



## 1508 VIDES Heartbeats E-News: Forming Leaders

Greetings,

*We'd like to highlight an amazing prevention job being done at the ROOT of the Unaccompanied Minors Migration problem in Santa Rosa de Copan, Honduras brilliantly described by **Mary Joy Cunningham**, one of our VIDES Volunteer Missioner*



*Mary Joy Cunningham in the middle of Honduras' girls*

Mary Joy writes: I had the privilege and honor to work as a VIDES volunteer missioner with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA, Salesian Sisters) in their girls middle-high school in Santa Rosa de Copán, Honduras for one year.

**Honduras is a beautiful place.** The natural beauty of the country is breathtaking; the people are some of the most kind, loving, simple, humble people I have ever met. Yet, the combination of political corruption, powerful gangs, economic difficulties, and an education

system with staggering limitations has made for a country of little opportunity and promise. Perhaps more than others, this lack of promise places a heavy weight on the shoulders of the young. **You see them - at an age when they should be inspired by dreams for the future - starting unstable families as young teens, getting drawn into the gang scene, and generally accepting the attitude that 'no good can come from Honduras'.**

From this experience, I find myself understanding of and empathetic towards those waves of young teens and children who have been fleeing to the United States from Central America. I understand that many of their fears about safety are likely very legitimate. I understand the desire to shed the weight of a society, which at times seems to barely allow one to stay afloat, let alone move forward. Yet, it saddens me to see the hope of these countries - the youth - fleeing, at times literally for their lives. **What hope can a country like Honduras have if the best of their society feels too stifled to stay and make the changes so desperately needed?**

**In pondering these ideas over the last year, I have been struck by the reality that there seems to be no adequate, short-term solution to the plight of countries like Honduras.** Although it is necessary to bandage wounds - to tend to immediate needs and 'treat symptoms', such solutions will not stop similar wounds from occurring in the future. I am convinced that, **for lasting change to occur, healing and growth need to come from within**, and most likely, little by little.

But how do you heal from deep within? Primarily, **grace**. Yet, God seems to have a keen interest in using people - using people as instruments through which His grace can flow. And so, my answer is: **the young**. Forming young people with a deep love of God, an unshakeable sense of justice and morality, and the tools of education is in effect forming future leaders with the means to truly transform a society from the inside out.

From this conclusion, I am more than ever convinced of the worth of schools such as the

**Instituto Salesiano María Auxiliadora (ISMA) of Santa Rosa de Copán.** At ISMA, I saw **girls not only learning about God, but learning to make decisions in line with a love of God and a love of goodness.** I saw girls, teachers, and religious sisters in a beautiful, family atmosphere like none I had ever seen at a middle school or high school before. I saw girls being given a good general education - a solid base for future studies. I saw girls being given real practice and experience in leadership roles. And, interestingly, I saw girls being given an **extremely valuable combination of academic and experiential knowledge** in the area of business administration.



The high school program of ISMA is designed specifically to give the girls a background in business administration at an impressive level, which I might equate to community college classes in the United States. During their time at the high school they work for a period in an internship with a local business. In

their eleventh grade, the girls actually work as a class to do research, and develop an idea for a small company. During their final year, the girls establish and spend a period of time running this company in the city of Santa Rosa. While I was working in the school, the senior class of 2014 developed a company called *Delichips*. They prepared, packaged, and sold organic potato and yucca chips throughout the city.

Even in my relatively short time connected with ISMA, I have seen fruits of the institution, which make me proud and excited to be a part of its work. By keeping up contact with some of the girls over the internet, I learned that members of the class of 2014 decided to keep *Delichips* running after their graduation. Eight girls produced the chips, and were able to have their products sold in seven different *pulperías* (corner stores, comparable to 7-11s) throughout Santa Rosa, as well as at a snack stand at their alma mater.



To be honest, I would be incredibly impressed if eight eighteen-year-old girls successfully established and ran a company soon after their high school graduation in the United States; let alone girls in a **third world country, where independent, successful, young women are still something of a rare novelty!**

Recently, in messaging one of these girls over Facebook, I learned that they had decided to let the company go. But, I wasn't disappointed. The company had been doing well; the reason for the decision was that its young owners had begun to attend university, and decided to focus their time on their studies. (She told me that the class of 2015 was taking up the baton, and would adapt and continue *Delichips* as their own class business.) **In a country where illiteracy is not uncommon, let alone completion of a high school-level education, I am**

**thrilled by the number of ISMA graduates whom I personally know who have told me that they have gone on to study in universities!**



Just the other day, I saw pictures on Facebook of ISMA graduates working in some sort of rural medical clinic in Honduras. One of them has told me that she hopes to find a scholarship that will allow her to go on to study nursing. The comment she had posted was:

**"Honduras está cambiando" - "Honduras is changing."**

Earlier, I referenced Honduras as a place of little promise for the young. Perhaps I should modify that statement.

The youth of Honduras hold within themselves a potential to be the promise of Honduras - to truly transform their own society.

**But can we help them actualize this potential?**

Yes, we can, by giving them the formation and educative tools of schools like ISMA- Instituto Salesiano María Auxiliadora in Santa Rosa de Copan.

I "liked" that girl's comment on Facebook; but I'm not sure if she realizes the incredible amount of hope and pride it gave me to see it.

**Steadily, little by little, Honduras is changing.**

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**May God Bless You All!**

**S Mary Gloria Mar, FMA  
VIDES+USA Director  
210-373-9532  
[director@vides.us](mailto:director@vides.us)**

**Russell Harpring  
VIDES+USA Vice Director  
502-551-6832  
[v.director@vides.us](mailto:v.director@vides.us)**



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