

GROUP WORKS TO DEVELOP SMILES WOMEN RAISE FUNDS FOR NEEDY IN LATIN, CENTRAL AMERICA

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Difficult economic conditions in Venezuela are prompting a group of south Florida women to expand their efforts to help.

“We want to reach a larger audience and start to grow,” said Graciela Monroy of Weston, Vice President of the Broward chapter of America Developing Smiles.

The charity was formed in Miami in 1997 to support the international non-profit organization Asociación Damas Salesianas. The Weston chapter was organized in 2001, and a third chapter was started in Boca Raton last year.

The international association began 30 years ago in Caracas, Venezuela, organized by Father Miguel González, a priest with the Roman Catholic Salesian order. Today it operates 141 centers in 28 countries around the world, including 20 Latin American nations.

“We help out 355 children at a school in Caracas,” explained Isabel Espinosa of Weston, the chapter’s treasurer. “The economic situation there is getting worse, so we are trying to help them with their education.”

The group also supports a health center near Caracas where funds help provide an education, daily meals and medical services. “The center charges a very small amount to each patient,” Espinosa said. “If you don’t charge them something, they take it for granted. We need to educate them.”

The three south Florida chapters concentrate their efforts in Venezuela, Colombia and Nicaragua.

In Nicaragua, the organization supports an educational center in Masaya that educates over 200 children. In Venezuela, the group provides support to children in three different educational projects.

“We have a sponsorship program where, for \$180 a year, a person can sponsor a child,” Monroy said. “They receive a photo of the child and can correspond with them or visit them. It’s a beautiful project.”

Espinosa said that she sends checks every three months to the organization’s various projects. “But, if there is a special need, we try to help,” she said.

Currently she is seeking to raise funds to buy a new van for a school in Venezuela. “The van broke down and the kids have to walk an hour to get to school,” Espinosa said. “We are trying to help them get a new one.”

America Developing Smiles also sponsors community projects in south Florida. “We are working with the All Aboard program of the Children’s Psychiatric Center,” Monroy explained. “Through that program, we have volunteers, including a lot of teenagers, who are tutoring children at a school in Miami Lakes.”

Monroy said that many Spanish children who immigrate to the Miami area do not do well in school. "We try to teach them their ABCs. It's a mentoring program to help children in the public schools."

"We try to help the children on a one to one basis," said Luisana Rincon of Miami who helps the organization with its public relations. "We are helping them learn to read. They will learn faster that way."

The organization also provides support to the Caridad Health Clinic in Palm Beach County that serves needy farm workers and their children.

To finance the various projects, each chapter holds one major fund-raising event each year in addition to seeking other donations and child sponsorships. "In Miami-Dade County we have a bazaar that involves a fashion show, a luncheon and a mini-concert," Monroy said. That event was held in late October.

In Broward County, the Association is planning a Brazilian Dinner and health fair in March as it's major fundraising event. The Palm Beach chapter will hold a gala dinner dance in May

The Weston group's annual event raises almost \$30,000 for their charitable projects. "In all, we probably raised around \$45,000 last year," said Monroy.

In total, the three south-Florida chapters raised nearly \$125,000 last year for their projects according to Mariangel Gonzalez of Miami who is president of the organization. "We will probably raise \$180,000 this year," she said.

By attracting additional members, the group's officers feel that they can expand the help they are offering. "We are open to people from all nationalities," Monroy said. "We have a lot of American women who are working with us."

"It's a way to give back to the community," said Monroy. "When we grow, we attract people who want to make a difference in society."

Information about the organization may be obtained by calling 305-365-9365 in Miami, 954-217-9072 in Broward County, or 561-477-0265 in Palm Beach County, or by writing to info@americadevelopingsmiles.org. The organization's web site can be found at www.americadevelopingsmiles.org.

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