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The Hour

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Monday, February 6, 2006 Vol. 135 No. 36

The Independent Voice of Our Community for 135 years

www.thehour.com

A life of helping children proves irresistible for Norwalk High grad

By JILL BODACH
Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — Twelve years ago, Norwalk resident Julie Coyne went to Guatemala because she wanted to learn to speak Spanish.

But she learned much more than that and, with the exception of a few months each year, Coyne, 39, never returned to the United States. She lives in

the village of Quetzaltenango (Xela is its Mayan name), which is in the Mayan highlands of Guatemala. Surrounded by mountains, the village is located in the heart of the Sierra Madres, 125 miles west of Guatemala City.

It is also a poor area where the cycle of illiteracy is prevalent in families. During her initial visit, Coyne saw how

poverty kept the children from going to school.

Once she was there, Coyne could not bring herself to leave knowing that so much help was needed and probably wouldn't be received otherwise.

"As my relationships with the families we were working with began to develop, I began to realize that there were many children who could not afford to attend school, either because the family could not afford the registration fees and materials, or possibly needed the child to work to support the family," Coyne, a Norwalk High School graduate, said in an e-mail from Guatemala. "Being a product of the Norwalk school



Contributed photo

Julie Coyne, founder of Education and Hope, poses with some of her students in Guatemala.

"So many of these children are like my own that it's impossible for me to imagine my life without them, and I hope I never have to."

Julie Coyne

Norwalk native working in education in Guatemala

See **NORWALK, A11**



Don't Miss Norwalk Hospital's **HEALTH TALK** on Cablevision Local Programming Channel 84 Sun., Wed., - Sat., at 6:30pm, Fri., and Sat., at 7:30. Sun., through Sat., at 8:30, 9:30, 10:30 and 11:30a.m. and on Channel 83, Fit TV, Mon., Wed., & Thurs., 8:30 p.m.

Topic week of February 6 is The Fourth Trimester - Tips for New Moms

with guests, Lynn Higgins, RCN, and Beth Iovinelli, RN
Lactation Consultants at Norwalk Hospital



Norwalk
Hospital

Norwalk native Coyne has been educating Guatemalan kids for 12 years

From A1

system, I couldn't imagine what my life would have looked like if I hadn't had the opportunity to receive an excellent education."

Coyne began to sponsor a few children — in numbers that grew a little at a time — with scholarships to attend school. But she wanted to do more.

"I always said that if I had it my way, my dream would be to begin an education foundation to extend that opportunity to other children," Coyne said.

In 1997, after receiving a significant donation, Coyne applied for and received 501c3 status as a nonprofit organization, which she dubbed Education and Hope.

Coyne serves 154 kids in her educational program, with 60 as part of the after-school program. They are served lunch each day and are given the opportunity to take a shower, something they are all eager to do because they are unable to do it at home.

But space is limited.

"Currently, we are in a very difficult situation because we have long since outgrown the houses we rent for the after-school program, but it has been nearly impossible to find a house for rent that has

enough room for all 12 teachers, four administrative staff, five housekeepers and cooks," Coyne said. "We are so cramped right now that we are literally on top of one another, with no private office space to speak of and no recreational area whatsoever for the kids."

Coyne is hoping to build a school, or buy one of the houses currently for sale, in order to accommodate everyone.

Despite all she has done and still wants to do to help the children of Quetzaltenango, Coyne never anticipated that she would be there for 12 years.

"I always hoped that my commitment to these children would be for life, but I still never imagined that 12 years later I would still be here," Coyne said.

But leaving would be difficult now that she has become not only a teacher to many of the children, but a mentor, friend and mother figure as well, she said.

Coyne described a relationship with a young girl named Wendy, whom she met in 1998 when Wendy ran away from home because her family would not allow her to attend school. Coyne helped Wendy receive an education and has since been referred to as "mi

mama" when Wendy introduces her to friends.

"So many of these children are like my own that it's impossible for me to imagine my life without them, and I hope I never have to," Coyne said. "It's traumatic enough for some when I go back to the U.S. for a few weeks or if I manage to get away for the weekend — much less forever."

Coyne's commitment to the children and families of Guatemala was renewed when Hurricane Stan hit the area a few weeks before Hurricane Katrina slammed New Orleans. Other natural disasters like the earthquakes in Pakistan followed Katrina and Hurricane Stan was forgotten.

Villages that rely on crops for their food and livelihood were leveled along with the precious fields. Coyne arranged funds through Education and Hope to provide 1,400 pounds of corn, beans and rice to an outlying village; traveling two hours to deliver the aid personally.

"I am still haunted by the faces of the mothers," Coyne said. "The women were genuinely grateful for this unexpected gift of food, visibly moved by the generosity of a stranger. Yet I have never been so humbled standing before

continued:

such astounding need."

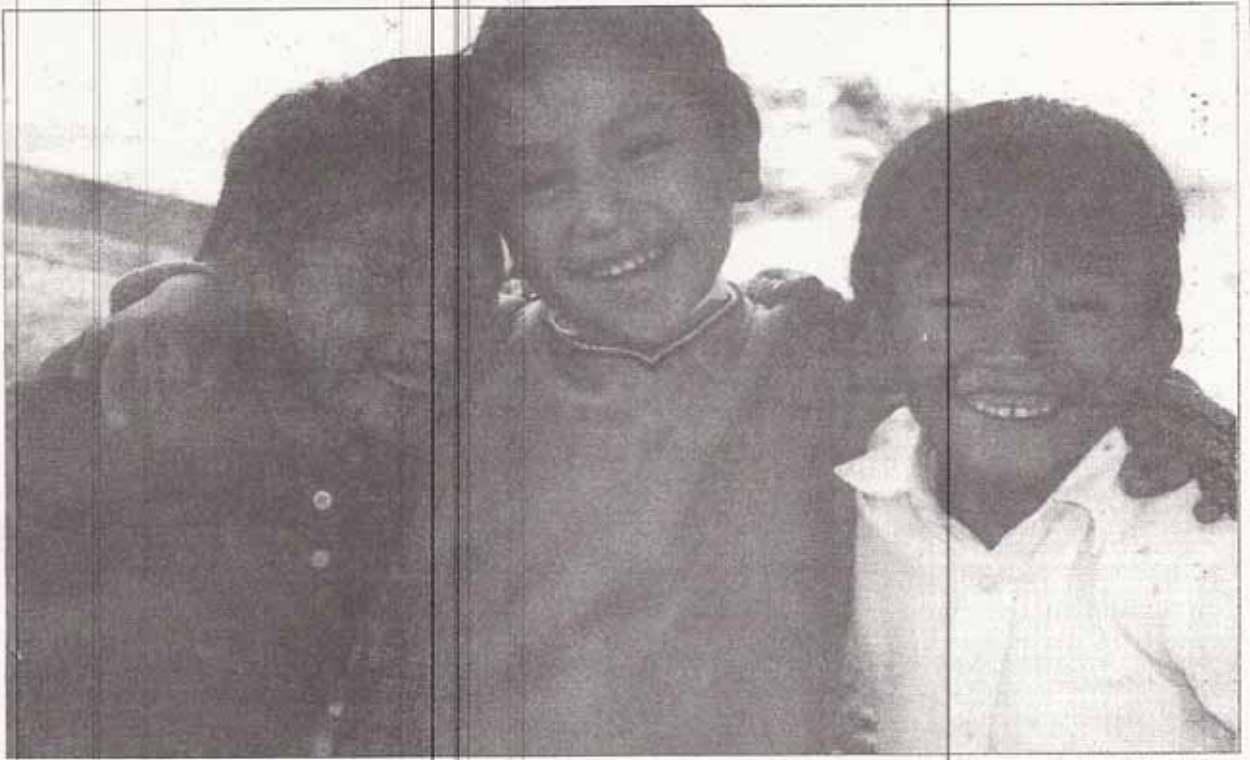
Back in Norwalk, hundreds of miles away from where her daughter has become a mother to dozens of children, Julie's mother misses her daughter but is also humbled by the work she has done.

"She has just done so wonderfully ... it's hard to even

describe what I feel when I talk about Julie," Kathy Coyne said. "She is giving people something they wouldn't otherwise have. She's given up her life to help the people of Guatemala, and all that she's done is going to ripple out like a rock thrown in a pond and they will be able to help each

other. Those little children just grabbed hold of her heart and she hasn't been able to leave because she is so committed to helping them."

For more information visit www.educationandhope.org or e-mail guatemalahope@optonline.org.



Contributed photo

Education and Hope has helped many Guatemalan children get an education, including these three.