

*Saint Jerome Parish, Norwalk***Scholarships bring hope to Guatemala**

By YVONNE MORAN

Although she was in her twenties, Julie Coyne had never been out of the United States when she decided eight years ago to go to Quetzaltenango in Guatemala to study Spanish and do some volunteer work.

As she got to know the locals through building stoves and latrines in regions surrounding the country's second biggest city, she noticed many children were not attending school. Extreme poverty prevented many from affording books and uniforms, and the maintenance fee required even in the public schools. Poor parents often needed their children to work to support the family, forcing the kids to quit school.

Coyne decided to do something about it.

Coyne, now 35, began to financially support the cost of educating three students seven years ago. The numbers jumped to 35 two years later when she

received a donation of \$20,000, enabling her to start her not-for-profit foundation, Education and Hope, assisting students in Quetzaltenango, (Xela), a five-hour drive northwest of the capital, Guatemala City.

Helping Every Child

"The program began because I knew so many families who were desperately struggling to help their kids make it through primary school," says Coyne, whose project survives mainly on small donations, many of which are organized by her home parish, Saint Jerome's in Norwalk. "We want to make it possible for every child to stay in education for as many years as they can."

Coyne returns to the U.S. every four months to raise funds. With a budget of \$115,000, Education and Hope supports 50 primary, 61 high school, and four university students in public and private education. Sometimes the need



EDUCATION AND HOPE, a foundation started by Julie Coyne (above) of Norwalk, helps the poorest children in Guatemala obtain an education.

might be as simple as money for school bus fare; other times it may go for the hospital fees for a traumatic eye injury without which a 10-year-old boy would have lost sight in one eye.

The children themselves rec-

ognize the importance of the gift of education. Juan Carlos Say, 12, says that his father abandoned the family years ago, forcing his mother to take them to an emergency shelter.

"It was there that we met a

wonderful woman who taught me the importance of education," he says. "She paid for our school registration, shoes, and backpacks. She has helped me since I was in first grade, and I am in fifth grade now."

Juan, who at this young age works with a bricklayer on weekends, knows that he will have a better future, thanks to Coyne's assistance.

Remarkable Vocation

"In a real sense Julie's a saint, I think," says Father David W. Blanchfield, pastor of Saint Jerome's. "What's remarkable is that she's given her life, and sacrificed greatly, and done this without being part of a large agency or religious order. It's clearly a vocation." The parish organizes fundraising and gift tags on the Christmas Giving Tree for Coyne's project, along with the moral support and sense of connection that Coyne says has often kept her going when things got too tough.

In return, assisting her program has given Saint Jerome parishioners "a better sense of poverty in another country, the blessing of leading a simpler life, and a relationship with a fellow parishioner who's an

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extension of ourselves," Father Blanchfield says.

Many of the students Coyne helps come from large, impoverished, female head of household families who must survive on about \$75 a month. While the mothers generally realize the importance of their children staying in school, keeping them there often becomes an intolerable financial burden, particularly if the child does poorly or continually fails because there is no one at home who can help with the school work.

Extra Tutoring

Realizing this, Coyne added an after school-program to give students the extra tutoring that uneducated parents couldn't provide. Seven part-time teachers work with 40 of the most needy kids. "The individual attention the kids receive has contributed remarkably to their growth," say Coyne.

Coyne says the opportunity to share her resources and talents with the less fortunate have enriched her life more than she could have imagined possible. She gets depressed, she says, when she hears people say that they're overwhelmed by the world's problems.

"So many people wish for the world to be a better place, and say that the world's problems seem too great, but if everyone were to make a difference in one person's life, that's where it begins," she says.

(For more information, or to make a donation, write to Education and Hope, P.O. Box 486, Norwalk, CT 06850, or e-mail: esperanza@xela.net) ♦