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Why So Many Guatemalan Mothers Love Julie Coyne

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NORWALK, Conn. — Julie Coyne of Norwalk, Conn., had never been out of the United States when she decided to go to Quetzaltenango in Guatemala to study Spanish and do some volunteer work seven years ago.

As she got to know the locals through building stoves and latrines in the regions surrounding the country's second largest city, she noticed many of the local kids weren't attending school. Extreme poverty, lack of money for books, uniforms and school maintenance fees, overcrowded classrooms and children who continually failed were some of the problems. Illiterate parents needed their children to work to support the family, forcing kids to quit school without any kind of diploma.

When Coyne heard that, she decided to do something about it.



Scholars Pedro Cruz, 6, and Nery Maldonado, 6. (Julie Coyne photo)

Coyne, 34, began financial support of the education of three students six years ago, and the numbers jumped to 35 two years later when she received a donation of \$20,000, allowing her to formally start her not-for-profit foundation, Education and Hope.

"The program began because so many kids couldn't make it through primary school," said Coyne, who up until recently survived off small savings, small personal donations, bigger credit card debts and odd jobs during her periodic stays in the United States (she paid herself a small stipend from the project last year for the first time).

With Coyne returning to the United States approximately every four months to fund-raise, a current budget of \$75,000, the program now supports 42 primary, 39 high school and four university students in public and private education on a financial need basis throughout the year. Sometimes that need might be as simple as money for bus fare to and from school; other times, it may be for something like a traumatic eye injury without which a 10-year-old student would have lost half his sight. The average paid per student is \$25 a month.

"Every child can stay in education for

as long as they like," said Coyne, a Catholic, of her education for life commitment that assists students in Quetzaltenango, a five-hour drive northwest of the capital Guatemala City, and in nearby rural La Esperanza. The latter means "hope" in English.

Many of the students she helps come from large, impoverished households headed by females, surviving on about \$80 a month.

And while the mothers generally realize the importance of their children remaining in school, keeping them there often becomes an intolerable financial burden if the child continues to fail because of inadequate teaching or no help with homework.

Realizing this, Coyne also began a five-day-a-week after-school tutorial program in 1997 that assists 35 of the kids most in need in both locations. "The kids are

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blooming, and I've seen their confidence grow," she said. Four part time local teachers are employed in the program. More are needed.

Tomasa Lopez, 23, quit school when she was 10 years of age, when money for school supplies became a problem.

"My mother was single, and what we made (working in the fields and selling cleaning products) was just enough to buy food," said Lopez, during a translated phone conversation from Guatemala. One year later, Lopez began cutting coffee and cleaning houses to help support her family.

When she was 17, Lopez left her village and traveled seven hours' drive north to find work in Quetzaltenango. She completed primary school, started high school, and began getting scholarship money two years ago.

"I had no books and had to use the library, but when I was finished work, the library was closed," she said. "I probably couldn't have continued my studies" without the scholarship, said Lopez, who'd like to study psychology and, later, teach.



Her accommodation, food, \$30 monthly school fees and supplies are paid for, and she could qualify for university within two years.

The scholarship enables students to focus on the future. "It's given us a lot of motivation for studying when we have the support," said Lopez. She said her 7-year-old sister Sorida has flunked the same grade twice, probably because of poor nutrition.

"Education is the most powerful way of bringing people out of poverty, and this can change their

lives," said Sheila Cahill.

The Irish woman and former teacher regularly returns to La Esperanza to visit a family she stayed with seven years ago, while studying Spanish and doing volunteer work. It was during that time she met Julie, and although Cahill has nothing to do with the project, she regularly visits it.

"I'm struck by the hope it gives the people it's supporting, and the ripple effect it has on the family," said Cahill who saw this firsthand with her former host's family. One of the boys is receiving the scholarship, and "it has a huge impact on his two other brothers — they are more likely to stay in school," said Cahill, speaking from Dublin, Ireland.

Student and parental attitudes have changed from skepticism to confidence. And the after-school program attracts a horde of children

"scrambling to take their books out and start their homework," Cahill said. The mothers are also very committed to their children's education, in spite of the huge financial burden: "I often think they must see the money spent on education and wish they had it to spend on food. But I've never heard them voice anything other than happiness that their children are getting this chance."

Cahill said she's amazed by Coyne's commitment to the project. "There have been so many times when I would have walked away" because of the lack of money, she said. "But I know the project is bigger than Julie, and it's not about her — but she's truly loved by the children and mothers she works with."

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Information

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Both Photos of Julie with Kids © Deborah Lopez