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TRES ISLAS ORPHANAGE FUND A mission to help

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When Donelle Manton traveled to Mexico on assignment for a Cheyenne, Wyo., newspaper back in the mid-1980s, she didn't know what she would get herself into.

The Wyoming Tribune-Eagle sent her to photograph the children of Mexico. She chose Mazatlan, a coastal city across from the southernmost tip of the Baja California peninsula, a place where her father had once vacationed with a group of Wyoming stockmen.

Manton, who now resides along the banks of the Umpqua River with her husband, Tom, spent several days photographing children on Mazatlan's 15 miles of beaches, in the many plazas, on the streets and inside churches. One day, she sought out an orphanage, after learning thousands of such facilities operate throughout Mexico.

She chose the Orfanatorio Mazatlan, the city's oldest orphanage. It was founded in 1902, when a bubonic plague epidemic left numerous children without parents. While there, she asked the children who lived there what they were eating that night for dinner.

"They just gave me blank looks and said 'no, se' — we don't know. I thought they were just joshing. I'm like, 'Come on, what's for dinner.' They gave me the same response. And so I went and looked in the cupboards and they were right. They didn't know what they were going to have," Manton said.

She found a few tortillas, some beans and a few eggs. It wasn't nearly enough to feed the 25 hungry children who lived at the orphanage.

Manton and a Mazatlan woman who accompanied her there, Gaudelia Cruz Hernandez, went out and bought \$250 worth of groceries and brought them to the orphanage. That began a more than 20-year association between Manton and the orphanage.

When she returned to the United States, Manton held public showings of her photographs from Mexico. Proceeds from the sale of the photographs and poetry she wrote went into a fund that she used to buy additional food for the children of the Orfanatorio Mazatlan.

She enlisted Cruz to buy the food and take it to the orphanage, and Manton began making quarterly trips back to Mazatlan. After telling friends and relatives about her efforts, Manton found others who wanted to help, and the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund — named for the three islands that sit off the coast of Mazatlan — was born.

Manton — who works as an assistant for the Annual Giving Program at the University of Oregon in Eugene — serves as president of the orphanage fund, which operates as a federally recognized nonprofit group. Her husband, Tom, the water resources director for Douglas County, serves as vice president.

ALL MONEY TO ORPHANS

Since its beginning, the orphanage fund has provided more than \$200,000 worth of food and supplies to the Orfanatorio Mazatlan and three other orphanages added over the years. During the 12 months ending in October, nearly \$34,000 was spent on the 88 children who live in the four orphanages in the city of more than 350,000 residents.

The orphanage fund spent an average of \$6,303 for food at each of the four orphanages, \$403 for shoes, \$320 for school uniforms, \$271 for school supplies and \$109 for school backpacks.

All of the purchases are made in Mexico to benefit local merchants. The tariff on goods shipped from the United States would be prohibitive. Cruz, who accompanied Donelle Manton the first time to the Orfanatorio Mazatlan, still supervises the buying of supplies, along with her daughter, Jasmine.

One of the orphanages received nearly \$2,000 for construction costs and appliances last year. The orphanage fund also spent \$1,540 total for English instruction. Another \$863 was spent to provide Christmas dinners for each of the orphanages.

"We believe it's better to do for a smaller group of people substantially than it is to do a little bit for a larger group," Donelle Manton said. "By keeping ourselves small and growing at a respectable rate, we can do more for these children."



Youngsters at Mazatlan's Ciudad de Los Ninos (City of the Children) orphanage wrap themselves in new blankets made by donors of the Tres Islas fund.

Unlike most other nonprofit organizations, the amount spent represents the entire amount collected by the charity. Nothing is taken out of contributions for administrative expenses. The Mantons absorb most of those costs themselves and they also receive in-kind donations.

"We feel it's a blessing and an opportunity from God to serve these children. That's our reward. So our fund says in our bylaws that no one shall receive a salary or a stipend from any donation. One hundred percent of all donations truly go to the children," Donelle Manton said.

The Mantons don't touch the money at all. Donations are sent to the fund in Cheyenne, where the orphanage fund's accountant is located. That ensures that every penny is accounted for.

"It's not our money. It's the donors' money," Tom Manton said. "We have to be good stewards."

The couple wants the organization's operations to be so transparent, they collect every receipt and include copies in an annual report sent out to donors at the end of the year. The receipts show purchases for food, school uniforms, shoes, along with those for appliances and other items to improve the orphanages themselves.

The Mantons, who use their vacation time to make regular trips to the orphanage, also organize an annual weeklong trip for donors in April or May, where they can meet the children and take part in improvement projects.

They have refurbished bathrooms and living quarters, painted and replaced failing water pumps and pipes, among other projects.

INSPIRED BY GIVING

Jan Christensen, an Alaska Airlines flight attendant from Monroe, Wash., northeast of Seattle, was vacationing in Mazatlan over the Christmas holidays with her husband, Chris, and their son, Mark, when they met the Mantons by chance.

The family viewed a dance performance by a group of children from an orphanage operated by the Salvation Army. They enjoyed the dancing so much they watched the group perform several times in different locations over a few days.

Each time they saw the group dance, they saw an Anglo couple watching as well. At some point they approached the couple, the Mantons, and asked their connection to the dance troupe.

"We realized they were helping with the orphanages and we wanted to help them, as well," Jan Christensen said by telephone.

The Christensens became donors to the Tres Islas fund and have visited the orphanages several times in the past few years. It's very heartwarming to see the difference their donations and those of the others' make in the lives of these children, she said.

Through Tres Islas, money is provided to pay for outside computer lessons and English language training. Other children are provided vocational education training.

"These kids are given a new lease on life. The whole thing is to make them able to provide for themselves and have a direction in life," Jan Christensen said. "We've built relationships which are important to show these kids that they can have a better future."

Another couple, Dotty and David Wasik of West Homestead, Pa., outside Pittsburgh, found the Mantons after reading a write-up about the orphanage fund in a Mazatlan tourist newspaper. When they called the number provided, they learned the Mantons were in Mexico at the same time. Donelle and Tom met with them and took them on a tour of the orphanages.

They were surprised to find out how old the facilities were and were saddened to see the children living in poverty. Dotty Wasik said her thoughts drifted to her five children and 11 grandchildren and knew she wanted to help.

"It just grabbed at your heart," said Dotty Wasik, a fan of the Pittsburgh Steelers and strong safety Troy Polamalu, who grew up in Tenmile and graduated from Douglas High School in Winston. "We felt no children should live like that."

The couple made a commitment to provide \$100 a week to go toward food costs for the orphanages. They also bought a television to replace a small one that children at one of the orphanages had to crowd around to watch.

Like the Christensens, Wasik and her husband have made several trips to Mexico to visit the orphanages and work on improvement projects.

"We have seen all of the benefits of the money that has come in," Dotty Wasik said. "I would say it's divine providence with God taking care of the children down there."

Until now, news of the orphanage fund has spread mostly through chance encounters with folks such as the Christensens and the Wasiks and through word of mouth. The Mantons would like to encourage area residents, church congregations and service clubs to help out, as well.

"Every donation is really appreciated," Donelle Manton said.

While donors praise the Mantons for their commitment and their efforts, they downplay their own involvement in the orphanage fund. They see the work, completed in a nondenominational fashion, as a spiritual mission.

"We see the hand of God in our work," Tom Manton said



Tyee residents Tom and Donelle Manton operate the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund, which supplies food, clothing and other supplies to nearly 90 children who live in four orphanages in Mazatlan, Mexico.

So you know ...

What: Tres Islas Orphanage Fund

Information: Online at <http://www.orphanagefunds.org/> or call toll-free (888) 459-8463.

Donations: Tax-deductible gifts can be sent to Tres Islas Orphanage Fund, 3717 Monroe Ave., Cheyenne, WY 82001.