

Changing lives, one by one

An NGO saw a need and decided to act

BY **ARTHUR SALAZAR**
The News

Located in an industrial park in southeast Ciudad Juárez, Los Ojos de Dios, A.C. (The Eyes of God), is the first, and currently the only, children's home in the state of Chihuahua that houses abandoned children with special needs and chronic illnesses.

It is also the first and only institution of its kind in all of Mexico and possibly Latin America whose facilities operate following an ecological and self-sustaining model.

The home was founded by social activists Patricia Silis and Gerardo Rivera-Rodríguez, who sought to establish an institution where abandoned special needs children could live and receive specialized medical care and a school education.

"We wanted to help those most vulnerable and less fortunate in Ciudad Juárez. When a feature story appeared in the city's daily, which indicated that every day, a child was abandoned in Ciudad Juárez, Patricia called me and asked what we could do to prevent it, and that's when we decided to create this institution.

complete the remaining stages of construction or, for that matter, continue to operate.

Rivera, a native of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, received official recognition in March 2009 from the commonwealth's First Lady for his altruistic work in Ciudad Juárez. There is even interest on the island in opening an ecological and self-sustainable children's home modeled after Los Ojos de Dios.

All the minors housed at this institution are wards of the State or, more specifically, of the Chihuahua State and Ciudad Juárez Municipal DIF agencies (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) and the Ciudad Juárez branch of the Chihuahua State Office of Children and Family Welfare (Procuraduría de la Defensa del Menor y la Familia).

Before Los Ojos de Dios opened its doors, there existed no place – privately or government operated – in Ciudad Juárez nor anywhere else in the state of Chihuahua that possessed the necessary infrastructure, personnel, and resources needed to house and treat abandoned children with special needs or chronic illnesses.

Los Ojos de Dios, A.C. officially opened its doors in November 2008 after a period of six long and arduous years of research, planning and raising the necessary funds in Mexico and the United States in order to begin and conclude the first stage of construction.

"Los Ojos de Dios has brought great happiness to our lives. We are completely committed to this project ... The name comes from the idea that if humanity were to look at children like God our creator does, then all those atrocities that are committed against them (children) all over the world would simply not occur," explains Rivera.

This nonprofit organization officially opened its doors in November 2008 after a period of six long and arduous years of research, planning and raising the necessary funds in Mexico and the United States in order to begin and conclude the first stage of construction. The home also has an administrative branch office in El Paso, Texas.

Nonetheless, the home still continues to raise funds. If it stopped doing so, it could not

These children were either sent to Mexico City, where many specialized facilities for such children can be found, or were simply housed in pre-existing local homes.

Unfortunately, the care that they received in these non-specialized institutions was neither always adequate nor sufficient, as most of these homes were not designed with the special needs of these children in mind. These institutions could not provide the specialized medical care that a special needs or chronically ill minor requires.

With the opening of Los Ojos de Dios, the Ciudad Juárez Municipal DIF and the Chihuahua State Office of Child and Family Welfare hope that those children housed in Mexico City will now be able to return to the state of Chihuahua.

"It is a matter of great pride and a real



A little girl housed at Los Ojos de Dios organization looks at the photographer that takes her picture.



The home's construction materials included sandbags (adobe style), steel mesh and cement.

privilege to have a home like Los Ojos de Dios here in Chihuahua," said Claudia Sierra-Rentería, Head of the Ciudad Juárez branch of the Chihuahua State Office of Children and Family Welfare.

"We truly had an enormous need for such a home here in the state, because a lot of special needs children continue going under the

wardship of the DIF. Many of them, unfortunately, are simply abandoned by their parents because they do not have the economic resources needed to care and provide for a child with a permanent disability or medical condition. I am very fortunate and grateful to be able to count on Los Ojos de Dios to house and care for these children."

TOMORROW: HOPE LIVES IN CIUDAD JUÁREZ



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LOS OJOS DE DIOS

This photo shows the play area at the Los Ojos de Dios. The lot that the home occupies was donated by the municipality of Ciudad Juárez.



In July, 2010 two solar water boilers were installed, making the institution even more energy self-sufficient.



The water treatment facility at Los Ojos de Dios.

Silis and Rivera recognized early on that a home such as the one they envisioned would generate very high energy and maintenance costs. This is why they sought to build facilities that would be ecological, energy self-sufficient and structurally long lasting. The money saved on energy consumption and maintenance repairs goes toward providing additional services or improving existing ones.

“The facilities were designed to operate using all those resources readily available in a harsh desert environment of strong winds, plenty of sunlight and an abundance of sand. Our design will also enable new generations to learn that the only way to live in this world is to live in a sustainable way,” Silis said.

“In addition, by producing our own energy ... we also provide for our community, since the surplus electricity that we generate is transferred directly to the Ciudad Juárez electrical grid.”

The lot that the home occupies was donated by the municipality of Ciudad Juárez during the first administration of Héctor Murguía Lardizábal, while the Chihuahua state

government headed by former governor José Reyes Baeza committed itself to funding 20 percent of the total cost of construction of stages one and two.

The home generates its electrical energy using wind and solar power, heats its water using solar boilers, and treats its own raw sewage and wastewater by means of an ecological waste treatment plant that uses red California earthworms to carry out the process.

The earthworms are distributed in a first layer of coarse sawdust and subsequent layers of gravel. They turn all the raw sewage and wastewater coming from the home’s bathrooms, showers, laundry department, and cafeteria kitchen into water that can be used in construction projects, as well as to water various types of gardens, vegetable crops and fruit trees.

The earthworms consume all solid organic matter, while inorganic solids are trapped in the layers of gravel and sawdust. In time, the sawdust in the first layer turns into hummus, which is a very effective and pure organic fertilizer.

All of the home’s buildings were constructed

from sandbags (adobe style), steel mesh, cement and mortar, while a mixture of mortar, cement, and sand was used as a finishing coat. This method of construction ensures that in the winter the inside of these structures is warm, and in the summer cool, all without the need for AC units or heaters. In July of last year, 56 additional solar panels and two additional solar water boilers were installed, making the institution even more energy self-sufficient. One more housing unit was also completed in the same month. It will house 15 additional children, who are expected to arrive in the upcoming months.

The home also has a vegetable garden, an orchard, and a farm called La Niña, where horses and other farm animals, such as cows, rabbits, goats, horses, donkeys, and chickens, used in rehabilitative therapies like equine therapy are kept and raised. The garden and orchard provide produce that is used to feed the children living at the home, while the chickens provide them with eggs.

The institution was nominated by Sophie’s Foundation of Oslo, Norway, in March 2009 to

receive the foundation’s ecological award, Sophia, for its environmentally friendly and self-sustaining infrastructure, and in the summer of 2010, the Social Development Ministry’s (Sedesol) Habitat Program designated Los Ojos de Dios the Modelo ecológico en el país (Ecological model for the country).

“This institution has a clear understanding of the scarcity of water in a desert environment and the need to conserve it, as well as the need to make good use of all that which is widely available to them – such as sand from which to build dwellings, and the sun and high winds to generate electricity – all of which are in abundance in this arid region.

“The home’s facilities simply, and quite logically, make full use of all that their environment provides ... Patricia and Gerardo have designed and created an ecological model that can actually be replicated and promoted in other parts of the country,” notes Maria Eugenia González Alcocer, Head of the Social Development Ministry’s (Sedesol) Habitat Program.

In February 2010, Los Ojos de Dios successfully lobbied President Felipe Calderón and Health Minister José Ángel Córdova to modify the National Commission on Publicly Subsidized Healthcare Act (Ley de la Comisión Nacional de Protección Social en Salud) so that all the country’s orphaned children could be automatically covered by the People’s Health Insurance (Seguro Popular). Automatic coverage for all orphaned children began in March 2010, first with all orphans in Ciudad Juárez, and later on with the rest of the country’s orphan population.

This lobbying effort was driven by the story of Mary Paz, an orphan at Los Ojos de Dios, who was born with only 10 percent of her brain. She cannot see, hear, speak or move. On Feb. 14, 2009, she became gravely ill and was taken to IMSS (Mexican Social Security Institute) in Ciudad Juárez, where 24 hours after being admitted she was refused further medical treatment because she was not a ‘derechohabiente’, which simply means she did not have the legal right to receive medical care at an IMSS facility.

Patricia and Gerardo had to seek medical assistance for Mary somewhere else. She was taken to the city’s General Hospital where they were told that they would simply have to wait until the child could be seen by a doctor, for the hospital’s ER was full of victims from Ciudad Juárez’ continuing narco-violence.

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CLAUDIA SIERRA-RENTERÍA
State Government Official

Normally, for a child to receive medical treatment at an IMSS facility, the child’s parents must be derechohabientes or affiliated themselves. Unfortunately, Mary could not make use of this right since her own mother was not a derechohabiente and abandoned her immediately after birth.

“Our little Mary Paz ... who cannot see, hear, move or talk ... had the power to touch many hearts and change the healthcare legislation of an entire country,” Silis said.

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Los Ojos de Dios, A.C. currently houses 40 special needs children under the wardship of the State. All suffer from some type of permanent physical or neurological disability, or a chronic medical condition.

"The home's facilities can actually house up to 60 kids; regrettably, the violence in the city is making it very difficult for us to operate to full capacity," explains the institution co-founder and social activist Patricia Silis.

Some of the children at the home were simply abandoned by their parents because the latter could not afford to provide the specialized medical care that a child with special needs requires. In other cases, they were taken from the family home due to the severe physical abuse or neglect that they suffered at the hands of their parents.

There are even kids that are classified as "foundlings," because they were literally found on the streets and the DIF (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) authorities do not know the identity of their parents or if the child already has a name. Others have been left orphaned due to the death of their parents. One can even find Tarahumara children with special needs, who have ended up being abandoned by their parents, because in Tarahumara culture, a child born with some type of disability or chronic illness is considered a curse upon the progenitors.

"The growing number of orphans with special needs and chronic illnesses in the state is alarming. We have a huge list of them just waiting to be taken in. Los Ojos de Dios is the only safe haven for these children in the state of Chihuahua.

"Unfortunately, we cannot take them all in at once, since even we do not have the economic resources to do so. These are lives that, meanwhile, are simply wasting away," notes Silis.

The home also runs an adoption program in conjunction with the Chihuahua State Office of Children and Family Welfare (Procuraduría de la Defensa del Menor y la Familia), which is the government agency that approves all adoptions of children under the wardship of the State.

So far, nine children from Los Ojos de Dios have been adopted, a definite record for the institution according to Silis. "With three biological children of our own, my wife and I had no intention of considering adoption, but after meeting the children at Los Ojos de Dios, my eyes were opened. I had a spiritual encounter with God. As a result, our family is now praying so that the adoption process completes itself very soon, and we can bring our wonderful little girl home," recounts Joel Tooley, an adopting parent from the United States.

Some of the children's medical conditions and disabilities include microcephaly, macrocephaly, mental retardation, autism, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), hypoglycemia, hepatitis, various types of physical disabilities and Down Syndrome.

All children housed at this institution receive specialized medical care from pediatricians and other medical specialists, as well as rehabilitative, physical, psychological, and language therapies, including a school education that uses the Montessori Method of teaching.

When a child first arrives, a general pediatrician carries out a complete medical examination. If a child has been previously diagnosed with a permanent neurological or physical disability, or a chronic illness, he or she is referred to the appropriate medical specialist who either confirms this previous diagnosis or refutes it. If the previous diagnosis



A kid rides a horse at Los Ojos de Dios. All children housed in the institution receive specialized medical care from pediatricians and other medical specialists, as well as rehabilitative

Hope lives in Ciudad Juárez

Kids housed at Los Ojos de Dios find attention to their needs

is confirmed, the specialist designs a treatment plan and provides a future prognosis for the child.

Additionally, a staff psychologist carries out a thorough psychological assessment in order to determine the child's needs in terms of psychological and language therapies. Psychotherapy is no less important, since it tries to undo all the emotional

and behavioral harm that has been caused by the neglect, abandonment and/or physical abuse that most of these kids have already experienced in their short lives.

The Montessori Method is a teaching method that allows children to use all their senses in order to learn, know, explore, and experience everything

in their environment. It prepares them to confront daily life. It also covers all traditional school subjects, from reading to mathematics.

With this method, children only study those subjects which they find interesting, and study them until they have completely mastered them. When they achieve this, the child's natural and



ve, physical, psychological, and language therapies.

innate interest in learning new things serves to motivate him or her to continue studying and mastering all the other subjects on the school curriculum.

By the end of the school term, all subjects will have been covered and studied, and, most importantly, will have been mastered by the child.

As a nonprofit organization, Los Ojos de Dios, receives the bulk of its funding from private sources, just like the other 32 private children's homes that operate in Ciudad Juárez.

However, since most of the children at these institutions are wards of the State, the DIF agency pays each one a monthly support stipend for each child that they house at their facilities. Only minors between the ages of 0 and 6 are housed in one of just two homes that are directly operated by the DIF. All others go to private homes like Los Ojos de Dios.

"We have always made use of private institutions. They are an integral part of our children's home system. We pay each institution a monthly support stipend for each one of our children that they house ... Nonetheless, in order for us to make use of a private children's home, the latter must have been previously certified by the Municipal Children's Home Committee (Comité de Albergues Municipal) as adequate and safe to operate



Mexico's First Lady Margarita Zavala is seen during a visit to the organization's premises in Ciudad Juárez.



Children use all their senses to learn, know, explore, and experience everything in their environment.



Children receive rehabilitative and physical therapies at Los Ojos de Dios.

as such," explains Claudia Sierra-Rentería, Head of the Ciudad Juárez branch of the Chihuahua State Office of Children and Family Welfare.

All homes currently operating in Ciudad Juárez have been certified by this committee.

Sadly, the amount given by the DIF for each child, more often than not, is really just "symbolic,"

since it does not offset the real cost per month of providing food, shelter, basic medical care, and schooling to all the minors living at that particular institution, Sillis said. It also does not cover the salaries of the home's staff, the cost of infrastructure maintenance and repairs, or the consumption of utilities like gas, water, and electricity, she added.

All those expenses that cannot be defrayed with what the government pays out for each child are covered by the home itself with money that is raised through various types of private-funding initiatives.

The situation is even more pressing if the children living at the home require some type of specialized medical care, like the kids at Los Ojos de Dios.

In their case, the DIF actually pays the home four times the amount it would normally allot for a non-special needs child housed at another private home. This is done because Los Ojos de Dios houses children that require continuous medical care.

Unfortunately, this amount does not even come close to covering a special needs child's total expenses for one month. "Each child at Los Ojos de Dios requires approximately 12000 pesos per month in support and specialized medical care," Sillis said.

"The home also spends 145,000 pesos biweekly on the payroll of the home's 102 employees."

Add to this amount the cost of medical devices for the children, occasional surgical procedures and other hospitalizations in private medical facilities equipped to treat special needs children, diapers, food, oxygen tanks, automobile fuel, pest control, 24-hour security, and the cost of those utilities that the home is still not able to generate on its own, such as potable water and the natural gas used in the cafeteria kitchen, and the cost of keeping Los Ojos de Dios running is quite high for an institution whose funding comes, primarily, from the money it can raise in a particular year.

As a nonprofit organization, Los Ojos de Dios, receives the bulk of its funding from private sources.

"The violence in the city and the socio-economic crisis it has generated has caused the exodus of a lot of businesses from Ciudad Juárez that were loyal benefactors. This has definitely affected our funding ... But being, for the most part, energy self-sufficient has enabled us to weather the storm and actually continue to grow quite a lot," Sillis said.

"The payment of our employees' IMSS (or Mexican Social Security Institute) affiliation payroll tax has currently become our biggest expenditure. Even though our employees fairly deserve to have this employment benefit, as this institution is the source of their livelihood, the IMSS should really apply a lower tax rate to non-profit organizations like our own. Unfortunately, we pay the same rates that a for-profit entity, such as a business, would pay," she added.

"We lose a lot of sleep trying to figure out how to keep the home open, especially in this recession. An institution like this requires a lot of funding to keep operating," comments co-founder Rivera.

Since 2010, its main source of funding has been an annual telethon called Siembra, which takes place in March and is organized through Channel 44, Cadena Tres' affiliate in Ciudad Juárez. It runs for 12 hours and features many Mexican celebrities. The event is broadcast simultaneously in Ciudad Juárez and its sister border city, El Paso, Texas.

"This telethon involves the Juárez and El Paso communities coming together for a good cause. For 12 hours straight, we do nothing but interact with the people of the two cities, who on this day, work for nothing but for sake of love. The Juárez community also looks forward to Siembra, since it brings with it a full day of peace and tranquility to the entire city," Sillis said.