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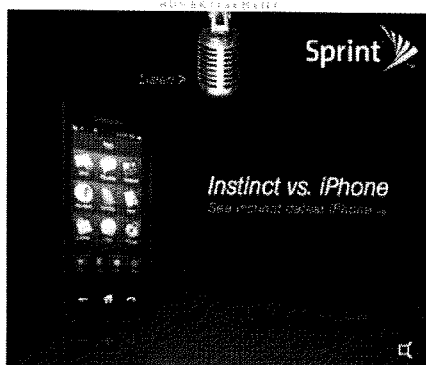
Lehigh Acres couple boosts lives in Bolivia

Program helps supply medical aid and more

BY FRANCESCA DONLAN • FDONLAN@NEWS-PRESS.COM • NOVEMBER 22, 2008

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Her life of service began when she knocked on the doors of more than 100 strangers in Cochabamba, Bolivia.



Joan Velasquez of Lehigh Acres ventured into Bolivia as a young, idealistic Peace Corps member. Ultimately, she helped create Mano a Mano, a nonprofit that helped change the lives of thousands of Bolivians. She and her husband, Segundo Velasquez, built medical clinics, roads and shipped more than 2.5 million pounds of medical surplus to one of the poorest parts of the world.

Last month, she received the 2008 Sargent Shriver award for distinguished humanitarian service.

Her journey was paved with sheer determination.

"Mano a Mano literally began as a kitchen table

organization," Joan said. "It's a yes we can story."

The first step was one of the hardest. She met with five doctors before one gave her medical clearance to join The Peace Corps and travel to Bolivia. Her medical record was compromised because she'd had severe polio as a child and endured an iron lung and temporary paralysis.

She learned how to overcome challenges starting at age 3, she told a group at All Faiths Unitarian Congregation in Fort Myers recently.

Her physical therapist would place a penny in her hand and tell her if she could squeeze the penny she could keep it.

"Yes you can, and yes you will and yes I did," she said.

She carried that lesson throughout her life.

She landed in Cochabamba, Bolivia, a poor rural community, as a 22-year-old in 1967.

She joined a group of priests from Iowa who encouraged her to ask the community how she could help.

Joan visited more than 100 homes and learned about a local tragedy from each family. A local 5-year-old girl burned herself to death trying to make dinner for her family. Because they didn't have child care, she was home alone all day.

Joan single-handedly created a day care program. She asked for financial assistance from every corner including the Bolivian government and her mother in Minnesota who raised money with bake sales.

The center thrives to this day and is a model for other day care centers that sprouted throughout the country.



Joan Velasquez speaks to hopeful volunteers on Nov. 9, while attempting to recruit them for the Mano a Mano program which is a non-profit organization to serve impoverished villagers in rural Bolivia. (Jack Hardman/Special to news-press.com)

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During her two-year stay in Bolivia, she also taught English. She met her husband in one of those classes.

Joan returned to her hometown of Minnesota and worked in social work, got her Ph.D and did research and administration work. Segundo worked for the airlines.

By the time she was 35 her polio symptoms began to return, which is common when the illness strikes young children. By 50, she retired because she had difficulty getting out of bed.

But it didn't inhibit her ability to dream or create Mano a Mano. The couple believed they could make an organized effort to collect the surplus medical supplies often wasted in the United States.

She sat in bed reading IRS codes and federal regulations.

"We had no idea it would be a huge nonprofit," she said.

Joan and Segundo targeted Bolivia because they had trusted friends to disperse medical supplies. Most rural Bolivians have no access to health care. They also understood the dire need. Segundo's brother, a physician, shared one stethoscope with 12 other physicians.

Since they established Mano a Mano in 1994, they have built 94 medical clinics staffed with physicians and public health workers. More than 1.5 million people have visited the clinics. They have built schools and housing for teachers, roads, public baths, water reservoirs and more.

But they don't do it alone. They are sensitive to Bolivian culture and hire only Bolivians to do the work, Joan said.

The government and community volunteer to work on the projects. The communities also request the projects, provide the labor and participate in the project.

So far community members have contributed up to 80,000 volunteer hours, Segundo said.

"The community makes this happen," he said.

They are traveling to Bolivia in February and are asking anyone interested in their organization to come along.

Joe and Charlotte Blitt of Fort Myers have been to Bolivia twice with Mano a Mano.

They were so moved the first time they returned again with their children.

They have also contributed financially.

"You wonder how much of what you give actually goes to the work," Joe said. "An incredibly high percentage winds up in their good works. You get back so much you are embarrassed about how good you feel."

For more information about Mano a Mano call Joan Velasquez at 651-558-9168 or e-mail her at manoamanousa@comcast.net or visit manoamano.org.

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