

# HORIZONS OF FRIENDSHIP Horizons NEWSLETTER

Spring 2021

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS TO END POVERTY IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

## Creating a Safe Haven for Girls



“In all the work that we do, we’re trying to give young people a leg up and a helping hand,” says Patricia Rebolledo, the executive director of Horizons of Friendship. The organization’s latest project is no exception to this mandate.

Despite all the additional challenges posed by a pandemic, Horizons of Friendship and our partners continue to uphold movements and projects in Central America that seek to support youth development. The overarching goal across the various projects is to break the ‘vicious cycle of poverty’ and provide communities with the tools and resources to sustain their own long-term growth and development.

Horizons is proud to announce a new project this spring: The Safe Haven Project: For Victims of Sex Trafficking and Sexual Violence. Over the next three years, Horizons – alongside our partner PIES de Occidente – will be working to support girls ages 9-17 at a government-run shelter in Guatemala. The shelter, its staff and its residents are in a desperate situation.

“The Safe Haven Project is working with the most vulnerable girls in all of Guatemala; it’s going to make an

incredibly positive impact on these young girls,” says Dr. Paul Caldwell, President of Horizons of Friendship. The shelter is severely understaffed while operating far over capacity. On top of that, shelter staff are struggling to provide appropriate support to this vulnerable, traumatized population in the midst of this daunting pandemic.

Shelter staff aren’t equipped to be working with survivors of gender-based and sexual violence. Often fresh out of college or university, teachers, nurses and doctors are trained to work with a general population – not specifically trained to meet the needs of such a centralized population of young girls who have been the victims of terrible crimes. Specialized, sensitive, trauma-informed psychological care is crucial in helping these girls recover.

The project, being implemented by PIES de Occidente, will have a dual

purpose: First, it will provide the traumatized youth with one-on-one psychological support and cognitive behavioural therapy, as well as yoga and mindfulness meditation classes. These methods have been scientifically proven to aid in the recovery of people with PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

Second, it will train teachers, nurses, doctors, and shelter support personnel on Trauma-Informed Care – a framework and best-practices that build a supportive and empowering environment. The Safe Haven Project also aims to implement community-wide awareness and education campaigns focused on bodily autonomy, consent, sexual and reproductive health, and how to seek help when you’re suffering abuse.

“This project has the potential to dramatically improve the conditions in the shelter and in the communities at large, as well as making a radical difference in the lives of these young women and girls,” says Patricia Rebolledo. “Now more than ever, we need your support to make this project come to life.”

### SAFE SHELTER FACTS

The Safe Haven shelter in Guatemala has the capacity to hold between 60-80 young women and girls, but oftentimes runs over capacity, housing between 100-130. The shelter residents are mostly from Guatemala, but sometimes young women and girls from surrounding countries like Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador end up at the shelter as human trafficking rings are dismantled around the country.



### INSIDE THIS ISSUE



<b>COSTA RICA</b> How to Strengthen Rural Villages.....	2
<b>MIGRANT WORKERS</b> Horizons Helps with Unique Challenges .....	2
<b>MNCH UPDATE:</b> Comadronas Dedicated to Saving Lives .....	3
<b>INDIGENOUS PEOPLES</b> Leaders Respond to COVID-19 .....	4



Playing on opening day at the brand new children's park in Coronado, Costa Rica.

**Studies show that one of the best ways to escape the cycle of poverty in a region is to invest in community development and education.** Our Spring 2020 Newsletter announced an initiative to do just that for several rural villages in the province of Puntarenas, Costa Rica.

Horizons and our partner, ADI Punta

Mala, had just delivered supplies to school classrooms in these villages, supporting students for years to come in a region with few resources, 50% unemployment, and poverty that affects 32% of its population.

Phase 2 of our work is now complete. Coronado Children's Park officially opened on March 7, 2021. Villagers see

it as their best hope for a future in which sport and positive community engagement provide their youth with an alternative to drugs, alcohol, and entanglement with traffickers. Amid pandemic concerns, it also provides an outlet for safe outdoor play and sanitary facilities that support enhanced hygiene.

The Phase 3, just launched, aims to revitalize a local community centre, which is in poor condition. The repairs will allow local communities to use the centre for education and training workshops, emergency sheltering, and community development and cultural meetings.

With your support, our investments are developing these villages and improving the future opportunities of their residents. This initiative means a better start for children and youth, enhanced supports for adults seeking to improve their quality of life, and a space for communities to plan robust emergency, climate change, and health response capacities.



Two Mexican workers visit Horizons' office for care packages.

**As vital frontline workers in Canada's food supply chain, upwards of 50,000 migrant workers come to Canada every year to work in the agricultural sector.** Workers uproot their lives in Mexico, Guatemala, Jamaica, and other Caribbean states for an opportunity to earn significantly better wages in Canada and provide for their families back home.

In 2020, migrant workers faced a very unique set of challenges, from travel complications to inadequate living conditions upon arrival and insufficient personal protective equipment. But Horizons of Friendship was there to help those who came to work in Northumberland County.

"For the last 15 years, we've been working to support migrant workers," says Daniel Quesada, Horizons' community

## MIGRANT WORKERS: Horizons Helps with Unique Challenges

outreach officer. "In 2020, with mandatory quarantining upon arrival for migrant workers, mental health issues related to isolation have really flared. We were able to quickly refer migrant workers to community mental health resources, available in English and Spanish."

An existing partnership with the Community Health Centre of Northumberland is often called upon to support with other health issues too. It's a system that has been working across Northumberland County for almost two decades, and is especially important now during the pandemic.

But Horizons hasn't been able to solve every problem. Some workers weren't able to travel back to their home countries for the off-season. As the pandemic continued to impact the small island of Trinidad and Tobago, thousands of Trinidadian workers were stranded in Canada as their government closed its borders to all travellers.

"Imagine being stuck in a foreign country for an indefinite period of time – in the middle of a pandemic," says Daniel.

"Our heart aches for these workers, but they're getting through it the best they can." Horizons has continued to provide unwavering support to the stranded workers, offering regular check-ins, grocery drop-offs, and 24/7 on-call availability.

While the pandemic has complicated almost every aspect of this essential migrant worker program, Horizons has been nimble enough to support the workers every step of the way. None of this would be possible without you. Thank you for your continued engagement, which is actively helping the people who need it most.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Throughout the pandemic, Horizons has been delivering lifeline care packages with essential food and hygiene products to migrant workers. When public health conditions permit, the workers sometimes visit Horizons' Thrift Store and office to purchase affordable clothing and/or pick up care packages.



# Comadronas Devoted to Saving Lives

**What is it like to be a comadrona** during a pandemic? For Margarita Aguilar, who has been practicing as a traditional Indigenous midwife (comadrona) in Totonicapán, Guatemala for more than 25 years, the pandemic has meant more work and personal sacrifice, but even greater commitment to her calling.

More Indigenous women are giving birth at home, explains Margarita, because of lockdowns, curfews and restriction of movement, coupled with a fear of going to the hospital where they may become infected. Before COVID-19, Margarita averaged 8 to 10 prenatal checkups per month in the village of Vasquez, a small predominately Indigenous community nestled in the mountains. That number is now up to 20 or more per month.

“Some of us [comadronas] are moving or staying many days with our patients, even if it means leaving our families,” says Margarita. “We fear that if we go home and the patient goes into labour, with the lockdowns and restrictions, we will be too late if there is a complication.”

This commitment helped save the lives of a 23-year-old patient and her baby. Margarita chose to stay with the patient during labour but quickly realized there were complications. She called for help and accompanied the young mother to the hospital, where she underwent emergency surgery. Both baby and mother survived.

Despite the potentially hazardous work, comadronas do not always receive compensation, which depends on the family’s



Margarita does a prenatal check on a young patient, following COVID-19 protocols

ability to pay. Historically, comadronas have faced discrimination, exclusion and lack of support from health systems. Their work, therefore, is based on their own sense of duty and commitment.

Throughout our Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) program, comadronas have received training to enhance their skills in identifying warning signs and providing up-to-date care. During the pandemic, we have also provided personal protective equipment, such as masks and hygiene items, to help them do their jobs safely.

Thanks to MNCH, health workers have also gained a greater understanding of

comadronas’ work and value. This is helping to decrease barriers they may face when doing referrals or streamlining care.

Stories of comadronas like Margarita, who have stepped up during this global health crisis, exemplify their resilience and the added value they bring to their communities.

“I am worried about getting COVID-19, but even with my fear I know that my community needs me,” says Margarita. “I will continue to do prenatal check-ups, provide care during delivery, give mothers post-birth baths, and when necessary, accompany women to health posts or the hospital. I am a comadrona.”



## MNCH: Winding Down

**Over the past five years, the Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH)** project has worked to improve the delivery and utilization of healthcare services to reduce the preventable deaths of Indigenous mothers, newborns and children. We are happy to report there has been a notable reduction in mortality over the course of the project.

Year 5 has been like no other. The global pandemic has necessitated a quick adaptation and shift in activities. This includes developing large communication campaigns in Spanish and K’iche to inform people about safe COVID-19 practices and MNCH care, as well as a shift to virtual training for health staff.

Horizons has also supplemented local staff salaries to help comadronas access patients during curfew and negotiate transport when needed. With our local partner, PIES de Occidente we have also doubled efforts to source, procure, and donate much needed MNCH equipment and supplies to the hospital, health posts, health commissions, and comadronas.

With the winding down of activities in March 2021, final reporting and evaluation of the MNCH project is now being carried out. The project has left a notable and important footprint: sustainability. This has been amply demonstrated during the pandemic, where despite challenges, lives of Indigenous women, children and newborns continue to be saved.

## Leaders Respond to COVID-19



Indigenous women in Nicaragua displaced due to hurricanes and living in temporary shelters receive hygiene and personal protective equipment to keep them and their families safe.

**Indigenous people worldwide are** often disproportionately affected by epidemics and other crises. According to the United Nations, “Indigenous people are nearly three times as likely to be living in extreme poverty as their non-indigenous counterparts [and] account for 19% of the extreme poor, irrespective of the region and residence in rural or urban areas and even across international borders.”

In Central America and Mexico, poor access to health, education, and land, as well as cultural and political exclusion contribute to the stark levels of inequality – which have been only exacerbated in the past year. In the absence of government support systems, many Indigenous peoples have found venues to maintain and strengthen their own organizing systems, building on Indigenous expertise and ancestral knowledge to respond to the needs of their communities.

In Mexico, for example, our partner DESMI (The Organization for Economic

and Social Development of Indigenous Mexicans) noting increasing levels of hunger among Indigenous communities, has doubled efforts to support sustainable and eco-farming in Chiapas, providing seeds and training to family and community gardens. DESMI also developed culturally relevant educational programming that includes messaging about COVID-19 safety, hygiene, and vaccine information.

In Nicaragua, following landfall of Hurricanes Iota and Eta, and the destruction of hundreds of homes in Indigenous territories, AMICA (The Association of Indigenous Women of the Atlantic) provided COVID-19 training and hygiene supplies to people moving to temporary shelters. This helped manage and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in these congregate spaces.

With an increase in levels of domestic violence, AMICA has also worked throughout the pandemic to help Indigenous women and children who are

victims of violence access support by accompanying them to courts, providing referrals, and working with traditional and official authorities to ensure their safety.

In Panama, the Ngöbe Bugle Indigenous peoples live in geographically disperse areas. At the onset of the pandemic, poor communication and health infrastructure meant that very little information on COVID-19 was available to them. Our partner ACUN (Ngöbe Cultural Action) created a communication plan where youth and spiritual Indigenous leaders were quickly contacted via telephone to share information, and these leaders in turn contacted others in the community.

As COVID-19 continued to spread, ACUN worked with traditional healers to share information and act as health focal points across different communities. This has enabled early capacity for communities to understand COVID-19 risks, plan accordingly to keep themselves safe, and keep fairly low infection rates to date.

These examples illustrate that in working with Indigenous-led organizations and supporting projects designed and implemented by them, we not only improve the life and dignity of these vulnerable populations, but also ensure diverse peoples can lead and participate in effective project interventions.

As we look on 2021 and the future, we know that Indigenous-led expertise and leadership will continue to be key to an effective COVID-19 response and recovery.



I want to help Horizons empower people in Central America and Mexico.

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