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Preface

It is our hope that the stories in this collection of exemplary projects will be of practical help to others who are committed to serving those who are poor the world over.

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Finally, we give thanks for all the dedicated sisters who cooperated with this project and who gave so generously of their time and energy in the preparation of this document. We are grateful to them for responding to our questions about their work and for giving us permission to publish their stories and photographs.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, a special thank you is due to all the generous, dedicated sisters whose lives, faith, and work have helped to shape this publication. We are grateful for permission to use their factual material and photographs, and are greatly indebted to the sisters for their unfailing generosity and cooperation throughout the project. It would be a litany in itself to list all the points of advice, suggestions, corrections, and additions received from the sisters whose projects were selected for this study. Their testimonies made their daunting efforts identifiable and embraceable for others; and by sharing their experiences, they will help many others in the mission field.

Several other people have contributed significantly to this work. They come from several sources of support and inspiration but special thanks should go to those who helped draw the work together.

- Sister Joyce Meyer, PBVM, Executive Director of the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters, provided direction and facilitated communication with the project coordinators when needed. Her efforts in gathering and organizing the initial materials and her ongoing encouragement and suggestions helped to move the project from start to finish. That we completed this long distance undertaking happily, without ever meeting each other, is a tribute to her professionalism, ingenuity, and kindness.

- James Galbraith and Sister Mary Catherine Rabbitt, SL, Board Members of the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters, planted the seed of interest for this project and expertly shepherded the process throughout. They helped us think through the issues as we encountered them, suggesting possible scenarios of how the material might be presented, critiquing, editing, and offering advice as the project developed. Their enthusiasm never waned.

- Sister Joyce Fey, SSSF, Associate Professor of Professional Communication at Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, tirelessly waded through the manuscript, carefully proofreading the text and offering suggestions for layout and cover design. What life it now possesses is a tribute to her creative skill and energies.

- Enrique Gutierrez, proprietor of Forest City Data, a computer network and IT consulting firm in Rockford, Illinois, was always available when needed to solve problems relating to formatting, editing, inserting graphics, and downloading photos. Such problems become even more technologically complicated when communicating internationally with such locations as Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, but with Enrique’s patience, expertise, and intelligence, the right solution was always a telephone call away.

Without the enthusiastic support and help of these individuals, this project could not have been undertaken. We are indebted also to Wikipedia, a multilingual, web-based encyclopedia, for the use of thumb-nail maps and basic information that provide a proper introductory visual and factual context for each of the stories.
Introduction

For more than 20 years the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters (CHFS) has awarded nearly $60 million to sisters’ projects. All this has been possible thanks to the generosity of Conrad N. Hilton, the hotel pioneer who gave the bulk of his personal fortune to the foundation which bears his name. In his last will and testament, Hilton stated: “There is a natural law, a Divine law, which obliges you and me to relieve the suffering, the distressed and the destitute. Charity is a supreme virtue, and the great channel through which the mercy of God is passed on to mankind.”

Hilton singled out sisters, who devote their love and life’s work for the good of humankind, as especially deserving of the foundation’s help and support. Being impressed by their focus on mission and their unusual ability to stretch the dollar to its maximum, he favored their commitment over “organized, professional charities with high-salaried executives and a heavy ratio of expense.”

Though the grant making efforts in Hilton’s name have made a difference in the lives of destitute people around the world, we believe there is another way to make the funds and creativity of countless sisters even more effective. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to share the experience and expertise gained through the tireless and persevering efforts of the sisters who have multiplied their effectiveness in the mission field through the support of the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters.

With emphasis on the practical experiences that led to their success, the twenty-eight projects in this publication were selected for their vision, commitment, and creativity. They exemplify fiscally responsible solutions to the extraordinary problems faced by the suffering poor in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other areas. Each project description carefully illustrates the step-by-step development strategies, successes, obstacles and practical methods of sustainability that evolved over time. The individual stories are clustered around such themes as: community development, community health, HIV/AIDS education, agriculture and food security, renewable energy, micro-credit initiatives, inter-congregational training opportunities, vulnerable women and trafficking, and prisoner rehabilitation. Original photographs, taken by the sisters, enliven and illustrate essential elements of each narrative.

Hopefully, these stories and methods will serve as a “how-to” reference for others involved in missionary service to the Church. It is our hope that the extraordinary creativity and initiative of the sisters who envisioned and implemented these projects will expand the reach of God’s work by mentoring others who seek to make the presence of a compassionate God a tangible reality in the lives of the people they serve.
Guarani Solidarity Team Project
Entre Rios, Department of Tarija, Bolivia

ENTRE RIOS, TARIJA DEPARTMENT, BOLIVIA

The Guarani trace their origins to Brazil and Paraguay from where they migrated more than 500 years ago. They mixed with the Chane' Indians who cultivated a great deal of corn and the Guarani themselves became “People of the Corn.” More than 50 ways of using corn are found in their daily diet.

The Guarani were the indigenous people most resistant to the invasion of the Spaniards. In fact, the Spaniards named them “Guarani,” a word meaning “war” in the Tupi language. After they were defeated at the Battle of Kuruyuki in 1892, they lost their liberty and consequently their spirit, becoming a very oppressed people.

When the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary first met the Guarani people in 1987, most were peons of the landholders who had obtained huge land titles conceded by the Bolivian dictators. There were no schools in the Guarani communities. Most people were illiterate, enslaved, and stoically passive about their condition.

The people had trouble growing their own food because of the onslaught of cattle that destroyed all their crops except those guarded well by good wire fences. Because of their crop losses they became enslaved to the landholders by their own debts. It became necessary for them to “borrow” in order to eat, obtain blankets, or minimal clothing. Huts with palm leaf roofs, often with no walls to protect them from the rains and cold weather, served as their homes. They were often looked upon by the Mestizos as “less than human.”

The “Guarani Solidarity Team” project or Support Team to the Guarani People (Equipo de Apoyo al Pueblo Guarani) was initiated to support the people in their efforts to liberate themselves from the landholders. Support was specified in five different areas known as the pillars of the newly organized “Guarani People’s Assembly” (Asamblea del Pueblo Guarani). These five areas were: production, infrastructure, health, education, and territory. Their mission was to achieve liberation and a self-sustaining life style for their own people. The team has been a continuous entity from the time of its founding.

Procedures for Establishing the Project

Upon learning the Guarani language, it became possible for the support team to visit the Guarani communities and begin listening to their dreams and aspirations. Their first concerns were to begin a common field where all could work together to clear, plant, weed and harvest. The project began with the coming together of four people dedicated to the Guarani cause: a Presentation sister, a Swiss engineer and nurse couple, and a local educator. The sisters’ home in Timboy provided services as an office until a team office was set up in Entre Rios. A grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for
Sisters made it possible to purchase the tools needed: axes, machetes, spades, large hoes, hammers, barbed wire, staples, and food for the families working in the field.

Naurenda became the first common field, followed by Saladito and then Yukimbia. Each common field began with the organization of the community: first, the choice of a chief (mburivicha), then the choice of the president of the work group, a vice president, secretary, and messengers.

Almost simultaneously, schools were established in each community. Local villagers put up a palm leafed roof structure and walls of wattle. The Team provided someone to plaster the walls, make a blackboard, and put in a cement floor, windows and doors. One of the Team members, a former rural school teacher, principal and supervisor, wielded enough influence with the public school district to begin the new schools and obtain teachers for them.

Through sponsorship by the Team, a young Guarani woman from the community received nurse’s training. Many more men and women who obtained scholarships for nursing training followed. A Swiss couple constructed and equipped the first health post in Yukimbia. This became a model for the government to construct and equip many other health posts in the region.

Unlike another non-governmental organization (NGO) in the area that planned projects in the city of Tarija and then advertised these to the people, this project was planned with the people, finding out what their priorities were before writing the projects. Because of this, each Support Team was different, reflecting the priorities of the community; for example, in addition to their agricultural focus, different local communities targeted education as an important need; another identified health care. Others focused on handicrafts, medical emergencies, honey production, a housing project, and a cattle cooperative.

All decisions about priorities, needs, organizational meetings, and problems are made by the Guarani People’s Assembly, a native Guarani organization. The Guarani Solidarity Team worked with the Guarani People’s Assembly to organize 36 communities along with their work groups and communal fields. Three Guarani agricultural promoters were contracted, one for each of the three Guarani zones. Cattle cooperatives were available to every community. Generally 2 or 4 communities were joined in one cattle cooperative. This took approximately 8 years. Funding was a vital part of this effort. Most of the funding came from Catholic Church organizations like the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters, the Raskob Foundation, Koch Foundation, German Bishops’ Miserior, and a host of other donors.

Meetings were called every month by the Guarani leaders in the local communities, every two months in the three zones, and every four months as an entire region. Some of their accomplishments included the following:

- Land and cattle made available in each zone (18 years and continuing)
- Schools within walking distance for all communities, a junior high school in each of the three zones, and one senior high school in Nurenda (15 years)
- Road projects in all three zones (18 years and continuing)

*We make our path as we walk along.*

-Native American saying
• Water projects made potable water available in most of the communities (18 years) and made small irrigation systems available (10 years)
• Electricity has been installed in a few communities
• Medical posts have been installed in each zone (15 years) and universal medical insurance made available to all
• More than 500 houses have been constructed in the Guarani communities; some still need to add bathrooms, dining rooms and kitchens (10 years and continuing)
• High quality honey production (10 years)
• Handicrafts draw considerable economic help to the Guarani families. Since growth had been phenomenal and markets scarce, many more markets need to be established (15 years)
• Seed corn, well known for its high quality, produced by the Guarani farmers (5 years)
• Peanuts and soy beans produced and added to the people’s diet (5 years)

Some of the more important factors that helped the project to achieve success were:
• The need to acquire legal status for the project. The project “Equipo de Apoyo al Pueblo” is now recognized as a legal entity by the government.
• The agreement to build the project around the priorities of the Guarani people by listening to their aspirations.
• A united team effort and good organization in the local communities. Instead of different components working independently of each other, the original Guarani Solidarity Team agreed to combine their efforts and work together for the good of the whole.
• The Presentation sisters actually living in one of the zones. This afforded them the opportunity to listen daily and learn the language more quickly.

Other resources that contributed significantly were the agricultural consultants, a forestry engineer, agricultural promoters, and Peace Corps volunteers, as well as other volunteers.

On the other hand, progress was sometimes hindered due to unplanned incidents:
• When efforts were given to more than one project at a time, for example, building houses while an irrigation project was in process, progress became somewhat more complicated.
• A major setback arose when—after ten years—the Peace Corps announced that they would no longer be able to send volunteers for the same handicraft project. A Bolivian woman was then employed to administer the production and marketing of handicrafts. Without the contacts of the Peace Corps with other Americans, however, commercialization of the baskets became a greater challenge. New avenues for contacts had to be sought through American visitors to Bolivia, through the sale of baskets after mission homilies, and through other friends of the Presentation and Dominican Sisters.
Leadership Changes

"In the very beginning," Sister Maura McCarthy declared, "the four founders decided to work on an equal basis as a committee." Later, when the Swiss couple returned to Switzerland, the two remaining Team members shared the leadership. After the Team became legally recognized as a Bolivian NGO, the Presentation sister ceded full responsibility for leadership to a native Bolivian. He became recognized as the coordinator and later as the director of the project. An accountant-auditor was then added as an administrator for the Team.

Sustainability for the Future

A number of measures have taken place to help stabilize the financial situation for the project:

- The Guarani People's Assembly has begun proceedings to negotiate a large sum of money in return for the petroleum taken from their lands.
- A sum of $40,000 per year has been pledged by the Swiss Solidarity Team. (This Swiss Team was formed in Switzerland after the Swiss couples returned home.)
- The Solidarity Team announced that the Guarani Assembly would need to take over the educational project, which had reached the cost of $28,000. The Guarani Assembly is expected to provide the funding and take charge of administering it by January, 2009.
- The administration of land purchased for the Guarani of Naurenda is in process of becoming administered by the Guarani themselves in the form of a Guarani committee.
- Plans for other avenues to financial stability are being explored: payment to the Guarani people by oil companies for oil extracted from their territory.

Progress on each of the team initiatives is evaluated regularly. At the end of the year, each team member writes a final report and evaluation of the area for which he/she is responsible.

"They have honored me with their trust and their gratitude. I have learned that I cannot liberate anyone. They liberate themselves. I can only accompany them. How people become liberated is their decision; they must trace their own future and when the time is right, I must get out of their way."

-Sister Maura McCarthy, PVBM
Good leadership is essential. A good leader must know how to communicate effectively, how to ask questions, show respect for team members, have a sense of humor, and be sensitive to when the team needs to talk things over or have a good party.

Team members must be chosen carefully especially for their commitment to the cause. The cause needs to supersede the job itself. Sister Maura McCarthy, founder of the project, stated, "We often say that sometimes there are no weekends. Guarani meetings often take place on Sundays to accommodate those who need to work on other days." There also needs to be a genuine love for the people served, a love which includes learning their language and customs.

Eventually, the Equipo de Apoyo al Puerto Guarani project will be replaced by the native people's Guarani People's Assembly. For the present, however, the Team continues with projects of urgent necessity, especially those insuring better alimentation for the Guarani people. One of these is the handicraft project of the Guarani women, promoted by a Dominican sister (a Guarani Solidarity Team member) and the Bolivian women working for the Team. The exportation of these baskets have potential for making a better future for these Guarani families.

Currently there are many companies working in the Guarani areas, building roads, schools, pre-schools, bridges, retaining walls against flooding. Due to inflation and the multitude of family needs, many Guarani men and women feel forced to find work in these companies, and therefore are not available for agricultural work, cattle cooperative work, or home building that needs to be done.

Sister Maura McCarthy considered this project the greatest experience of her life. "They have honored me with their trust and their gratitude," she said, "I have learned that I cannot liberate anyone. They liberate themselves. I can only accompany them. How people become liberated is their decision; they must trace their own future and when the time is right, I must get out of their way."

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Good Shepherd Village Outreach Program
Nong Khai, Thailand

NONG KHAU, NORP KHAU PROVINCE, THAILAND
In the northernmost northeastern province of Thailand the Good Shepherd Village Outreach Program, begun in 2000, provides support services to 54 villages. The catalyst for this outreach was the mounting prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the area. A growing number of the middle generation, capable of working and supporting aged parents, were dying from AIDS, leaving HIV infected partners and children. Oftentimes the children were left in the care of grandparents who lacked the means to support them.

In 1981, the Good Shepherd Sisters were invited by the Bishop of the Udon Thani Diocese to work in the area. Since that time they have been involved in programs that aim to help the people develop self-reliance through sewing and tailoring, weaving, pottery and agriculture. Due to isolation, old age or illness, however, some of the villagers were unable to work or engage in programs offered at the Good Shepherd Center. The sisters therefore went to the people to provide assistance regularly within the villages.

The Needs of the People

The northeastern province of Thailand is characterized by harsh living conditions. There is no rainfall for five months of the year which presents a major water problem. Many families are traditional farmers who have lost their land due to sub-division and debt. Oftentimes, parents migrate to neighboring provinces or cities in search of work after the rice harvest. Houses are often occupied by extended family members and vary from simple bamboo or cement block structures to the traditional wooden houses on stilts. Transportation is a major problem, limiting access to hospitals. Though there are government clinics that serve clusters of villages, they have no resident doctors. Primary schools are found in most villages but students must sometimes travel long distances to attend secondary school and higher education.

People living with HIV/AIDS are usually too weak to do hard physical labor. If they try to sell food items in their villages, they are shunned, and therefore forced to travel to places where they are not known. Through participation in the village outreach programs, the people are able to take care of their families. They benefit from services that include: transportation to clinics and hospitals, advocacy with government departments, access to medical treatment, home nursing care, nutritional support, house construction and renovation, skills training and income generation, school sponsorship, emergency aid, and social support.

Our main goal is to help those living with HIV/AIDS, to do just that--LIVE--to live with dignity and hope and to celebrate life as part of a community.

Sister Pranee Sitti, GSS
Steps to Project Initiation

In 1999 a growing number of HIV/AIDS cases were identified.
- An action plan was developed to establish an outreach team for intervention services
- Two volunteers from France (nurse, social worker) were assigned to Nong Khai for two years, joining a Good Shepherd Thai sister who was to initiate the program
- A second-hand jeep was purchased

In 2000, home care of the sick and handicapped and those infected with HIV/AIDS was begun.
- Staff accompanied patients to hospital appointments
- A volunteer from Australia worked part-time to help with grant and report writing
- A Thai field worker/bookkeeper joined the staff
- A nutrition and transportation program was initiated for infants under age two
- Supplementary food was provided for the handicapped, elderly and infirm

In 2001, weekly visitation/support group activities for those living with AIDS were temporarily offered at the Redemptorist Center in the neighboring town of Viengkuk. Other steps included the following:
- The jeep was sold and a pickup vehicle became available
- Building materials were supplied for villagers' house repairs
- A Thai driver/nurse assistant joined the staff
- Twenty-five water jars were provided to the poorest families to store water
- Income-generating activities were initiated with the villagers. These activities included:
  - raising chickens, growing vegetables and mushrooms, mat making, and sewing
- Seminars on AIDS awareness, prevention, and care giving were held in the villages
- AIDS patients met fortnightly at the Isan Pottery Center to make small pottery animals
- The First communal celebration took place (a birthday celebration for an AIDS patient)
- A network with the Catholic Committee on HIV/AIDS was begun
- Friendship Center (communal center for those infected/affected by AIDS) was opened
- Pottery instruction was offered at the Friendship Center and Family Days were held weekly at the Friendship Center

In 2002, the Outreach Program joined with the Sponsorship staff for planning and assessment. Also:
- A nurse from Nong Khai Hospital accompanied the team to the villages for 8 months
- A Canadian physiotherapist volunteered his services two days a week giving lectures conducting individual assessments, and designing exercise activities for the center
- A housing construction, repair, rental program for the villagers was initiated

In 2003, anti-retroviral drugs became available in Nong Khai Provincial Hospital.
- HIV/AIDS patients were taken to the hospital for testing and follow-up services
- A strong relationship between the hospital staff and local medical staff was begun
Sisters and staff took advantage of education in patient care and drug treatment
Hospital medical staff gave a seminar at the village Vocational Training Center to family members caring for adults and children infected with HIV/AIDS
- Volunteer services from the Canadian physiotherapist were continued in April

In 2004, an addition to the Friendship Center, including a large community building, two bedrooms, office, kitchen, and outside sala (covered area outside), was constructed. Other actions taken:
- Pottery instruction at the Friendship Center was discontinued
- Children's self esteem camps were initiated four times yearly

In 2005, the residential treatment program began at Friendship Center for emergency needs. Other actions taken:
- Hands of Hope Card project replaced individual pottery production for HIV/AIDS adults
- A truck for transportation was acquired for participants to Friendship Center programs
- A communal rice planting program began: planting in July and harvesting in November
- A full-time home care nurse was employed
- Men infected with HIV/AIDS began training and employment at the Isan Pottery Center

In 2006, an addition to the Friendship Center of two storerooms/bedrooms was constructed. During this year, the Thai field worker/bookkeeper left the program to join her husband in Bangkok (The bookkeeping was taken over by another staff member previously trained in this area)

In 2007, land was purchased for the Garden of Friendship, a new housing and income generating project for families in need. Other actions taken:
- The first HIV/AIDS infected staff member was employed as a second driver/field worker
- A child support worker was employed
- A Fortnightly Saturday learning program for children began at the Friendship Center
- The Family Days program was changed from weekly/fortnightly to monthly gatherings

Two Good Shepherd Sisters work for the project: one serves as the full-time director and the other works part-time for the Children's Sponsorship Program and the Friends for All Law Office. Seven lay staff also work with the project: two full-time drivers/field workers, a full-time home-visiting nurse, a full-time child support worker, a full-time project manager (fund raising/reporting/Hands of Hope), and two part-time field/administration workers for children's sponsorship and bookkeeping.