



Taking cheer to Mexican orphans

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Janet Sanchez, left, and Janet Dominguez head off in clown costumes to entertain children living in orphanages in Mazatlan, Mexico.

They didn't look like clowns. They came to the Journal sans the requisite red rubber noses, greasepaint and garish wigs, but they were quite jolly.

I suppose I would be jolly, too, if I could bring as much joy to children as Janet Sanchez, Janet Dominguez and Benita Brennan do.

It's a funny business. Dominguez and Brennan — known in the trade as Jungle Janet and Bizzy BeeBee, respectively — are professional clowns, earning their living painting faces (theirs and others), crafting balloon creatures and providing general mirth.

Sanchez, alias Ms. Heart, clowns around as a hobby.

But for the gig they've loved the most, the gig they'd love to do again, they paid their own way to Mazatlán, Mexico, to entertain children living in orphanages — and those children paid them in smiles and the warm satisfaction of a Samaritan heart.

"I've done my share of parties here in town, and some of those children are pretty spoiled," Brennan said. "But there, you should see the gratitude of those kids. Those hugs. Those smiles. You go there, and you want to stay there for the rest of your life."

The women were inspired to march their big, floppy shoes south of the border when Sanchez read an August 2009 column I had written about a Rio Rancho woman and her friends — who aren't clowns but are pretty funny — who every year fly to Mazatlán the first weekend after Easter to volunteer a week of their time making repairs, cleaning, painting, landscaping and spreading their own brand of mirth among five orphanages and about 126 children.

It's part of Spring Mission Week, which draws several dozen volunteers from across the United States and Canada and is coordinated through Tres Islas Orphanage Fund, named after the three islands off Mazatlán.

Since 1987, the Wyoming based nonprofit has provided more than \$644,941 worth of food, supplies and safety improvements to the orphanages — and a way for kindhearted travelers to do something more than lie on the beach getting a tan, although there's still plenty of time for that while they're there.

"Not one penny goes to administrative costs," said Heidi Englade, the Rio Rancho woman in the column. "Tres Islas is not affiliated with any church, and you can pretty much decide how much you want to put into it and how much you want to just relax and vacation."

Englade and her friends have been going with the Tres Islas bunch for five years, paying their own way and splitting the cost of a beach condo, food and other personal expenses. Cost per person averages about \$1,000, including airfare.

Since her first mission week, Englade said, she has noticed continued improvements in the upkeep of the orphanages and the wellbeing of the children.

And she doesn't feel half bad herself.

"It's such a rewarding experience," she said. "You think you're giving so much to them, but in reality they are giving more to you."

And contrary to what you may think, the women say it feels safer there than here.

"I never feel fear there," Englade's fellow traveler Mary Cotruzzola of Albuquerque said. "We are treated like special guests."

Each morning, they meet up with other volunteers to be shuttled by Tres Islas' founders Donelle and Tom Manton to the orphanage scheduled that day.

"We do whatever is needed, and whatever way we feel we can help," Cotruzzola said.

At the end of their workday, the volunteers, orphanage staff and children have lunch.

And that is when they send in the clowns.

Sanchez, who started going down for mission week in 2010, talked Dominguez and Brennan into joining her in 2011.

For the past two years, the three women have done their share of cleaning, painting and gardening in the mornings, then transforming themselves into clowns in the afternoons to entertain the children.

"The clowns have made a huge impact on the children," Englade said. "These ladies work hard."

But here's the not-so-funny part. The clowns may not be going to Mazatlán this year.

Clowning business is down.

"The economy has hit us hard," Brennan said.

Sanchez, too, said her housecleaning jobs probably won't be enough to pay for her way and the cost of someone to take care of her ailing mother.

Still, the clowns remain jolly, hopeful they'll find a way.

"The desire is there to go," said Sanchez, who has also served as a Spanish translator for the group.

"When we go, we get so much in return. It's the best richness you can feel, better than winning \$1,000."

If only they could each win \$1,000.



Last year, Albuquerque volunteer Benita Brennan, left, took along her son, Sean Brennan, who designed this mural for Father Tovar's Home for Boys, one of the orphanages in Mazatlán.

COURTESY OF JANET SANCHEZ

More information:

To volunteer or donate, log on to www.orphanagefunds.org or call 1-888-459-8463.

Or e-mail Heidi Englade at henglade@yahoo.com for more information, clown travel donations, help with finding accommodations, roommates, flights. This year's trip is April 5-13.