

**Mexico '99**

**Reflections from TNT**

Once again we started out as a group of typical suburbanites trekking to Latin America for a ten-day stay. Well, sort of!

I think it was around 12 a.m. Saturday, July 3rd if I remember correctly. About 45 of us loaded up our stuff on this supposedly brand-spanking new coach bus that was going to take us all of 900 miles away to Juarez, Mexico. Well, the bus wasn't new, my cousin forgot a lot of his stuff including his state I.D., and my parents were sad to see me leave. But I guess what comes next was the most important thing of all.

My experience in Mexico was somewhat different than my trip to Guatemala last winter. This time I was accompanied by 44 of my dearest peers. As a group we complained and whined on the bus ride down. We went down there with a message to bring to the Mexican people. We were just teens of suburban Chicagoland trying to help the less fortunate.

Many people in this country think that today's youth are evil. People like Marilyn Manson (so-called Satan's Savior), the Trenchcoat Mafia (Columbine, CO) and all other evils in our world. But if people could look at TNT and the 45 of us that journeyed to Mexico and look at the smile of one of the little children of Juarez, they would see the positive side of our teens.

The smiles of the kids of San Lucas, Guatemala and Juarez are something that will travel to the depths of anyone's heart and remain forever. The bonds we forged and the memories we shared in Juarez could be described as no less than a miracle.

My message, when I join the classroom, is to be no more than honest, willing, and sincere. It takes this kind of trip to step aside from the hustling around and reflect upon one's own life.

Coming home, I find myself trying to spread a little bit of goodness into some young people at home. With every encounter in life there is a mountain to climb. Whether we quit climbing or even get sick while climbing, there is always that reason to keep climbing farther and farther into the church.

Barrett Laspesa

If anyone would have told me that a week in Mexico would change me forever, I probably would not have believed them. But it did. We were faced with many challenges throughout the week, but no one expected to face such a large challenge on the bus ride there. The air was broken, seats didn't recline, people slept on the floor, and the televisions were broken. Even though we all complained at the time, I feel that this is what we needed to prepare for what we were going to see.

As we crossed the border we saw little Mexican women collecting money in cans while holding their children by the hand. Driving down the streets of Juarez, I was in disbelief: ten minutes away was a completely different way of life.

We unloaded the bus and headed to our sleeping quarters and found we would be sleeping in a room of about 14 by 14 feet with four triple bunk beds. After we received our orientation we were told to go mingle with the people of their church community. I was nervous because I knew no Spanish and was at first apprehensive to go and approach the children. Then a little girl came up to me and wanted me to swing her around. The feeling that I had is hard to explain. One thing that I took away from this trip is that the international exchange of the smile from one face to another could change a person. The children were so happy – probably happier than some people I know. The one thing that ceases to amaze me is that they don't have nearly as many material possessions as we do; but, they cherish all they have and take nothing for granted. I now know that even though we live completely different lives we all want the same thing – to be loved. I think that even though they have less than us in some aspects they have so much more: They have the gift of loving anyone and they will let no barrier stand in the way.

In teaching the children at Vacation Bible School, I felt that I was doing something to bring the children closer to God. I also realized that we have so much in common with the children. When I played with them I don't think I ever smiled so much in my life.

The following two days there I helped to build a house. I was brought to many emotions physically and mentally. It was hard for much of the group and I came to expect that Mexican women are supposed to be in the house all day. Many of the Mexican men on the site would often have us stop doing our jobs because we were women. In the end, that made all of us want to work even harder to show them that women can work just as hard as men.

As we worked at the site the sun was beating down, but I never seemed to be extremely tired. The night that we climbed the mountain was very powerful for me. I was amazed with the beautiful land we looked onto, but sorrowful at how they lived. Looking at the cross that stood next to me, I realized that these people have so much to teach me. Standing upon that mountain I realized how lucky I was to have my family and all my friends. As we were seated there listening to the sounds I thanked God for letting me spend this trip with all these people that mean so much to me.

Every night I found that I got a lot out of the songs we would sing as a group. I would just close my eyes and reflect on everything that happened that day.

In my small group I learned so much not only about myself, but also about the other five people there. My group developed a bond in which we knew we would not be judged. We could say how we felt and they would all be there to comfort us when we needed it.

When the last day came I found myself taking in every remaining second because I didn't want to leave. One thing that the trip also taught me was how powerful the Bible is and how it can help you through problems. I had never, besides CCD, opened the Bible to read it and I will take that home with me.

There is so much I learned it is hard for me to express it all on this paper. Much of it is in my heart, but will be used to better my life and hopefully all those that surround me. My mission now is to keep everything I learned in my heart so I can share all I learned with all the people at home. "Everything happens for a reason" and wow – was this one of those experiences!

Melissa Nintz

## My Story about Mexico

My trip to Juarez, Mexico was an unforgettable and memorable trip for me. After a long, hot bus ride we arrived in the small town of Juarez. I was surprised to see that the town actually looked better than I expected. There were stores and an ice cream shop. The local market had lots of cool things like blankets, shirts, maracas, etc. However, the houses were not near as nice as we have at home. The people were making do with the little that they had.

I enjoyed every minute helping out the community and teaching in the Vacation Bible School. It was a great experience to see the culture that they live in and also helping out to make the city a better place. It was lots and lots of fun playing with the children and talking to the parents. I also enjoyed going to church with old friends and new acquaintances.

One experience I will never forget is climbing up to the top of a mountain. It was a rough trip both up and down because of the rocky land. Sometimes rocks broke loose so we had to watch our step and help each other. Once we reached the top, we took time to look at the scenery, enjoy moments of silence, and take a group picture. The cross against the sunset was beautiful!

This trip brought me together with a wonderful group of friends. We sang together, worked together, and helped each other out. I enjoyed sharing experiences with my small group. I hope to return next year to continue building my friendships and giving my service to God and His people.

Mike LaPorte

**“daniel”**

by Mike Vlachos

my life is forever changed now,  
since you were “given” to me.  
Though I wished it could be,  
For more than five days,  
I knew that’s all it could be.  
Your smile always used to bring me joy,  
Now the memory of it brings me tears.  
I know I’ll never forget you,  
Even through the many years.  
Although you may forget me,  
To me, our friendship will never end.  
I just want to say “I love you, daniel,  
And you’ll always be my friend.”

N.B. Before our departure, I received the following e-mail from a sophomore at Andrew High School:

Well, the effect of me leaving for a foreign country is finally hitting my mom, and I'm more than sure that it'll be hitting me in about a day or so! I can't wait to do God's will for the less fortunate and (I just have to have this experience. My mom is freaked out about that serial-killer who has ties to the Juarez area, but I keep telling her that Chris Gallagher (a graduate this year from Tinley High who stands about 6'3" and weighs... well, probably 220 pounds), you, and I won't let anything happen to anyone on this trip – incoming freshman included (little joke there [his parenthesis])! I have more people telling me to be smart and to be careful.... I'm really getting sick of it! I know that I have to be careful, and I may not show it all the time, but I do act smartly and think things out before I go ahead and do them.....

### REFLECTIONS

Much of my trip to Mexico was spent playing with a boy named Daniel. Although communicating was rough, our best times together were spent with the both of us smiling. We spent time playing baseball, soccer and (the part we enjoyed most) piggyback rides. It was cool to see the look on his face and how much it meant being a "friend" with a fifteen-year-old teen, since he was only seven himself. The look on his face made the whole trip.

We wrestled together and had a mock bullfight with Daniel serving as the matador and me being El Toro (the bull). He would run away and then scream "Toro!" as loud as he could. With my fingers serving as horns, I'd charge at him and snort. Daniel, loving every minute of it, stood in front of a pole and, thinking I didn't see it, once again yells "Toro!" Now, having faked hitting my head many times at home, I ran into the pole and pretended to be knocked out. The "little matador", as I call him, came and put a foot on my chest and posed for a "victory photo". Just after the picture was taken, I jumped up and scared the daylights out of him. That's when he and three of his friends jumped on top of me and we had a big wrestling match – always with the kids winning.

Before I knew it, it was the day before we were to depart and the youth group was invited to a service with the community. Daniel's face lit up when I entered the one-room church. Right away he came and sat down between me and my friend Kelly. She was amazed at the bond that we had formed over the past four days and constantly laughed at the two of us. That night was filled with piggyback rides, volleyball games and food. Suddenly a lady with the organization approached us and explained to me that Daniel had to go home "because the sky is dark" and that Daniel had to say good-bye. Not knowing what to say, I said, "Buenos noches mi amigo" (goodnight my friend). In response I got a hug as big as the smile on his face! After a two-minute hug he walked home and out of my life for what may be forever.

The next day we cleaned the area where we had stayed, packed our things, and left. The whole ride home I thought about him. And I have every day since. I hope I never forget Daniel. And, for some odd reason, I know he'll never forget me.

Mike Vlachos

Going to Juarez, Mexico was one of the most inspiring and exciting times of my life. I met many different people -- young and old -- and formed bonds with some of them.

Two main reasons for going to Mexico were to build houses and teach Vacation Bible School (V.B.S.). During the first two days my small group combined with three other groups helped build houses. I first laid bricks for a house, but I didn't really know how. El Maestro, one of the Mexican workers, eagerly tried to help and I learned quickly. Other jobs we did on the work site included mixing cement, putting on a roof, and building wooden structures for the corner of the house. I learned about teamwork and how to communicate with some of the older Mexican people. It was very fun.

The last two days I taught V.B.S. That is where I made a lot of friends. Three kids in particular were Jesus, Ricardo and Ismael. I'd give them piggyback rides and play tons of games with them like baseball, basketball, pato-pato-gonzo (duck-duck-goose), and tag. I thought of these kids as my own brothers.

There was one kid who was also named Ismael. During V.B.S. he would just goof around and not listen. But when we were leaving, he was there wishing us good-bye. I was so thrilled to see him there and to see how he had changed his ways from the first day.

In conclusion, in Mexico I made many friends and learned how the Mexican people live their lives. I felt that I helped both adults and kids in many ways. My worst part of the trip was seeing all the houses and how terrible and sick they looked. The worst feeling was knowing that I was leaving and I couldn't do anything else to help. I would go back any day.

T. J. Dexter



As we loaded up the bus the nervous feeling in my stomach seemed to grow. I had spent the whole week prior questioning my belief in God. I felt I was really not where I wanted to be with God. I didn't feel like I was walking by His side anymore. This is what made me nervous. I was nervous about the bus ride and what to expect when we finally reached Mexico. People would tell me "you're safe in God's hands." Well I was a little unsure about God then so those words were little comfort. We said our final good-byes and left leaving a crowd of crying family and friends.

The bus ride there was pretty bad. There was no air conditioning and it was very crowded. We survived, however, with the humor we found in our two bus drivers and the two fans that we stopped and bought. The fans weren't much help, but they were enough.

When we got there we unloaded our stuff. Then we gathered in the Vacation Bible School (VBS) room for a welcoming from some Mexican families. They sang "Happy Birthday" to Gina and a tear rolled down my cheek. At that moment I saw God.

I saw God the rest of the week through all the children at VBS and through some of my friends and chaperones that came down with me. So I decided I would try to build a relationship with God. I never realized how easy that might be (there at least). It was easy there because there was no one really in Mexico to fall back on except God. By the end of the trip (Friday) I felt pretty comfortable with God but I knew I had more to learn about Him and I felt I needed to give Him more of myself. I felt a part of me holding on to the not-real me. So I got on the bus with that and the "Holiness, holiness is what I long for" song in mind and God holding my hand. I felt like a brand-new person. My heart felt filled with more love and joy than ever before.

On the bus ride home I began to think about all I had learned. I learned what it's like to be genuinely happy. I learned how to open my heart more easily to others (including strangers). I learned how interesting the Bible could be (and promised to read more of it when I returned home). I also built new friendships and strengthened old ones. And, best of all, I found God (for certain) and through God I found myself. My true self! What I realized at that point was that I am on a new mission. And that is to share God with others and share my true self as well.

When I got home I kissed my parents hello and told them about all my wonderful breakthroughs and experiences. Then later that night I went online and checked my mail. I read one forward that's called "Lunch With God" by an anonymous person. After reading the story I knew I had just had my own "lunch with God". And He's the reason I always have and always will have a smile across my face.

## Lunch With God

There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer, and he started his journey. When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Once again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word. As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps; he turned around, ran back up to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I have ever seen!" Meanwhile the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?" She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." But before her son responded she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. People come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime.

Kelly Nagle

## Mexico '99

Many people asked where are you going? This year we told them Mexico and they were all jealous. Then it came down to where in Mexico are you going? Well at the time, one would have to understand that the place we were going to be a surprise to everyone. The stories of the place were always there, but you have to understand that Juarez changed the life of many of the teens.

The ride was 36 hours (bus ride), hot, and no room to move for space. The ride there is what I think made most teens want to turn around and go home. Do you ever eat one thing for every meal? Well 45 people did, eating nothing but McD's on the way there. The BBQ on the last night on the road was wonderful. Within 10 hours we would all be in Mexico.

We made it! Across the border into Mexico and what we saw from there will surprise you. One goes they're expecting the worst but never expected the best. The homes are small and made of bricks and wood. The place we were staying at was made by other Americans. We arrived there and were told some of the do's and don'ts. Did you know that purple means that you are with someone? Girls after they finish school are not allowed out of the house? Well that explains why you do not see them on the streets of Juarez. One may never see a couple together unless they are serious about each other. So much information we found out in one hour in Juarez. We were able to meet the people of the church after their service was over. I have never seen better volleyball players before. They were all open and friendly with us and that is what got the trip off to a new beginning.

Bible school and work were waiting for us. We split in half and started what we came here to do. The children in bible school were the most playful children you have ever seen. They were glad we were there and they loved the games we played together. Although I think chasing the hats we all had was their favorite game. We played and sang a lot of songs with the children. Padre Abraham was their favorite song to sing. We spent two days for two hours with the children. They made the trip seem endless. Two days later, on to the work site. The two things we had to do were build a roof and to lay bricks down for a new house. We finished the jobs and we were ready to put a second floor on the second house. Too bad our time was cut short. I wonder what it looks like now? The market was a blast and the items were all really inexpensive and nice. That is only one thing we did on our free time without the children.

From the ground everything looks so high up. We climbed a hill (a very high hill) with a cross on top that seemed to be looking over the city. Stand behind it and you can see a statue of Jesus. This statue can be reached from New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico. The sun setting in the west made the night a night to remember and the sounds from the town below were sounds one always hears but never really listens to. The ice cream and waterballoon-volleyball were some of the fun things at night we did. I wonder who won the water fight? We attended a service there and it was up bet and wonderful.

We made one last circle and said our good-bys to Nate, Bill, Sara, Jessica and the awesome bus driver Sonja and headed home. At the border we were stopped and our entire luggage was checked and then on the road again stopping at McD's for meals along the way of course. We got home early and were greeted by all our friends and family. Before everyone left, we ended up in a big circle and sang our two songs. We were all glad to be home but it looked like some people did not want to leave. Every night we did this thing called "CLUB." We all sit around and talk about where we saw god working that day and give out "YEAH Gods." It made me think but like one of my friends said "Thanks God for bring me down here looking but letting me leave seeing. "Thanks to everyone who made this trip one to remember. YEAH GOD!!!"

## Mexico '99

There is an old saying that goes, " You only get out what you put in." For me, that was not true of the Mexico Mission trip. I gained much more than I put in. The young Mexicans taught me so much more than our group or I taught them.

As we started our journey the purpose of the trip was to build a house and teach Bible school. Later, I realized that we built something far more important than a house and we learned far more than we taught. While we made progress building a house, we formed concrete bonds that can not be broken.

We spent time teaching Bible lessons to the children, but we learned every minute we were in their presence.

I learned to be happy for what I have and not regret what I don't have. I was taught to be satisfied with today and know that God will provide for tomorrow. I learned to accept people for themselves and not for what they have because sometimes the less they have materialistically the more they have spiritually. The Mexicans despite the language and cultural barriers accepted us.

The happiness of the people we met astounded me. I envied their ability to see good amidst the poverty.

Faith and Love of God is what I learned the most about from this trip. The Mexicans are deeply religious and have a very strong faith. I admire the fact that they can love God that much even though they have so little. My own faith in God doubled in strength in just those nine days.

I have been inspired by this trip try and become a Youth Works Staff member sometime when I'm in college. In our favorite song from Mexico the last lines are:

Take my heart and form it

Take my mind, transform it

Take my will, conform it

To yours, To yours, Oh Lord.

God did just that to each and everyone of us who went on the Mexico mission trip.

Kevin Chlum

## Mexico '99

Matt 19.13-15 Jesus bless the little children...

Sunday arrived at approx. 6:00 p.m. Worked as a group to empty the van, truck, bus. The people of the parish prepared us fruit snacks, tostados – when they have so little!

The bus trip was ver uncomfortable to say the least; the air conditioning went out – very hot. The weather in Juarez is hot also but there is always a breeze. The kids are doing great – VBS is fun. Had about 60 neighborhood kids here singing songs, played games, acted out the gospel reading and did crafts. The teens are bonding with the kids too. It's quite a sight to see. There is so much love in everyone here you can just feel and breathe it. Everyone is so grateful for being here. We are blessed to be able to do this.

Everyone is enjoying so far. I am building houses, it's very hard – brick and mortar.

Building houses – very hard work, hot, dirty, dirt blowing everywhere. In spite of it all it felt good to do something with our hands that makes results which could be seen. We worked hand in hand with the local people even though most of us could not communicate very well; we made awesome strides on the housing project. A new roof on one house along with tires removing to put in stairs to the existing house. Tires are buried into the hillside to help prevent landslides. The tires were heavy and filled with sand and stone. 3 tires deep, we removed between 9-12 tires. The bricklayers finished the first floor of the new house and put the wood down for the second floor. A lot was accomplished in the short period of time that we worked on the project. Another project we worked on was the kindergarten classroom on the church property. Approx. 5-6 coats of paint were applied, a hole in the ceiling fixed. I am taking a collection up to pay for a new tile floor for the kindergarten room. It is missing quite a few tiles and is very worn and cracked in places. Hopefully the children will have a nice floor put on. It will be a nice remembrance of TNT's time down in Juarez. I sent a check to Bill at youth works on 7/22/99 for the floor.

Bonding continues with the local children even after we finish VBS. Before and after worksites the children continue to look for and play with the teens they had befriended during our 2 days of VBS. Hugging, handholding, horsy backs rides, chasing, soccer, and volleyball with the local adults also, and smiles everywhere. It's amazing to see how happy everyone could be with so little.

The Youth Works team was amazing also. We were so busy most of the time no had had a chance to be bored. The singing at night along with the stories was another wonderful time. Reflections were good also. The frosting on the day was the small groups and the big group time. It was very moving to see how deep our teens are. Then we did the washing of the feet... I can't put into words how I personally felt. It was one of the hardest things I ever let someone do for me but given the time I could have washed every teens feet that was there. I truly feel every TNT member deserves it. They are so good and hard working.

I believe most of our teens got a lot out of this mission. I know I did. I would like to go next year, preferably on a plane!

Mrs. Andreason

Leaving for a week to go to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico was a sad experience for my family and I because we had never been apart. I said bye to my family and I got on the bus & sat next to my chaperone, Charity. We started talking and I felt more comfortable, then I started to get to know the TNT group and they were nice to me.

When we reached the borderline I had great expectations for myself and the people I was going to work with. My greatest fear was not accomplishing my task as a new missionary. Thank God that everything turned out good. This trip showed me not to take things for granted because there are people less fortunate. We reached our destination and we had an orientation of the place we were staying at. The week is about to begin. There are two groups; working site – working on refugee houses and the Vacation Bible School – working with the children around Juarez. Both groups were hard work but we did it. At the work site people were making cement, putting on blocks, and roofing. VBS we sang, worked on crafts, and read from the Bible. The week went fast, no one could believe we were about to leave. Before we left the Pastor led us in a prayer to take care of us on the trip back home. (Thank the Virgin Guadeloupe we came back safe.)

Lourdes Gonzalez

## Mexico – 1999 Mission Trip

“This could be one of those ‘Life Changing’ experiences”. With that insight from Padre I began thinking about our upcoming trip, still 6 months away. Past Mission trips (Appalachia & Kentucky) had been interesting and eventful, but not life changing. I was wondering what he saw that would make Mexico different.

An overnight lock-in 5 months later offered no clues and did little to convince me that this trip would be anything special. True, it appeared to be an interesting trip offering an opportunity to help a community in need as well as an opportunity for the teens to grow together in the process. The lock-in left me tired (no sleep) and cautious towards the trip however the seeds for the trip were planted. The group bonding began, the small groups were formed, and the anticipation began to build.

Fast forward approximately 1 month to Friday, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 12 hours into our 36-hour bus ride, at this point I was sure I knew what Fr. Jim meant by a ‘Life Changing’ experience. We were really just underway and discovered that ½ the seats didn’t recline, the VCR stopped working, one of the bus drivers was a chain smoker and the air conditioning quit during the hottest part of the day. All our expected suburban comforts were slowly slipping away and the group let it be known they were not happy. In retrospect this was simply setting the stage for events to come.

By Sunday we had had our fill of McDonalds, crowded buses, and no sleep but had accomplished the goal, we made it safely to Mexico and the group began to come together. New friendships were made, old ones were rekindled, and the anticipations for the week ahead were high.

As we met up with the Youth Works staff for Juarez II I had the feeling that this would be a well run, well organized mission. It was now up to us to get all we could out of it. My concern was again directed to the group. Would this be an ‘experience’ or a vacation for the teens? Time would tell. As we crossed the boarder into Juarez the physical contrasts were amazing. We left behind skyscrapers and malls in El Paso to find dirt roads and homes made of wood pallets and cardboard in Juarez. I was convinced that the people would be no better off given the poverty conditions they were living in. My thoughts began to center around how we would be helping them by constructing homes and assisting VBS, although I had some reservations about the VBS.

Sunday concluded with a typical planning meeting; establishment of ground rules schedules for the week, bunk assignments etc.

Monday & Tuesday we drew VBS, we began planning in the morning, which was a real challenge. I ‘volunteered’ for games and music. Any idea what it’s like trying to get a teen age guy brought up on Collective Soul and Smashmouth to sing the Mexican version of ‘Banana’s’? The planning for the games went well, patto, patto, ganzo was easy and a hit with the younger children, ‘football’ (the real one) was a hit with the older children. Planning complete, lunch is served and we collectively held our breath not really knowing what to expect. After lunch but prior to the VBS starting time I noticed the children started to appear, 1 or 2 at a time, standing on the perimeter of the grounds and building, smiling. The smiles really caught my attention. Slowly our teens picked up on this and began to mix with the children. The younger ones came inside, the older ones began to play outside. By the start of VBS we had in excess of 40 local children and 20 teens interacting like they had been friends for weeks. The amazing thing to me was very few, if any, of our teens spoke Spanish yet the interaction and communication was there immediately. I think the bonds that were forming were all the stronger due to this. As we proceeded through the program, prayer, games, songs, bible skit, craft and more games it was very noticeable that the teens (and I) were really enjoying the experience. In fact, the teens were learning from the children. We had many small groups within the large one. Children teaching teens local songs, teens giving ‘horsy back rides’ to the children. Baseball games and football games going on simultaneously (with some of the teens being schooled on the fine arts of soccer). All to soon the day was over and the children were expected to leave.

Did the bonds form? Did the teens really get anything out of it? I say the answer was a resounding YES. We spent the next ½ hour trying to regroup the teens for a meeting to recap the day. Everywhere I turned you saw one of the small groups still actively singing, playing, talking etc. The teens didn't want it to end! Finally after wrapping it up for the day it struck me that the conversations had moved from questions in the morning to non-stop talk of the VBS experience and excitement for tomorrow.

Personally I was excited to see how well the first day went and looked forward to tomorrow to see if the bonding would continue to grow. That evening, as we met for 'Club' my thoughts were still on the day's activities. As we began the evening I came to realize this too was going to be a unique experience. The effort put forth by the Youth Works staff was tremendous. The songs, skits, talks, and reflections were great. The 'up tempo' songs to burn off energy, moving into songs of reflection 'Holiness is what I ask for' really gave the group the opportunity to reflect on the day and come together with their thoughts and God. For me, a highpoint was yet to come. The small group discussions were phenomenal! It offered a time to recap, reflect and discuss the events of the day and in our case, tie them back to the workings of Jesus. It really struck me as to how insightful the teens were, the small groups on mission trips should be mandatory. We closed with a large group discussion, which would prove to be the most powerful part of the trip as the week progressed. By the end of the first night my mind was swimming. My initial concern about the group was set aside; the majority was there for the experience. My initial thoughts on the 'poverty' and expected attitudes of the people were blown away. I didn't see a single 'unhappy' face, only numerous children enjoying what God had given them.

Day 2 – more of the same? Yes and No. The schedule was basically the same with the exception of the surprise trip to the market. It proved to be a nice break and a great experience. Once we were back at the mission the expectations were high and the teens were actually looking for the children from the day before. I saw even more enjoyment and fun. The teens who earlier had been slow to join in now jumped in with both feet. The bonding was more intense and the time passed even faster. At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of VBS I realized how close we all had grown to this group of children and how much joy and happiness they had shown us. It was next to impossible to separate the teens from their new friends after VBS had ended. Hours later we still found teens talking with their new friends. Again 'club' was a hit. The whole group appeared to warm to the songs and talks, Nate did a wonderful job of sharing his views on Jesus and I could see the groups (large and small) growing together. The wrap-up, with the small group meetings and large group reflection were amazing. We had many teens requesting that we extend the time frame for small group since they felt so strongly about it. How could this get any better?

Day 3 & 4 – the real reason I thought I came to Mexico – building homes. The day started with a real eye opener for me. A 'home' is basically 3 bedroom, 2 bath, kitchen, living room etc., right? Not in Juarez. We were working on a home that was 1 room, approximately 16' wide by 24' long, 1 window and 1 door. That would house a family, a 2<sup>nd</sup> family would live above in the same size dwelling. All the construction was cinder block. Mortar was made from scratch, sand dug from the hill; water brought to the site, and a lot of manpower. On the job site we met Jose and Maestro, 2 of the hardest working individuals I've ever seen, they never stopped regardless of how hot and dusty it became. Additionally some of the ladies from the church were there as well; they jumped right in mixing mortar and cement, laying cinder blocks etc. What were amazing to me were the work ethic and the attitude. Always looking to help the teens do what they were trying to do; teaching them to mix or lay brick and always with a smile on their faces. Whenever a teen looked tired or slowed down they jumped right in to give them a break, a really amazing experience. We went back each night reflecting on the accomplishment of helping to build the home however once again it was the people of that community who gave us more than we could give them.



Club on Wednesday was truly amazing, Nate's interpretation of the story of the leper from the Bible was fantastic, and the songs seemed to have more energy and to bring more out in each of us. The small group discussions became deeper yet closer. Really a moving experience. The large group reflection and sharing with the passing of the candle really turned the corner for me. This was truly a 'life changing' experience. The emotions were high, the sharing was incredible, and the bonding was deep and lasting for those involved. I think Kelly and I really came together at that point.

Thursday brought us a couple of unexpected but enlightening twists. We started the day off with a sunrise mass led by Fr. Jim and wrapped up with a prayer service in the church at the mission given by 'Pastor'. It was a wonderful experience in sharing, English songs by the teens and padre, Spanish songs by the congregation, and a very eloquent and deep talk by the Pastor. Truly a 'Big' man despite his humility. We followed it up with a get together with the congregation and the teens, again a great experience in sharing and community building. Wrapping up the evening with small group and reflections was at the same time anticipated but very hard. The end of the trip was in sight, I really don't think anyone was ready for it to end however that closure was needed and helpful. Small groups gave us a chance to share 1 last time with friends we had grown very close to (Thanks Megan, Melissa, Kevin, Eric, & Chris). Reflections gave us an opportunity to share with the group, reinforce what we created over the week, and genuinely share some final thoughts. The next morning we would be cleaning and on the road back home.

As I sit back now and really reflect on the trip I really believe it was the 'life changing' experience for a number of participants. Fr. Jim was able to see this and I thank him for it. It really changed me and my relationship with my family for the better, it was time well spent and would I do it again? In a minute!

I'll leave you with some final reflections that I often sit back and think of:

- The send off from the families and friends, and the reception on our return!
- 36 hours on a bus – NO air
- McDonald's, NO anything but!
- Mexican Ice Cream
- the market
- water balloon volley ball
- water balloon fights
- digging the van out of the sand
- patto, patto gonzo
- Happy Birthday Gina! – sung by the whole community
- Things you can't do with 2 people!
- Sarah's favorite line - Awesome!
- Nate's talks during 'club'
- The evening songs – especially 'Holiness is what I ask for'
- Yeah God's
- Sunrise mass with Fr. Jim
- The young adult chaperones – how much they meant to the group
- The sounds of Juarez from the mountaintop and the cross
- The small group bonding (Thanks again Megan, Melissa, Kevin, Eric, & Chris)
- The large group reflections
- The passing of the Candle
- The staff at Youth Works – Sonya, Jessica, Sarah, Nate and Billy
- The people of Juarez (Pastor, Jose, Maestro, and many others)
- And especially the children of Juarez

In Mexico the Youth Works! Staff took us up a mountain. That evening on top of the mountain they asked us to close our eyes and just listen to what was around us. Not only did I listen that night, but I listened the rest of the week. I heard things such as dogs barking, children laughing, a difference in the language spoken, and silence. I decided to take this "listening" a step further: I decided to open my eyes and really look around me. I saw things like the smiles on so many people, the poverty of a town, and the rich people another ten minutes away, an appreciation of hard work, games played by children, songs sung, friends made, compassion in the children, beauty, peace, thankfulness, faith, no barriers in age, the simplicity of life and God in all that was around me. I also used my sense of touch to touch things like tools used to build, and the hands of the children. I felt the hug of someone who cares and a kiss on the cheek from a newly-made friend. I had the feeling of being dirty. And, I felt the presence of God.

I used the senses of smell and taste to smell things like the bathrooms outdoors and the water and to taste things like the food, the water and sometimes the dirt that would get into my water jug and a taste of what it feels like to lack all of the material possessions I had at home.

By using my senses, it made me realize how good I have it. But it also made me realize where I need to improve in my life. I learned that I shouldn't put up barriers between me and other people, because I don't like it when barriers are put up against me.

One of the most important things I learned was how I could bring this trip home and use what I learned in my daily life. The most important thing that happened on this trip was that I was shown the path to a stronger faith.

Meghan Hosty

## Warning!

**The following is a cautionary message authored by  
One of God's "angels"...**

Missionaries are asked to share the emotion of Mexican life with those at home. This is not a request, but an inescapable side-effect...

You will be asked to share what you have with those around you...  
Be reminded: To give completely is the only way to follow the Lord's footsteps.

If you seek to find the Lord, keep your eyes open. His work is done all about you. If you seek to serve the Lord, keep your soul open. His work is done throughout you.

Preserve the dignity of the people you serve. You have done nothing if you build 50 houses and tear down the dignity of one of God's children.

Do not bring anything you would not leave in Mexico. This includes, but is not limited to, clothing, toiletries, and a portion of your heart.

You have been warned...

Eddie Pluchar

Up until the night we left, I was so excited about the Mexico '99 Trip. I have never experienced any kind of poverty – or basically any life outside life in the U.S. I wasn't nervous at all – just so excited to be able to help other people and to finally go on a Mission Trip. I've wanted to go since I was a freshman. When July 2<sup>nd</sup> finally rolled around I found myself in the church parking lot and I realized that there were so many people that we were leaving behind. I almost started thinking that I really didn't want to go. But I got on the bus and headed toward all my friends at the back of the bus. I sat in one of the many chairs that didn't recline. It also got very hot in the back. About five hours into the ride I couldn't take it anymore, so I sat on the floor near the middle of the bus. It was so much better there. I finally got a chair and I tried to sleep, but it was already morning.

When we finally got to El Paso, we were all able to get off of the bus for a few hours while we waited for the Youth Works! Staff. We were all so happy to be able to do that. We all got to sit in a park for a while and just hang out, listen to Chris play his guitar, and eat ice cream! Then it was time to meet the staff. They introduced themselves as Nate, Bill, Sara, Jessica and Sonia. Then we said a prayer and it was time to cross the boarder. When we crossed the boarder I fell into shock: Instead of the huge skyscrapers and paved roads we had left in El Paso, there were dirt roads and cardboard houses. We got to the compound in which we would be staying about five minutes after crossing the boarder. Nate told us how we were lucky because a couple of years ago they didn't even have running water. We would not be able to take many showers during our stay and the ones we would take would have to be two-minute "Army showers." And we couldn't flush any toilet paper down the toilet. If we accidentally dropped toilet paper in the toilet we would have to "go fishing".

After he told us all the important information we got to meet the church people. I know VERY little Spanish and none of the Mexicans knew any English; but, we were able to communicate with the very little Spanish I know and a big smile. It was just amazing how they all smiled at us – welcoming us with open arms. The adults wanted to play volleyball and I hadn't played volleyball in about four years, so I wasn't planning on playing. One Mexican woman came up to me and said something to me. Now I couldn't tell you exactly what words she said, but I knew she wanted me to play on her team. So I decided to play. We all had so much fun. No one wanted to go to our first "Club Meeting", but we had to. Club was definitely great. We all got to sing new songs. We grew to love our Club time. Then it was time to go to bed.

The next day we split into our work groups. I was going to do Vacation Bible School (V.B.S.) first. Our whole group actually wanted to do the work site first, but we were just as happy to be able to do VBS. We got together in the morning, trying to plan out the next two days. I ended up being the only girl in the games/songs group. We had so much fun planning everything. We had games of "Pato, pato, gonzo" (duck, duck, goose) and Rojo, verde (red light, green light) and Futball (soccer) and basketball going on. Then we sang songs like "Yo Tengo Gozo" and "Bananas". We all had a lot of fun planning our games. We were worried about how the kids would react to us. But when they all came in with big smiles on their faces, ready to play the games and make friends with us, those worries were put aside. The kids wanted horsey-back rides, which we didn't mind giving them. Later that night, Sonja (the YW bus driver) took us out for ice cream! We were so happy to get ice cream. All the water we had up to that point was room temperature and when it was brought outside it got even warmer. There were the bottles of pop from the store, though. Those were great. (I still can't believe I can't find *Fresca* anywhere in the U.S.!!!)

The next day was pretty much the same as the first, except that it was raining in the morning. But Gen and I had fun in the rain! (Puddle-hopping is great at 9:00 in the morning!) The kids were so happy to see us again, and we had so much fun with them again. They all welcomed us back with open arms (literally!) They loved all the crafts we had them do. We could not believe that we would not see them the next day. That night, what started out as a nice game of water-balloon volleyball turned into a major water fight. It was the greatest.

The next day was our first day at the work site. It was the most amazing thing. It's just amazing how two people who don't even speak the same language can work side by side to build a house. I was working with one of the Mexicans and I couldn't always understand what he was saying, but somehow we still understood each other enough to do everything that we needed to do. (And I swear that I am never mixing cement again in my life!) At night, we climbed a mountain. There was a terrific view. Nate explained to us that to the right was New Mexico, in back of us was Texas (we could see the skyscrapers again!), and right in front of us was Mexico. He had us just sit and listen and watch the sunset. It was the most amazing thing ever. One could hear everything up there from cars honking, people talking and children playing. It was breath-taking. We were thinking about spending the night up there, but we knew we had to go back.

On Thursday Bill brought us ice at the work site! We were all very happy about that. Thursday night we attended a church service, then we got to spend time with the townspeople of Juarez for our last night. Then we held our last Club (we were all very sad about that. Club was so much fun for us.)

Friday was our last day in Juarez. It was time to get ready and face reality, get back to the skyscrapers, the paved roads, and the rich people. I think we all learned not to take everything for granted anymore. Fr. Jim told us all that we were going down there to help the people of Juarez. I truthfully felt that they helped me in many more ways than I helped them. I just wish we could have done much more for them than we had. I wish that I didn't have to go home – that I could stay in Mexico forever and continue to help the people. But I knew it was time to go. After the long, cold bus ride home we all got off the bus and back to (our) reality. I still think about our few days in Juarez. It was definitely one trip I will never forget. I tell all my friends it was the best vacation I have ever taken and they look at me like I'm crazy. Maybe I am. I loved both bus rides, all the kids, all the adults, and all of the YW staff. This trip has done so much for me. How can I not love it? I guess only one more thing has to be said... "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary...."

.. Emily Andreasen

## Mexico Mission

As I look back on the recent Mexico trip it's hard to describe my feeling for the Mexican people and the work we were able to do there.

Although we endured many hardships on the 36 hour bus trip, there were inconsequential to what the Mexicans faced daily. I was astonished as we rode into Mexico; I couldn't believe the conditions these people lived in. Some of the houses were made of fences and you could see through the walls and others were so small it didn't look like they could house one person let alone an entire family. It was apparent how lucky we are and how much we take for granted.

As soon as we arrived at the compound the Mexican children were eager to greet us and help with our luggage. In their eyes there were no strangers. That night we met all the families of the church. The entire congregation was very accepting and was excited to have us there. I was not surprised later when we went to play with the children and they immediately trusted us because they were raised to love and care for everyone. In the United States we are raised being wary of strangers, but in Mexico they were open to everyone. We spent the rest of the evening playing and loving the children. This is when I realized how in actuality we are the unfortunate ones. Although we have everything materialistically, we have true happiness and an unbelievable strong faith in God.

Throughout the rest of the week we did the best we could to communicate with the children despite language barriers. At Fiesta Para Los Ninos (Bible school) we formed bonds with all the children. Although we were teaching the children they also taught us. They taught us to have faith in God during good times and bad times. During the trip we were given two crosses, one for us and one to share with someone who we had formed a special connection with. From day one I bonded with two little girls, Lupe and Miriam. Throughout the week I spent time with them, talking and playing. Luckily the girls were sisters and I was able to give them both my cross. Lupe and Miriam will always hold a special place in my heart.

One of the highlights of the trip was Club. Club was a time when we got together to sing songs, listen to a speaker, and share experiences with our small groups. This time spent together helped our group to form an unbreakable bond.

I pray that I will be able to take what I learned in Mexico and apply it to my life. I also hope that we can teach others about our experience and help them to understand how fortunate we truly are. The bonds we formed with each other and with the Mexican people are unlike any bonds ever experienced and I will cherish them forever.

Erin Chlum

But there were just as many ways in which our group needed to grow a bit. For most of us, spending an hour every morning reflecting on Scripture and listening for the stirrings of God in our hearts was a new concept. But many teens and chaperones quickly found a “new” approach to learning more about Jesus, his culture, and God. It was exciting to read the reflections they wrote after the trip. Many commented how their relationship with God had deepened as a result of the time we spent in silence after our breakfast.

Another interesting point I noticed was that some reflections failed to mention the religious nature of the Mission that permeated our time together. That’s not because of any failure on the part of God to touch their hearts or the staff to help integrate the knowledge of God’s activity in our daily work. Rather, it’s a sign that a) the separation of Church and State has made us fearful to share our faith publicly and b) Catholics have always tended to be people who keep their relationship with God to themselves. Case in point; one teen who wrote a powerful reflection called me to ask if “it’s okay to write in a religious tone for a newspaper”. He thought that the sharing of his faith might be rejected for publication, much as (I hear) our children are not allowed to express their faith in song or in their writings at school. I’m left wondering how much of the sheer power of God in our week was omitted for this reason.

Sure, it’s a lot of work and responsibility to take a (relatively) small number of “disciples” to foreign lands. But the seeds that God plants in the teens, chaperones, their families and our communities will be sprouting for years to come. Mission work is part of my call. There is a depth of growth taking place through these shared times together that can be found nowhere else. And so we go.

Mother Teresa was once asked why she even bothered taking on the overwhelming poverty and suffering she found in Calcutta:

*“I never look at the masses as my responsibility.*

*I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one.”*

*“You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, ‘Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.’*

*So you begin . . . I begin.*

*I picked up one person –*

*maybe if I didn’t pick up that one person I wouldn’t have picked up 42,000.*

*The whole work is only a drop in the ocean.*

*But if I didn’t put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less.”*

Same thing for you  
same thing in your family  
same thing in the church where you go  
just begin . . . one, one, one.”

Fr. Jim Curry



Since my arrival at St. Julie Church in the Summer of 1995, I have wanted to share a "Mission Experience" with our teens and families. Through my own travels to Mexico, Kenya and Tanzania in Africa and cities like Calcutta, India God has allowed me to see the wealth of our materially poor sisters and brothers around the world. We are very blessed in America. But at times we lose sight of just how blessed we are.

In fact, our first Mission Trip to Guatemala last January was inspired by the comments of a teen who (I felt) had lost sight of her many gifts. Sally, I'll call her, was despondent over her latest birthday because her parents had failed to give her a car. "All her friends" had received one and she felt left-out and "unloved". Upon hearing her story I reflected on my own experiences of the world and thought to myself, "It's time. We need to get her – and others – out of the suburbia I had known most of my life. (I grew up in Des Plaines, just north of O'Hare Airport).

The greatest gift we received through our journeys has been a deepening of gratitude for all God has given us. We have recognized the generosity of God and God's love and we have been overcome in our desire to give thanks. The grace we have been given abundantly just oozes out of us as we discover a deep desire to share what we have been given. Each of these "crazy" experiences (by human standards) has served to bring us closer to God and all God's people.

Basically what happens on these Mission Trips is simple: we are stripped of all our "necessities" (like showers, air conditioning and other creature comforts) and we find that – beneath it all – we are still loveable (though smelly) and we are still healthy and sane. It's much like the process of addiction and detachment. Throughout life we build our own structure or "comfort zone". And, before long we actually believe that we need all the things we have (and more). We become attached to the things of this world. Below the layer of make-up, for example, lies the same person who was always there – but hidden. In other words, a Mission Experience strips away all the superficial "junk" so that we can find the real person beneath. This is one of our primary objectives.

Our trip to Juarez was unique in that it was the first time we worked as a "multi-denominational" group. YouthWorks! Staff confessed that we were their first Catholic group in their ten year history. They were amazed at the size of our group that was so large that we "took over the place". Usually their workweek was shared by more than one group. Staff members also expressed excitement with our particular group's enthusiasm in singing their upbeat and moving songs and the teens' work ethic.

On the way to Mexico 45 teens and chaperones took a coach bus and we were all comfortable in the reclining seats. About half-way down there the air conditioning broke down. Everyone was complaining how hot it was and when I realized what the Mexican people were living in I shut my mouth.

To tell you the truth, I was expecting conditions to be a lot worse. You know, cardboard box homes and all. When I stepped off the bus, I was actually amazed at the way things were. Sure they were homes, but they were very weak and not clean at all. Through the weakness of it all I tried to look at the homes like they were the Ritz Carlton. These kids and their families use everything and anything around them to their full use. The phrase "it's the little things that count" has a totally different meaning to me now. I used to think, "who wants the little things?" Well, now I know. These kids took a piece of paper and a crayon and turned it into gold. We have so much and they have so little. It actually hurts to know that some people aren't even happy with the big things in life and these people enjoyed the little things.

I woke up in the morning and took not even ten steps out of the bunkhouse, turned around, and saw streetlights, fast food restaurants and stores. The huge city of El Paso wasn't even five minutes away.

I learned that the best way to get a child's heart is just to love them and show affection. I made three friends with the Mexican children and 44 new ones from church. This trip made me realize that I just need to deal with what I have and use it to the fullest. Don't take anything for granted because, chances are, you're going to lose it anyway. I loved this mission and I'm just waiting now for the time to come when I can go again and share my love and affection in another culture.

Gina Glocksen

Going on the Mexico Trip was a great experience. I learned how they live, what some of their customs are, and how to be more God-like. The trip will always be a highlight in my life. It will also be something I will never forget. Besides the bus ride, the trip was unbelievable. When we first arrived I was a little nervous, but once I met the kids I was fine. They taught me how to keep smiling if something wasn't right. It made me feel good when I was allowed to go on the trip because it was a great learning experience. It was fun playing games with the kids and I even made some new friends. I thought the food was going to be bad but it turned out we had American food. That was a relief. I really enjoyed working on the house. For one, I like to build things and, two, I like to help others in whatever way possible. I ended up working on the roof of the house. It was kind of scary being that high up but I'm glad I was able to help put down the tarpaper. I am glad I had the opportunity to go on this mission. It was a great learning experience. I can't wait for the next trip to Mexico because I am ready to go next time.

Justin Scalise

Through a week of a different culture and a different way of living, my soul has been re-energized and my heart has not only been touched, but rather embraced by several people both young and old. In this area of poverty, I encountered extreme beauty.

My week began with the events of vacation bible school for the Mexican children. While I do speak a little Spanish, the awkwardness of understanding one another was still apparent. By the power of God, that feeling of awkwardness lasted a mere second. We chose to communicate through loving smiles, actions, games and hugs. To my amazement the Mexican children were very willing to befriend all of the members of our group, even though they knew we would leave shortly and a new group would come to the site. These children are blessed with the knowledge of what is truly important in life. Unfortunately, it took me 24 years for someone to teach me the extreme importance of God and other people in my life- a lesson which I learned from children . . . God bless those children.

At the work site, I participated in the building of a home. Once again, despite the language barrier we were able to work with the people of Juarez to complete this task. Once again God made Himself astoundingly present in this situation because most of the members in our group had never worked in this type of construction, yet with the help of others, we were able to conquer the unknown.

Through the beauty seen on top of the hill with the watching of the sunset, I learned that showers can clean the outer shell of a person, but it was through the loving actions of others that my heart and soul were cleansed on this trip. Through the grace of God, my eyes were opened to the world of beauty, which I never took the time to notice until this trip.

AMY BISHOP

On Friday we were awakened at 5:00 a.m. for Mass (another Fr. Jim idea), breakfast, a cleaning of the mission complex and preparations to board the bus at 10:00 a.m. for our trip home. Before leaving the pastor said a prayer with all of us as we joined hands in a large circle. As the prayer ended, and we were on our way to the bus, a young boy came up to me and said "good-bye". As I looked at him, I recognized him as Moises, one of the young boys who would come to Vacation Bible School, but didn't want to join us in the activities. (He just watched from afar.) I told him we were on our way back home and I wouldn't see him anymore. I asked him, in Spanish, for a hug. As he gave me a hug I kissed him on the cheek and told him it was wonderful meeting him. With tears in his eyes he looked up at me and smiled. I told him he shouldn't do that because I would start crying also – he smiled again. With that I left him and did not turn back until I got on the bus. (Then I cried on another chaperone's shoulders!) Many of the Mexican children were there to say "good-bye" to us and wish us a safe return home. After many hugs and kisses it was "on the road again!"

We arrived back at St. Julie's around 10:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 10<sup>th</sup>. We were greeted by jubilant family members and friends. I was happy to be home – a home I would never again take for granted. That night I thanked God for all I had.

Why did I go on this trip? Was it to get away from my own problems (what problems could I possibly have?) Or was it to learn about humility, patience and an understanding of one's culture and values? I want to believe it was the latter. I hope that what I learned and saw in Juarez makes me a more humble, patient and understanding person. I learned a lot from a people with so little!

I also learned that St. Julie's Church has some very talented, enthusiastic and spirited teens in their parish. And the parents of these teens can be very proud of them. Fr. Jim has guided this group of teens over the past several years and has done an excellent job steering them in the right direction. Keep up the great work Fr. Jim and TNT.

Andi Borucke

On Wednesday and Thursday my group was assigned to teaching Vacation Bible School. What fun we had there! Each day approximately 50 to 80 young Mexican children (ages 1 to 13) would join us for song, a Bible reading (or re-enactment) and crafts. As little as they had, they truly enjoyed "giving" to others. I came back home with many coloring pages or drawings given to me by the children because they wanted me to have something! One smile from them and they had you! It was very evident that they enjoyed the attention and hugs we gave them (and to think our kids take it for granted!)

Each night we were able to play different games / sports with the Mexican children. Both our teens and the children really enjoyed this time. After game time we all joined Nate and his staff for reflection, song and prayer. We learned some great songs – some of which we brought back to our own church, and shared some excellent reflections on the day. One evening we joined the pastor in his church, listening to him as he thanked us for what we had done for his community and inviting us to return someday. We also sang several Spanish songs that were very joyful and meaningful.

Wednesday evening we were all taken by bus to a mountain where we could see Juarez, Texas and New Mexico. At the very top of the mountain was a huge white cross where we took time to reflect on the day's events. What an exhilarating experience this was! As I sat on top of the mountain with the group, in total silence (all one could hear was a dog barking now and then, and car horns from a distance), I looked down on the desolate town of Juarez and envisioned my own parents as youngsters (both were from Mexico) running up and down the dirt roads with no running water, and electricity that was just installed (light bulbs hanging here and there) and outhouses for bathrooms. The tears just kept coming and I found I could not stop crying. My parents (both deceased) would be in there nineties today and in Juarez it seemed like time stood still.

During these four days our teens were real troupers! Their cooperation, enthusiasm, and energy really impressed the Mexican community. It was evident they made a statement and left an impression that will not soon be forgotten.

**“You’re going where? With how many teens? Are you crazy?”**

These were several of many questions asked of me by family members and friends when I told them I was chaperoning 35 teens to Juarez, Mexico – and we were traveling by bus!

As we took off on July 2<sup>nd</sup> at approximately 12:30 a.m., the mood was one of excitement and joy! The videos were on until approximately 4:00 a.m., and then there was silence – finally, everyone was so tired, they just fell asleep or got as comfortable as they could and were quiet.

Sometime during the drive through Oklahoma the air conditioning unit on the bus broke down, and the bus drivers decided to stop for some fans. Everyone was happy to get out of the bus and walk around. Many of the teens in the back of the bus were perspiring so badly that their T-shirts were wet! Surprisingly, there was very little complaining (the first thing I noted about our wonderful teens)!

Well, the fans helped, somewhat, and we were on our way to Texas where we would cross the border into Juarez, Mexico sometime around noon on Sunday!

When we arrived in the complex where we would be staying, my first thought was “where’s the shower?” We were taken to our bedrooms where we roomed with nine teens/chaperones and there was only enough room for the nine wooden bunk beds (we all brought our own sleeping bags / linens). The entire luggage was in the center of the room!

The first evening we enjoyed playing volleyball with the church community, and getting to know them. They had a lovely table of fruit, snacks and beverages for us. The leader of the group, Nate, then gave us instructions on how the week would go and we ended the day with prayer. Everyone was eager to go to sleep; however, Fr. Jim had other plans for us. That evening, and each evening that followed, each chaperone was assigned five teens and we got into small groups for discussion (this turned out to be one of the most moving experiences for me personally because each teen poured out their hearts and “opened up”! We laughed, cried and hugged a lot!)

On Monday and Tuesday my group went to the site where we would be building a home for refugees. We were putting the roof on a home that was probably the size of one of our bedrooms. (I wondered why some had so much in this world and others so little.) Some of the church members were with us, building the home, and one could only notice the pride with which they built the home.

### The Other Side of the Window

When arriving in a poverty stricken and visually unappealing place, like Juarez, I was expecting my internal struggles to magnify. Winding down the streets in a fairly old school bus, seeing the makeshift homes of the natives gave me an even stronger feeling that this was going to be too tough for me. Soon enough, my life took a drastic change that was very unexpected. As the bus pulled into the compound, two children who were more than willing to help us unload our heavy luggage greeted us. That brought a smile to my face, because back in America, children are too self-centered to care about helping others. As day turned to night, many locals, who were more than willing to socialize, greeted us. I began the night trying to take in the acceptance that these people had for us. As the night grew longer, my problems, which had been bothering me for two months, were erased instantly, by a little girl's smile. As I sat there with one of our video cameras filming the activities, I noticed a young girl who took a liking to the strange and pretty object that I was holding. So to add to her amazement, I showed her a picture of herself through the camera's monitor. When she saw her own face she was initially amazed, and possibly frightened. Seconds later, the look on her face turned to laughter and smiles, as she pointed to the image of herself and changed "Me!" To see that girl, who obviously was no where near as fortunate as I, smile and laugh at something I found common, made me want to take a different approach at life. With her one smile, all of my problems were erased from my mind. She brought me back to my own reality...she broke the window between me and my outlook on life.

Brian LaPorte



I thought the trip to Juarez was awesome! I had a great time helping the less-fortunate. The people in Juarez were so nice to us – helping us out with whatever we needed. I was shocked to stay in such a nice place. I was planning to sleep on the floor – not on wooden bunk beds. I had a lot of fun working with the kids and building a house. Thanks again for a great trip.

Casey Rolewicz

Instead of telling about a chain of events that took place on our way down to Mexico, in Mexico, or on the way home, I would like to briefly state one of my beliefs involving both ourselves and the Mexicans.

What in our society today would resemble an angel or classify as an angel? Well, to start, what is an angel? I believe an angel is an messenger of God or someone existing to do God's will.

Now picture this, a group of 35 teens and 10 chaperones travel on a bus from Tinley Park, IL to Juarez, Mexico to do much needed missionary work (building houses and teaching VBS). Most American people would look upon this and say, "Look at those young missionaries traveling all that way to make a difference, to help those poor Mexicans." Would that make us angels?

Same scenario, different point of view, a Mexican community hit hard by poverty, disease, and pollution, welcomes that same group from Tinley Park with all their heart. These locals teach us about themselves, their way of life, their language, and how to take nothing for granted. They are willing to give all they have to make us feel wanted. so now I ask you, "Who are the real angels?" And remember the greatest of all deeds are the ones that go unnoticed.

Chris Pluchar

## How welcoming would we have been to them?

The very moment that the adults of the community of Juarez came out of church...open arms were extended. The pastor of the community was overfilled with joy when he said, "I hope we can teach you something as well." Those people taught me more about compassion and love in 5 days than I've been taught most of my life thus far.

I have never fully understood the joy of a child's smile until we traveled to Mexico. Their smiles were not because they had received a new expensive toy...but rather because they possessed true happiness. They were content with their lifestyle... they new all they had to share with us was love... the children gave and gave and never needed to be refilled.

In our peaceful town and middle class lifestyle... children are never let out of their parent's site for more than a few seconds. While we were at the work site, the young children I saw roaming the streets, barefoot and alone looked so needy. Not of material objects, but needy of love. Estrella was just standing around the site, alone, with her stuffed bear. A dangerous area for a four-year-old to be in...I sat next to her and struck up a conversation. She told me all about herself and her bear. I later found out that she was the daughter of Carlos, a member of the church and a worker at the site... but at the time she looked so afraid and needy... she let me hug her and by lunch time was leaping into my arms.

In our world where we are so caught up in material objects....how welcoming would we have been to a bunch of strangers? How helpful would we be to them? Would we have welcomed them with open arms or with closed doors? Through this trip I have gained an entirely new perspective on what it means to truly give love.

Colleen Kampa

TNT's Mexico trip was a life touching experience for me. From the very beginning of the trip I was touched by God's love. As the group drove over the boarder into Mexico, I think everyone was amazed. I was especially shocked at the poverty level. After we had reached the site and unloaded the bus, we had a chance to play with the kids. I was scared at first because I knew very little Spanish. The kids were so sweet and welcoming though, they didn't care if we spoke much at all.

I will never forget the strong sense of love and welcoming I felt there. The first night, the people of the church introduced them to us and said so many nice things to welcome the group. They even sang a song for us. Throughout the week, the Mexican people were always trying to talk to the group and get to know us better. It felt great to know that they wanted to be our friends as much as we wanted to be theirs.

The first two days of the trip, I was on the work crew. The first day I helped build the roof on the church's refugee home. I had fun developing friendships with other teens as we worked. I also enjoyed taking to the family that was going to live in the hours we were building. It was so awesome to see how dedicated these people were in the building of their own home. The smiles on their faces showed how proud they were of the work they were doing. I found that so inspiring, because all of us here in the US either buy a used home, or hire contractors to build our homes for us. We definitely do not work as hard as these people do for our homes. The sense of family is very strong within the Mexican people too. Every member of the family that was going to live in the home was helping out in some way. I wish I could say that I work as hard as they do.

I will never forget a very kind man I met at the work site. I was up on the roof hammering when we met. He saw that I was taking forever to drive a nail into the roof and getting a little frustrated too. Without any words, he took my hand and showed me how to hammer a nail. He then stood and watched as I hammered the next few nails into the roof. He smiled when I did a much better job than I had done before. Just that small act of kindness he showed, made me feel so accepted. In Mexico, it is not appropriate for women to work hard labor. His gesture is a small example of how kind and caring the Mexican people are.

The second day of work, I painted the kindergarten room. I grew closer to the teens I worked with a got to know some of the Mexican children too. In the afternoon many of the Mexican kids were trying to come into the classroom and paint with us. The Mexican children were constantly trying to help the group out in any way they could. There were also some children playing on a playground outside of the kindergarten room. I was able to meet and talk to some of them. Even though both of my workdays were long and tiring, the work was definitely worth doing. It felt great to know that we were helping someone in the name of Jesus.

The last two days we were in Mexico I helped out at Vacation Bible School. I was part of the Bible study committee. We acted plays out for the children about the Bible lesson for that day. I had so much fun acting in front of the children. It was a little difficult though; I had to read Spanish lines. I also had a bunch of fun playing games and making crafts with the kids. I was not able to speak much Spanish and I told the kids that, but they didn't care. We found other ways to communicate. I was amazed how much the children cared. All they wanted was to be loved, and it was so easy to love adorable little kids that open their hearts to you so willingly. In all of the friends I made, there were two little Mexican girls that I was able to get to know the best. Janet and Jessica were so kind and loving. I was surprised at their openness to me. Right away they gave me pictures they drew, they wanted me to sit next to them, hold their hand, and give them piggyback rides. They weren't the least bit shy. In fact, I do not think any of the kids were shy. The boys ran around and wrestled with us, and the girls were constantly hanging on us. I had a wonderful time playing with the kids during vacation Bible school.

The overall experience of Mexico changed my life in so many ways. I am much more thankful of everything I own. I am also much more appreciative of everything I receive. My respect level for the Mexican people has gone up much more too. I am in awe of how much harder they work than how little they have, and us. Also, in spite of their poor living conditions and little to no material possessions, they are extremely happy. Each one of them has so much joy inside and they are very appreciative of every little thing. In our culture, we take so many things for granted and we are always wanting more. Going to Mexico has really opened my eyes to all of the blessings God has given me. I could never forget such an awesome experience. I thank God so much for giving me such an incredible opportunity. It has truly touched my life.

Danielle Drewes

## REFLECTIONS

N.B. Before our departure, I received the following e-mail from a sophomore at Andrew High School (Mike Vlachos):

Well, the effect of me leaving for a foreign country is finally hitting my mom, and I'm more than sure that it'll be hitting me in about a day or so!! I can't wait to do God's will for the less-fortunate and (I) just have to have this experience. My mom is freaked out about that serial-killer who has ties to the Juarez area, but I keep telling her that Chris Gallagher (a graduate this year from Tinley High who stands about 6'3" and weighs... well, probably 220 pounds), you, and I won't let anything happen to anyone on this trip – incoming freshman included (little joke there [his parenthesis])! I have more people telling me to be smart and to be careful.... I'm really getting sick of it! I know that I have to be careful, and I may not show it all the time, but I do act smartly and think things out before I go ahead and do them.....

Eddie Pluchar  
(Andrew '99)

### **Warning!**

**The following is a cautionary message authored by  
One of God's "angels"...**

Missionaries are asked to share the emotion of Mexican life with those at home. This is not a request, but an inescapable side-effect...

You will be asked to share what you have with those around you...  
Be reminded: To give completely is the only way to follow the Lord's footsteps.

If you seek to find the Lord, keep your eyes open. His work is done all about you. If you seek to serve the Lord, keep your soul open. His work is done throughout you.

Preserve the dignity of the people you serve. You have done nothing if you build 50 houses and tear down the dignity of one of God's children.

Do not bring anything you would not leave in Mexico. This includes, but is not limited to, clothing, toiletries, and a portion of your heart.

You have been warned...

Melissa Nimtz  
(Sandburg '99)

If anyone would have told me that a week in Mexico would change me forever, I probably would not have believed them. But it did. We were faced with many challenges throughout the week, but no one expected to face such a large challenge on the bus ride there. The air was broken, seats didn't recline, people slept on the floor, and the televisions were broken. Even though we all complained at the time, I feel that this is what we needed to prepare for what we were going to see.

As we crossed the border we saw little Mexican women collecting money in cans while holding their children by the hand. Driving down the streets of Juarez, I was in disbelief: ten minutes away was a completely different way of life.

We unloaded the bus and headed to our sleeping quarters and found we would be sleeping in a room of about 14 by 14 feet with four triple bunk beds. After we received our orientation we were told to go mingle with the people of their church community. I was nervous because I knew no Spanish and was at first apprehensive to go and approach the children. Then a little girl came up to me and wanted me to swing her around. The feeling that I had is hard to explain. One thing that I took away from this trip is that the international exchange of the **smile** from one face to another could change a person. The children were so happy – probably happier than some people I know. The one thing that ceases to amaze me is that they don't have nearly as many material possessions as we do; but, they cherish all they have and take nothing for granted. I now know that even though we live completely different lives we all want the same thing – to be loved. I think that even though they have less than us in some aspects they have so much more: They have the gift of loving anyone and they will let no barrier stand in the way.

In teaching the children at Vacation Bible School, I felt that I was doing something to bring the children closer to God. I also realized that we

have so much in common with the children. When I played with them I don't think I ever smiled so much in my life.

The following two days there I helped to build a house. I was brought to many emotions physically and mentally. It was hard for much of the group and I came to expect that Mexican women are supposed to be in the house all day. Many of the Mexican men on the site would often have us stop doing our jobs because we were women. In the end, that made all of us want to work even harder to show them that women can work just as hard as men.

As we worked at the site the sun was beating down, but I never seemed to be extremely tired. The night that we climbed the mountain was very powerful for me. I was amazed with the beautiful land we looked onto, but sorrowful at how they lived. Looking at the cross that stood next to me, I realized that these people have so much to teach me. Standing upon that mountain I realized how lucky I was to have my family and all my friends. As we were seated there listening to the sounds I thanked God for letting me spend this trip with all these people that mean so much to me.

Every night I found that I got a lot out of the songs we would sing as a group. I would just close my eyes and reflect on everything that happened that day.

In my small group I learned so much not only about myself, but also about the other five people there. My group developed a bond in which we knew we would not be judged. We could say how we felt and they would all be there to comfort us when we needed it.

When the last day came I found myself taking in every remaining second because I didn't want to leave. One thing that the trip also taught me was how powerful the Bible is and how it can help you through problems. I had never, besides CCD, opened the Bible to read it and I will take that home with me.

There is so much I learned it is hard for me to express it all on this paper. Much of it is in my heart, but will be used to better my life and hopefully all those that surround me. My mission now is to keep everything I learned in my heart so I can share all I learned with all the people at home.

“Everything happens for a reason” and wow – was this one of those experiences!

**AMY BISHOP**  
(Young Adult)

Through a week of a different culture and a different way of living, my soul has been re-energized and my heart has not only been touched, but rather embraced by several people both young and old. In this area of poverty, I encountered extreme beauty.

My week began with the events of vacation bible school for the Mexican children. While I do speak a little Spanish, the awkwardness of understanding one another was still apparent. By the power of God, that feeling of awkwardness lasted a mere second. We chose to communicate through loving smiles, actions, games and hugs. To my amazement the Mexican children were very willing to befriend all of the members of our group, even though they knew we would leave shortly and a new group would come to the site. These children are blessed with the knowledge of what is truly important in life. Unfortunately, it took me 24 years for someone to teach me the extreme importance of God and other people in my life- a lesson which I learned from children . . . God bless those children.

At the work site, I participated in the building of a home. Once again, despite the language barrier we were able to work with the people of Juarez to complete this task. Once again God made Himself astoundingly present in this situation because most of the members in our group had never worked in this type of construction, yet with the help of others, we were able to conquer the unknown.

Through the beauty seen on top of the hill with the watching of the sunset, I learned that showers can clean the outer shell of a person, but it was through the loving actions of others that my heart and soul were cleansed on this trip. Through the grace of God, my eyes were opened to the world of beauty, which I never took the time to notice until this trip.



## Justin Scalise

(Andrew '02)

Going on the Mexico Trip was a great experience. I learned how they live, what some of their customs are, and how to be more God-like. The trip will always be a highlight in my life. It will also be something I will never forget. Besides the bus ride, the trip was unbelievable. When we first arrived I was a little nervous, but once I met the kids I was fine. They taught me how to keep smiling if something wasn't right. It made me feel good when I was allowed to go on the trip because it was a great learning experience. It was fun playing games with the kids and I even made some new friends. I thought the food was going to be bad but it turned out we had American food. That was a relief. I really enjoyed working on the house. For one, I like to build things and, two, I like to help others in whatever way possible. I ended up working on the roof of the house. It was kind of scary being that high up but I'm glad I was able to help put down the tarpaper. I am glad I had the opportunity to go on this mission. It was a great learning experience. I can't wait for the next trip to Mexico because I am ready to go next time.

## Meghan Hosty

(Andrew 2000)

In Mexico the YouthWorks! Staff took us up a mountain. That evening on top of the mountain they asked us to close our eyes and just listen to what was around us. Not only did I listen that night, but I listened the rest of the week. I heard things such as dogs barking, children laughing, a difference in the language spoken, and silence. I decided to take this "listening" a step further: I decided to open my eyes and really look around me. I saw things like the smiles on so many people, the poverty of a town, and the rich people another ten minutes away, an appreciation of hard work, games played by children, songs sung, friends made, compassion in the children, beauty, peace, thankfulness, faith, no barriers in age, the simplicity of life and God in all that was around me. I also used my

sense of touch to touch things like tools used to build, and the hands of the children. I felt the hug of someone who cares and a kiss on the cheek from a newly-made friend. I had the feeling of being dirty. And, I felt the presence of God.

I used the senses of smell and taste to smell things like the bathrooms outdoors and the water and to taste things like the food, the water and sometimes the dirt that would get into my water jug and a taste of what it feels like to lack all of the material possessions I had at home.

By using my senses, it made me realize how good I have it. But it also made me realize where I need to improve in my life. I learned that I shouldn't put up barriers between me and other people, because I don't like it when barriers are put up against me.

One of the most important things I learned was how I could bring this trip home and use what I learned in my daily life. The most important thing that happened on this trip was that I was shown the path to a stronger faith.

**CASEY ROLEWICZ**

(Andrew '02 or '03)

***I THOUGHT THE TRIP TO JUAREZ WAS AWESOME! I HAD A GREAT TIME HELPING THE LESS-FORTUNATE. THE PEOPLE IN JUAREZ WERE SO NICE TO US – HELPING US OUT WITH WHATEVER WE NEEDED. I WAS SHOCKED TO STAY IN SUCH A NICE PLACE. I WAS PLANNING TO SLEEP ON THE FLOOR – NOT ON WOODEN BUNK BEDS. I HAD A LOT OF FUN WORKING WITH THE KIDS AND BUILDING A HOUSE. THANKS AGAIN FOR A GREAT TRIP.***

Gina Glocksen

(Andrew '02)

On the way to Mexico 45 teens and chaperones took a coach bus and we were all comfortable in the reclining seats. About half-way down there the air

conditioning broke down. Everyone was complaining how hot it was and when I realized what the Mexican people were living in I shut my mouth.

To tell you the truth, I was expecting conditions to be a lot worse. You know, cardboard box homes and all. When I stepped off the bus, I was actually amazed at the way things were. Sure they were homes, but they were very weak and not clean at all. Through the weakness of it all I tried to look at the homes like they were the Ritz Carlton. These kids and their families use everything and anything around them to their full use. The phrase "it's the little things that count" has a totally different meaning to me now. I used to think, "who wants the little things?" Well, now I know. These kids took a piece of paper and a crayon and turned it into gold. We have so much and they have so little. It actually hurts to know that some people aren't even happy with the big things in life and these people enjoyed the little things.

I woke up in the morning and took not even ten steps out of the bunkhouse, turned around, and saw streetlights, fast food restaurants and stores. The huge city of El Paso wasn't even five minutes away.

I learned that the best way to get a child's heart is just to love them and show affection. I made three friends with the Mexican children and 44 new ones from church. This trip made me realize that I just need to deal with what I have and use it to the fullest. Don't take anything for granted because, chances are, you're going to lose it anyway. I loved this mission and I'm just waiting now for the time to come when I can go again and share my love and affection in another culture.

**Andi Borucke**

(Chaperone)

**“You’re going where? With how many teens? Are you crazy?”**

**These were several of many questions asked of me by family members and friends when I told them I was chaperoning 35 teens to Juarez, Mexico – and we were traveling by bus!**

**As we took off on July 2<sup>nd</sup> at approximately 12:30 a.m., the mood was one of excitement and joy! The videos were on until approximately 4:00 a.m., and then there was silence – finally, everyone was so tired, they just fell asleep or got as comfortable as they could and were quiet.**

**Sometime during the drive through Oklahoma the air conditioning unit on the bus broke down, and the bus drivers decided to stop for some fans. Everyone was happy to get out of the bus and walk around. Many of the teens in the back of the bus were perspiring so bad that their T-shirts were wet! Surprisingly, there was very little complaining (the first thing I noted about our wonderful teens)!**

**Well, the fans helped, somewhat, and we were on our way to Texas where we would cross the border into Juarez, Mexico sometime around noon on Sunday!**

**When we arrived in the complex where we would be staying, my first thought was “where’s the shower?” We were taken to our bedrooms where we roomed with nine teens/chaperones and there was only enough room for the nine wooden bunk beds (we all brought our own sleeping bags / linens). All the luggage was in the center of the room!**

The first evening we enjoyed playing volleyball with the church community, and getting to know them. They had a lovely table of fruit, snacks and beverages for us. The leader of the group, Nate, then gave us instructions on how the week would go and we ended the day with prayer. Everyone was eager to go to sleep; however, Fr. Jim had other plans for us. That evening, and each evening that followed, each chaperone was assigned five teens and we got into small groups for discussion (this turned out to be one of the most moving experiences for me personally because each teen poured out their hearts and “opened up”! We laughed, cried and hugged a lot!)

On Monday and Tuesday my group went to the site where we would be building a home for refugees. We were putting the roof on a home that was probably the size of one of our bedrooms. (I wondered why some had so much in this world and others so little.) Some of the church members were with us, building the home, and one could only notice the pride with which they built the home.

On Wednesday and Thursday my group was assigned to teaching Vacation Bible School. What fun we had there! Each day approximately 50 to 80 young Mexican children (ages 1 to 13) would join us for song, a Bible reading (or re-enactment) and crafts. As little as they had, they truly enjoyed “giving” to others. I came back home with many coloring pages or drawings given to me by the children because they wanted me to have something! One smile from them and they had you! It was very evident that they enjoyed the attention and hugs we gave them (and to think our kids take it for granted!)

Each night we were able to play different games / sports with the Mexican children. Both our teens and the children really enjoyed this time. After game time we all joined Nate and his staff for reflection, song and prayer. We learned some

great songs – some of which we brought back to our own church, and shared some excellent reflections on the day. One evening we joined the pastor in his church, listening to him as he thanked us for what we had done for his community and inviting us to return someday. We also sang several Spanish songs that were very joyful and meaningful.

Wednesday evening we were all taken by bus to a mountain where we could see Juarez, Texas and New Mexico. At the very top of the mountain was a huge white cross where we took time to reflect on the day's events. What an exhilarating experience this was! As I sat on top of the mountain with the group, in total silence (all one could hear was a dog barking now and then, and car horns from a distance), I looked down on the desolate town of Juarez and envisioned my own parents as youngsters (both were from Mexico) running up and down the dirt roads with no running water, and electricity that was just installed (light bulbs hanging here and there) and outhouses for bathrooms. The tears just kept coming and I found I could not stop crying. My parents (both deceased) would be in their nineties today and in Juarez it seemed like time stood still.

During these four days our teens were real troupers! Their cooperation, enthusiasm, and energy really impressed the Mexican community. It was evident they made a statement and left an impression that will not soon be forgotten.

On Friday we were awakened at 5:00 a.m. for Mass (another Fr. Jim idea), breakfast, a cleaning of the mission complex and preparations to board the bus at 10:00 a.m. for our trip home. Before leaving the pastor said a prayer with all of us as we joined hands in a large circle. As the prayer ended, and we were on our way to the bus, a young boy came up to me and said "good-bye". As I looked at him, I

recognized him as Moises, one of the young boys who would come to Vacation Bible School, but didn't want to join us in the activities. (He just watched from afar.) I told him we were on our way back home and I wouldn't see him anymore. I asked him, in Spanish, for a hug. As he gave me a hug I kissed him on the cheek and told him it was wonderful meeting him. With tears in his eyes he looked up at me and smiled. I told him he shouldn't do that because I would start crying also – he smiled again. With that I left him and did not turn back until I got on the bus. (Then I cried on another chaperone's shoulders!) Many of the Mexican children were there to say "good-bye" to us and wish us a safe return home. After many hugs and kisses it was "on the road again!"

We arrived back at St. Julie's around 10:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 10<sup>th</sup>. We were greeted by jubilant family members and friends. I was happy to be home – a home I would never again take for granted. That night I thanked God for all I had.

Why did I go on this trip? Was it to get away from my own problems (what problems could I possibly have?) Or was it to learn about humility, patience and an understanding of one's culture and values? I want to believe it was the latter. I hope that what I learned and saw in Juarez makes me a more humble, patient and understanding person. I learned a lot from a people with so little!

I also learned that St. Julie's Church has some very talented, enthusiastic and spirited teens in their parish. And the parents of these teens can be very proud of them. Fr. Jim has guided this group of teens over the past several years and has done an excellent job steering them in the right direction. Keep up the great work Fr. Jim and TNT.

## Kelly Nagle

( )

As we loaded up the bus the nervous feeling in my stomach seemed to grow. I had spent the whole week prior questioning my belief in God. I felt I was really not where I wanted to be with God. I didn't feel like I was walking by His side anymore. This is what made me nervous. I was nervous about the bus ride and what to expect when we finally reached Mexico. People would tell me "you're safe in God's hands." Well I was a little unsure about God then so those words were little comfort. We said our final good-byes and left leaving a crowd of crying family and friends.

The bus ride there was pretty bad. There was no air conditioning and it was very crowded. We survived, however, with the humor we found in our two bus drivers and the two fans that we stopped and bought. The fans weren't much help, but they were enough.

When we got there we unloaded our stuff. Then we gathered in the Vacation Bible School (VBS) room for a welcoming from some Mexican families. They sang "Happy Birthday" to Gina and a tear rolled down my cheek. At that moment I saw God.

I saw God the rest of the week through all the children at VBS and through some of my friends and chaperones that came down with me. So I decided I would try to build a relationship with God. I never realized how



easy that might be (there at least). It was easy there because there was no one really in Mexico to fall back on except God. By the end of the trip (Friday) I felt pretty comfortable with God but I knew I had more to learn about Him and I felt I needed to give Him more of myself. I felt a part of me holding on to the not-real me. So I got on the bus with that and the "Holiness, holiness is what I long for" song in mind and God holding my hand. I felt like a brand-new person. My heart felt filled with more love and joy than ever before.

On the bus ride home I began to think about all I had learned. I learned what it's like to be genuinely happy. I learned how to open my heart more easily to others (including strangers). I learned how interesting the Bible could be (and promised to read more of it when I returned home). I also built new friendships and strengthened old ones. And, best of all, I found God (for certain) and through God I found myself. My true self! What I realized at that point was that I am on a new mission. And that is to share God with others and share my true self as well.

When I got home I kissed my parents hello and told them about all my wonderful breakthroughs and experiences. Then later that night I went online and checked my mail. I read one forward that's called "Lunch With God" by an anonymous person. After reading the story I knew I had just had my own "lunch with God". And He's the reason I always have and always will have a smile across my face.

Lunch With God

There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer, and he started his journey. When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Once again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word. As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps; he turned around, ran back up to the old woman, and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I have ever seen!" Meanwhile the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?" She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." But before her son responded she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. People come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime.

**Ed Pluchar, Sr.**

(chaperone)

“This could be one of those “life-changing experiences”. What an insight from Padre. I began thinking about our upcoming trip, still six months away. Past mission trips (to Appalachia in Pennsylvania and Kentucky) had been interesting and eventful, but not life-changing. I was wondering what he saw that would make Mexico different.

An overnight “Lock-In” retreat five months later offered no clues and did little to convince me that this trip would be anything special. True, it appeared to be an interesting trip offering an opportunity to help a community in need as well as an opportunity for the teens to grow together in the process. The lock-in left me tired (no sleep) and cautious towards the trip; however, the seeds for the trip were planted. The group bonding began, the small groups were formed, and the anticipation began to build.

Fast-forward approximately one month to Friday, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 12 hours into our 36-hour bus ride. At this point I was sure I knew what Fr. Jim meant by a “life-changing experience”. We were really just underway and discovered that half of the seats didn’t recline, the VCR stopped working, one of the bus drivers was a “chain-smoker” and the air conditioning quit during the hottest part of the day. All our expected suburban comforts were slowly slipping away and the group let it be known they weren’t happy. In retrospect, this was simply setting the stage for events to come.

By Sunday we had had our fill of McDonalds, crowded buses and no sleep, but had accomplished the goal. We made it safely to Mexico and the group began to come

together. New friendships were made, old ones were rekindled, and the anticipations for the week ahead were high.

As we met up with the YouthWorks! Staff for Juarez II, I had the feeling that this would be a well-run, well organized mission. It was now up to us to get all we could out of it. My concern was again directed to the group. Would this be an “experience” or a vacation for the teens? Time would tell. As we crossed the boarder into Juarez, the physical contrasts were amazing. We left behind skyscrapers and malls in El Paso to find dirt roads and homes made of wood pallets and cardboard in Juarez. I was convinced that the people would be no better off given the conditions of poverty they were living in. My thoughts began to center around how we would be helping them by constructing homes and assisting VBS – although I had some reservations about the VBS.

Sunday concluded with a typical planning meeting, the establishment of ground rules, schedules for the week, bunk assignments, etc.

For Monday and Tuesday, my group drew VBS. We began planning in the morning, which was a real challenge. I “volunteered” for games and music. Do you have any idea what it’s like trying to get a teen-age guy brought up on *Collective Soul* and *Smashmouth* to sing the Mexican version of “Bananas”? The planning for the games went well. “Pato, pato, ganzo” (duck, duck, goose) was easy – and a hit with the younger children. “Futball” (the “real one” -- soccer) was a hit with the older children. With planning complete, lunch was served and we collectively held our breath – not really knowing what to expect. After lunch, but prior to the VBS starting time, I noticed the children start to appear, one or two at a time, standing on the perimeter of the grounds and building – smiling. The smiles caught my attention.

Slowly, our teens picked up on this and began to mix with the children. The younger ones came inside while the older ones began to play outside. By the start of VBS we had in excess of forty local children and twenty teens interacting like they had been friends for weeks. The amazing thing to me was that very few, if any, of our teens

spoke Spanish; yet, the interaction and communication was there immediately. I think that the bonds that were forming were all the stronger because of this. As we proceeded through the program, prayer, games, songs, Bible skit, crafts and more games it was very noticeable that the teens (and I) were enjoying the experience very much. In fact, the teens were learning from the children. We had many small groups within the large one. There were children teaching teens local songs, and teens giving “horsy-back” rides to the children. Baseball games and futbol games were going on simultaneously (with some of the teens being schooled on the fine arts of soccer). All too soon, the day was over and the children were expected to leave.

Did the bonds form? Did the teens really get anything out of it? I say the answer was a resounding YES. We spent the next half-hour trying to regroup the teens for a meeting to recap the day. Everywhere I turned I saw one of the small groups still actively singing, playing, talking, etc. The teens didn’t want it to end! Finally, after wrapping it up for the day, it struck me that the conversations had moved from questions in the morning to non-stop talk of the VBS experience and excitement for tomorrow.

Personally, I was excited to see how well the first day went and looked forward to tomorrow to see if the bonding would continue to grow. That evening, as we met for “Club”, my thoughts were still on the day’s activities. As we began the evening I came to realize that this, too, was going to be a unique experience. The effort put forth by the YouthWorks! Staff was tremendous. The songs, skits, talks and reflections were great. The “up-tempo” songs to burn off energy, moving into songs of reflection like “Holiness is what I ask For”, gave the group the opportunity to reflect on the day and come together with their thoughts and God. For me, a “high-point” was yet to come. The small group discussions were phenomenal! They offered a time to recap, reflect and discuss the events of the day and, in our case, tie them back to the workings of Jesus. It really struck me as to how insightful the teens were. Small groups on mission trips should be mandatory. We closed with a large group discussion that proved to be the most powerful part of the trip as the week progressed. By the end of the first night my mind was swimming. My initial concern about the trip was set aside: the majority was there for the experience. My

initial thoughts on the “poverty” and expected attitudes of the people were blown away. I didn’t see a single “unhappy” face – only numerous children enjoying what God had given them.

Day Two – more of the same? Yes and no. The schedule was basically the same, with the exception of the surprise trip to the market. It proved to be a nice break and a great experience. Once we were back at the Mission, the expectations were high and the teens were actually looking for the children from the day before. I saw even more enjoyment and fun. The teens who earlier had been slow to join-in now jumped in with both feet. The bonding was more intense and the time passed even faster. At the end of the second day of VBS I realized how close we all had grown to this group of children and how much joy and happiness they had shown us. It was next to impossible to separate the teens from their new friends as VBS came to a close. Hours later we still found teens talking with their new friends.

Again, “Club” was a hit. The whole group appeared to warm to the songs and talks. Nate did a wonderful job of sharing his experience of Jesus and I could see the groups (large and small) growing together. The wrap-up, with the small group meetings and large group reflection were amazing. We had many teens requesting that we extend the time frame for small group since they felt so strongly about it. How could this get any better?

Days Three and Four – The real reason I thought I came to Mexico was to build homes. The day started with a real “eye-opener” for me. A “home” is basically three bedrooms, two baths, a kitchen, living room, etc. Right? Not in Juarez. We were looking on a home that was one room of approximately sixteen feet wide by twenty-four feet long with one window and one door. This home would house a family while a second family would live above in the same sized dwelling. All the construction was cinder block. Mortar was made from scratch with sand dug from the hillside three feet away. Water was brought to the site. On the job site we met Jose and “El Maestro” – two of the hardest working individuals I’ve ever seen. They never stopped regardless of

how hot and dusty it became. Additionally, some of the ladies from the church were there as well. They jumped right in – mixing mortar and cement, laying cinder blocks, etc. What was amazing to me was the work ethic and the attitude of the people. They were always looking to help the teens do what they were attempting. They taught them to mix mortar or lay brick – always with a smile on their faces. Whenever a teen looked tired or slowed down, they jumped right in to give them a break. It was an amazing experience. We went back each night reflecting on the accomplishment of helping to build the new home; however it was once again the people of the community who gave us more than we could give them.

Club on Wednesday was amazing! Nate's interpretation of the story of the leper from the Bible was fantastic. And, the songs seemed to have more energy and they drew more out of each of us. The small group discussions became deeper and closer. It was a moving experience. The large group reflection and sharing with the passing of the candle really "turned the corner" for me. This was truly a "life-changing experience". The emotions ran high, the sharing was incredible, and the bonding was deep and lasting for all involved. I think my daughter Kelly and I really came together at that point.

Thursday brought us a couple of unexpected, but enlightening, twists. We attended a prayer service in the church at the Mission given by "Pastor". It was a wonderful experience in sharing with English songs sung by our teens and Padre, Spanish songs by the congregation, and a very eloquent and deep talk by the pastor. He was truly a "big" man, despite his humility. We followed up with a get-together with the congregation and the teens. It was a great experience in sharing and community-building. We wrapped the evening up with a small group session and reflections. As expected, the time was very difficult, though anticipated. The end of the trip was in sight, but no one was ready for the experience to end. However, these moments of "closure" were much needed and helpful. Small groups gave us a chance to share one last time with friends with whom we had grown very close. (Thanks Megan, Melissa, Kevin, Eric and Chris – our group members). Reflections gave us an opportunity to share with the group, reinforce what we had created among us over the week, and genuinely share some

final thoughts. The next morning we would rise very early for Mass with Padre, clean, and head out.

As I sit back now and reflect on the trip I believe it was a “life-changing experience” for a number of participants. Fr. Jim was able to see this and I thank him for it. It changed me and has altered my relationship with my family for the better. It was time well-spent. Would I do it again? In a minute!



## **Fr. Jim Curry**

(chaperone)

Since my arrival at St. Julie Church in the Summer of 1995, I have wanted to share a "Mission Experience" with our teens and families. Through my own travels to Mexico, Kenya and Tanzania in Africa and cities like Calcutta, India God has allowed me to see the wealth of our materially poor sisters and brothers around the world. We are very blessed in America. But at times we lose sight of just how blessed we are.

In fact, our first Mission Trip to Guatemala last January was inspired by the comments of a teen who (I felt) had lost sight of her many gifts. Sally, I'll call her, was despondent over her latest birthday because her parents had failed to give her a car. "All her friends" had received one and she felt left-out and "unloved". Upon hearing her story I reflected on my own experiences of the world and thought to myself, "It's time. We need to get her – and others – out of the suburbia I had known most of my life. (I grew up in Des Plaines, just north of O'Hare Airport).

The greatest gift we received through our journeys has been a deepening of gratitude for all God has given us. We have recognized the generosity of God and God's love and we have been overcome in our desire to give thanks. The grace we have been given abundantly just oozes out of us as we discover a deep desire to share what we have been given. Each of these "crazy" experiences (by human standards) has served to bring us closer to God and all God's people.

Basically what happens on these Mission Trips is simple: we are stripped of all our "necessities" (like showers, air conditioning and other creature comforts) and we find that – beneath it all – we are still loveable (though smelly) and we are still healthy and sane. It's much like the process of addiction and

detachment. Throughout life we build our own structure or “comfort zone”. And, before long we actually believe that we **need** all the things we have (and more). We become attached to the things of this world. Below the layer of make-up, for example, lies the same person who was always there – but hidden. In other words, a Mission Experience strips away all the superficial “junk” so that we can find the real person beneath. This is one of our primary objectives.

Our trip to Juarez was unique in that it was the first time we worked as a “multi-denominational” group. YouthWorks! Staff confessed that we were their first Catholic group in their ten year history. They were amazed at the size of our group that was so large that we “took over the place”. Usually their workweek was shared by more than one group. Staff members also expressed excitement with our particular group’s enthusiasm in singing their upbeat and moving songs and the teens’ work ethic.

But there were just as many ways in which our group needed to grow a bit. For most of us, spending an hour every morning reflecting on Scripture and listening for the stirrings of God in our hearts was a new concept. But many teens and chaperones quickly found a “new” approach to learning more about Jesus, his culture, and God. It was exciting to read the reflections they wrote after the trip. Many commented how their relationship with God had deepened as a result of the time we spent in silence after our breakfast.

Another interesting point I noticed was that some reflections failed to mention the religious nature of the Mission that permeated our time together. That’s not because of any failure on the part of God to touch their hearts or the staff to help integrate the knowledge of God’s activity in our daily work. Rather, it’s a sign that a) the separation of Church and State has made us fearful to share our faith publicly and b) Catholics have always tended to be people who keep their relationship with God to themselves. Case in point; one teen who wrote a **powerful** reflection called me to ask if “it’s okay to write in a religious

tone for a newspaper". He thought that the sharing of his faith might be rejected for publication, much as (I hear) our children are not allowed to express their faith in song or in their writings at school. I'm left wondering how much of the shear **power** of God in our week was omitted for this reason.

Sure, it's a lot of work and responsibility to take a (relatively) small number of "disciples" to foreign lands. But the seeds that God plants in the teens, chaperones, their families and our communities will be sprouting for years to come. Mission work is part of my call. There is a **depth** of growth taking place through these shared times together that can be found nowhere else. And so we go.

Mother Teresa was once asked why she even bothered taking on the overwhelming poverty and suffering she found in Calcutta:

I never look at the masses as my responsibility.

I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time.

Just one, one, one.

You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.'

So you begin . . . . I begin.

I picked up one person --

maybe if I didn't pick up that one person I wouldn't have picked up 42,000.

The whole work is only a drop in the ocean.

But if I didn't put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less.

Same thing for you  
same thing in your family  
same thing in the church where you go  
just begin . . . one, one, one."