



HANDMADE HOPE, HOMEGROWN FAITH

A women's cooperative in Mexico empowers the poorest of the poor

BY CHRISTY LAMBERTSON

No one comes to Juarez, Mexico, for the scenery. It's desert brown as far as the eye can see and at least 100 degrees. In the *colonia* of Panfilo Natera, when the wind blows in, it uncovers the trash. That's because it was the city garbage dump until 1996, and sometimes people from other parts of the city still come and leave behind garbage and dead dogs.

I'm visiting the Centro Santa Catalina with a group from the Center for Action & Contemplation to learn about life just over the U.S.-Mexico border. We will be hosted for a few days by the women from Las Mujeres de Esperanza y Fe (Women of Hope and Faith), a "faith-based community for the spiritual, educational, and economic empowerment of women who are economically poor."

Two nuns from the Adrian Dominican Sisters, along with some of the women in the *colonia*, formed Women of Hope and Faith in 1996. It started out as a prayer group, and the women still meet every Friday for prayer. Since then, it has

grown to include a pre-school and kindergarten, an after-school program, a four-year Values and Faith program for the women, a garden project, and an economic cooperative. Monday through Thursdays, the women meet at the Centro Santa Catalina to sew and iron handbags, tablecloths, blankets, and other items. They market their goods primarily in the United States, splitting the profits equally.

When we arrive Sister Donna introduces us to the group, and the women give each of us a paper heart with a gift written on it. Mine is "el don de la esperanza," the gift of hope. Then we meet the families we will be staying with. A roommate and I will be with the Herrera family: Aurelia, Raul, and their 11-year-old daughter, Monica. Aurelia and Raul are open and hospitable, and over the next few days I will have the opportunity to hear some of their family's story.

Aurelia tells me that when they arrived in Panfilo 11 years ago, the garbage was everywhere, and everyone—men, women, and children—worked to clear it down to the dirt. It is appar-

ent that we are standing on far more than just earth, but it would take some heavy machinery to delve down far enough to reach the clean soil deep underneath the ground. The people of Panfilo tend not to think too hard about the consequences of what may or may not seep up from underneath.

Aurelia and Raul picked a spot and started building the best they could. In the beginning, their house was only wooden pallets, and the rain came through. Monica was only 3 months old at the time, and Aurelia would hide under the table with her when it rained so she wouldn't get wet. It's better now: four rooms plus a kitchen and a bathroom around a concrete courtyard with a gate that locks. Aurelia, Raul, and Monica have two rooms. Two other young families share the other two rooms. Raul worked 20 hours a day for four years to buy the materials to build this home. He would work a shift at the *maquiladora*, one of the factories just inside the Mexican border, come home, and sell *raspas*—shaved ice with a choice of flavors—for eight hours, and then catch four hours of sleep. The next day he would get up and do it again.

The roads still aren't paved, but there is bus service now. They didn't have running water or any kind of sewer system until 2004, and the electricity was jerry-rigged from existing lines in the town. Now that they are on the grid, things are better, although the water and electricity are expensive. They don't mind those bills so much—what really worries them is the *terreño*, which is similar to a mortgage, except that Aurelia and Raul never took out a loan. The people of Panfilo own their houses, but not the land beneath them, so they must make monthly payments to the bank if they want to stay. A few years ago, the city sold the colonia to private landowners, although no one seems to know precisely how that happened or who the owners are. Aurelia and Raul do know that now they owe 24,000 pesos for the land they cleared and the house they built with their bare hands.

If they don't pay the *terreño*, they've been told they can be evicted, so they do what they can to find the money. Raul is now the night watchman at a cement factory because he says the *maquiladoras* only pay \$5 a day. When he leaves, I watch him pick up small stones and a slingshot, which is what he brings for protection because they don't give him a gun. He works six nights a week, 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., to make a total of \$80. On the weekends, starting at 8 a.m., he and

Aurelia still sell *raspas*.

Aurelia works at the cooperative Mondays through Thursdays, making tablecloths, tote bags, purses, and other sewn goods that will mostly be sold in the U.S. Sometimes she brings work home in the evenings. Even Monica sells chocolate and gum for her school and helps her parents sell *raspas*.

Our second day there, Raul and Monica go downtown with their cart, while Aurelia walks us over to the center to meet the rest of the group. In the morning, we help out with the Home Grown Nutrition Project. The women who participate receive a large garden box, healthy soil from a nursery, and a cover to keep the sun from scorching the plants and the birds and bugs from eating them. I sweat, talk with the women, and trim the odd cover or two. They tell us a bit about their lives and what the garden project has meant to them. I am amazed at how much food they are able to grow in such a small space.

For most of the families, the only fruits and vegetables they can afford are what they are able to grow in their gardens. Gloria talks about how her son loves to help take care of the plants and how excited he is to eat the carrots that he planted, watered, and harvested. One of the women came to love gardening so much that this year, in addition to working with her garden box, she dug up a corner of her yard and planted potatoes. When she tells the garden project coordinator this, he smiles ruefully and tells her that it's great she loves her garden so much, but it wouldn't be safe to eat the potatoes.

Continued on page 30.

Opposite: Aurelia, at far right, works at the cooperative with her neighbors four days a week, making textile goods to be sold across the border.

Right: Consuela, modeling one of the handmade blankets, helped launch the cooperative a decade ago.

