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Miami lawyer sought R & R, finds a future

By Stephen Van Drake

During the summer of 1999, aiding neurologically impaired orphans was not on Miami lawyer Frank Valladares' agenda during a trip to Santo Domingo with his wife, Lourdes. While Lourdes traveled to the Dominican Republic's capital to visit a church mission, Frank envisioned some scuba diving and R & R. What was about to happen would change their lives forever and inspire them to create Project ChildHelp.

They run PCH out of their garage. Zero overhead. Every dime that comes in goes to the kids. And when needs exceed donations, the pair dig into their own pockets. It's a charitable, tax-deductible, non-profit corporation, dedicated to saving and enriching the lives of scores of abandoned children.

And although she didn't know it then, Lourdes Valladares' 1999 visit would merge with a larger quest, a revelation that she said came to her in 1991. "I know some day the children will be in a better, earthly place," she said. "I just know that what we do does matter. We've seen it in the lives of these children in the last three years, but we have a long way to go."

'The forgotten children'

In 1999, the Valladares' and their friend and physician William Muinos found themselves on the third floor of a five-story building housing 75 of what Frank Valladares called "the forgotten children." "These kids were thrown out like garbage, all neurologically compromised," said Muinos, associate director of pediatric gastroenterology at Miami Children's Hospital. For nearly three years, the fate of these children increasingly depends on PCH.

On March 23, the trio were to take their sixth week-long trek to care for these unwanted children. And with them, they'll take 5,000 pounds of medicine, food, clothes and other supplies to the orphanage. American Airlines continues to charge "nada" for the shipments, Frank Valladares said. He takes all his vacations caring for the orphans. How does it affect his law practice at Richard B. Marx & Associates? "Well, I get a little flack from Richard, but he's good about it," he said. "In fact, he's contributed financially, too." Marx and Valladares specialize in representing attorneys, doctors, nurses and other professionals facing discipline by state licensing agencies. Valladares said he works hard to separate his law practice from donating time and money to PCH. "When I get home, my wife and I work on PCH," he said.

And PCH's taken wings and brought many others on board to help. Miami residents Kent and Kathy Mead Hamill will join them for the first time. "The pictures I saw reminded me of the starving in Africa, but here it is, just a few islands away, right here in our own back yard," Kent said.

It's not a pretty sight.

Greed, corruption, neglect

In 1999, after reeling from the stench of human waste, Valladares said he saw a hyperactive boy, about 8 years old, "inside a 3-foot-by-4-foot barred cage." The boy, named Cappuccino, existed among 75 naked and deformed, starving and dehydrated orphans. Many lay in their own excrement and urine. Lourdes Valladares said she first saw Dominguito, about age 8, deformed from cerebral palsy, dragging himself along the floor with his elbows and knees. "He refused to sit on a chair," she said. There was no running water, no air conditioning, no working toilets, exposed electrical wiring, broken windows, decaying walls, leaky ceilings and no working refrigerators, Frank Valladares said.

Privately run, the place was severely understaffed, he said. The state turned a blind eye to the owner's appalling abuses even after a local newspaper exposé, he said. The woman running the orphanage rarely fed the children. And none got fed on weekends, Frank Valladares said. A bath consisted of pouring a cup of water on the child. Most lay on the floor, tethered to beds or huddled in cages. "Every single one of them was malnourished and dehydrated, and many were at death's doorstep," Frank Valladares said. How could a lawyer be of any possible help, he said. Muinos immediately set up a makeshift ICU. He triaged and treated the acutely ill. Muinos incubated those who could not swallow and fed them through IVs. "I was helping with tube feedings, and preparing the feeding formula and generally doing whatever I could to avoid being a hindrance," Valladares said. Muinos tried to get Dominican doctors to help. "They told me, 'Why are you doing this? They are going to die anyway.'" "There's a lot of poverty. These local physicians believe that the strongest will survive and the rest don't," he said. "But they [the children] are here for us to help them."

And it has worked.

A revelation unfolds

PCH started gaining financial support through garage sales and small contributions, Lourdes Valladares said. Then, PCH started hiring caregivers directly at \$250 a month to work in the orphanages. If the money went to the owner, it would vanish, Frank Valladares said. PCH funds six caregivers and created a network of volunteers to help, he said. "Our first goal was to get them fed and bathed." Now, Cappuccino lives outside his cage but remains tied by his ankles to his bed. After six months, Dominguito is beginning to walk like a 1- or 2-year-old, "falling into our arms but smiling as if saying, 'Hey, look at me, at what I can do now,'" Lourdes Valladares said. The boy cannot speak but she said you see in his eyes he understands and is bright. "I am seeing that revelation unfold before my eyes," Lourdes said.

In 1991, Lourdes Valladares, then working as a purchasing agent, said, "I saw myself in the future at the grand opening of a new home for special needs children." As part of that vision, Lourdes said she entered teaching five years ago, taking a two-thirds salary cut to work with children.

The Valladares' returned March 3 after a weekend visit with government officials in Santo Domingo viewing four possible locations for a new orphanage. A recently created government agency is willing to donate land to PCH. When the team returns to Santo Domingo, they will check out three more parcels. "Raising funds to accomplish this dream is a daunting responsibility, but it pales in comparison to dealing with a foreign government bureaucracy," Frank Valladares said. "It's an insurmountable project, which aims to restore this den of misery into a home of dignity," Muinos said. But Kent Hamill, 50, who said he's "working on his spirituality," put it this way: "If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat."