved throughout the year for home improvements.

Jerry Dwyer of St. Louis Priory School pours out vegetable seeds for Maria de Jesús of Galvanes.



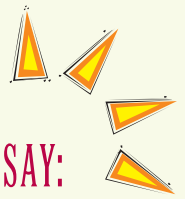


Grace Guyol and Leah Anderson help mix cement for a dam project underway near Galvanes for two decades. The students from the U.S. join Mexicans in working on the dam each year.



Kristina Sit gets a lesson in making tortillas from Galdina, a woman in Galvanes, who serves ten family members a daily diet consisting almost entirely of chili, tortillas and beans.

Luis and Irma Brito, hosts for Sister Rives' annual service project, stand in front of their home in Galvanes with son Axel. Axel, 25, and a chemistry major at the University of Monterrey, learned English during a year at Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Charles and serves as a translator during the annual visit by Sacred Heart students from St. Louis.



WHAT PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY:

People have been so appreciative and have wanted to spend time and get to know us. I will be more welcoming to other people because they have shown me how to do that.

— Katelyn Poelker

I noticed that the Mexican kids cared a lot more about the activities than about the stuff. I think I might be more carefree. Material things just don't matter anymore.

— Matthew Schulz

I have definitely learned more about myself. Why do I always pressure myself? Why can't I be more happy and content?

— Dani Kabbes

We receive Sister Rives and Mary West because they are friends and they help us to understand what is happening in the North – with the idea that we are all together in one world, and need to form one community.

— Luis Brito

I realized I knew so little about the Mexican people. I will be less likely to stereotype people now.

— Christian Herbosa

The first day, I thought these people are really so poor, and I understand that they are. But I learned that they do well with what they have.

— Virginia Rhomberg

I didn't think there was going to be this much labor. It was actually a lot of hard work, and I learned how much I really can do.

— Kristina Sit

People say you feel the happiest in the self-giving, and that's what I'm feeling here.

— Katie Halenkamp



Mary West, center, and Carmela Chavarría greet Maria de Jesús, infant daughter of Sabrina, who was a young child herself when West first visited Galvanes. Chavarría, of Mexico City, often assists as translator for the Villa Duchesne project.

During her travels to Mexico, Sister Rives has developed an extensive network of friends, including the families of ninety-nine children who, with her help, have spent a year at a Sacred Heart school in the United States.

Among those families are Luis and Irma Brito, whose three children each spent a year at Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Charles. The Britos have hosted Sister Rives' service project since its inception at their home in Galvanes, the largest of a group of poor villages situated midway between San Miguel de Allende and Dolores Hidalgo in central Mexico.

The service-oriented couple came to Galvanes after graduating from Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. They taught reading and mathematics and ultimately, urged by the villagers themselves, settled in Galvanes. The villagers offered land and help with building a house.

Over the years, the couple has established a modest conference center on their small parcel of land, adding several guest cottages. They practice organic gardening, engage in research on uses for native plants, and produce herbal ointments, soaps and creams, which they sell. Luis gives talks on health, ecology and family relations at the center and in nearby cities, including San Luis Potosi, where he met Sister Rives many years ago while speaking at a Sacred Heart school.

Since the project began, Mary West of St. Charles has accompanied Sister Rives to Mexico annually, earning the informal title of co-project director. West, who attended Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Charles for two years and sent three daughters to the academy and to Villa Duchesne, serves on the development committee of the academy board in St. Charles and on the board of Barat Academy, a new high school in St. Charles County, that aspires to become part of the Network of Sacred Heart Schools. She has been a docent at the Shrine of St. Philippine Duchesne since 1988. ❖



Two women examine a child's swim suit, found in one of the suitcases and boxes filled with clothing that Sister Rives brings each year from St. Louis. Villagers pay just a few pesos for their purchases. Visiting students oversee the sales.



The framed embroidery on the wall behind Galdina was made by her husband during four months in a U.S. jail. He was arrested after crossing the border illegally.



Sister Rives talks with a friend in the village of Trojes while waiting for an elementary school play to begin.

