

Trip becomes crusade to help orphans

Couple donates time, supplies

BY SUSAN MENDEZ

Herald Writer

Motionless bodies lying in excrement, flies buzzing around and more than 70 children — all malnourished.

That's what greeted teacher Lourdes Valladares during what she thought was a simple missionary trip to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic.

The haunting reality of the orphanage she visited stayed

MIAMI-DADE

with her — and now it has become a crusade for her and husband Frank Valladares.

So much so that the couple spent their honeymoon at the orphanage, trying to make life better for the kids there.

"I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing," Lourdes Valladares said of her first

visit.

It wasn't hard to convert her partner.

"After hearing everything, I couldn't just turn my back," said Frank Valladares.

The saga started in 1999, with Lourdes Valladares' first trip to the island country.

After arriving, she met a woman who — out of the blue — took her to the orphanage, the name of which the Valladares don't want to disclose until they work out an agreement with the owners.

"There were about 70 to 100 children lying motionless in the horrible conditions," Lourdes Valladares said. "The lady that took me didn't tell me her reason for doing it, but I knew that she wanted me to help."

Immediately, Lourdes Valladares went across the street from the orphanage and bought diapers and milk, until there was enough to satisfy the

kids for the time being.

She knew this would not be a one-day project.

After a summer in the Dominican, Lourdes Valladares returned home with pictures from the orphanage — and an idea.



F. VALLADARES

The 43-year-old called it PAN, Spanish for bread. It would now have a new meaning, as the acronym for Proyecto Ayuda al Ninos, or Project ChildHelp.

Lourdes, who teaches at a private school, also discussed the orphanage with her then-fiance, lawyer Frank Valladares, 45.

After they got married, they spent their honeymoon at the orphanage.

They put together a missionary trip of about 11 people, including doctors, nurses, teachers, ministers, even a massage therapist.

They were all just people

who wanted to help.

"I shared my story with people from my church [Coral Park Baptist]," said Lourdes. "In one afternoon alone, I had \$3,000 from people who wanted to help."



L. VALLADARES

That money was used to buy things to start helping the orphanage, like a refrigerator and a stove.

The honeymoon trip also was the first time Frank Valladares saw the children.

"I didn't know what to do. They were all motionless," he said. "I just put my hand on them, and they lit up. They need human contact."

Frank Valladares had a sound system installed in the orphanage, which played music for the children.

The couple also assembled a year-round staff of five peo-

▶ PLEASE SEE ORPHAN, 8

Couple dedicated to Caribbean orphanage

▶ ORPHAN, FROM 2

ple, who work six days a week at the orphanage. The couple also collects and sends money and supplies as often as they can.

Since the honeymoon trip, the couple visits the kids at least three or four times a year, usually for a week at a time.

A pediatrician from Miami Children's Hospital, Dr. William Muiños, goes with them.

After two years, the Valladares say changes have been made.

"In the beginning, the children used to take turns eating because there was not enough food for everyone," said Frank Valladares. "Now they each have two or three meals a day. They also have a daily bath, and many previous nonrespon-

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To make monetary donations to Project ChildHelp, send them to Frank Valladares, 66 W. Flagler St., Second Floor, Miami, FL 33130. To send wish-list items, call 305-271-0467. The Valladares are planning their next trip for Dec. 27-31. The ChildHelp group meets at 7 p.m. on the third Saturday of every month at the Valladares' home, 10030 SW 84th St.

sive children are now improving."

American Airlines has also helped, allowing unlimited cargo to be brought on its planes for each of the trips.

Baptist Hospital has also pitched in by supplying over \$500 worth of diapers and antibacterial soap.

However, since all their money is raised through donations, the Valladares some-

times find themselves short of cash.

The minimum they need a month is \$1,500 for the supplies, which include liquid vitamins, medicines, food supplements and medical gloves.

Their wish list consists of diapers, towels, diaper rash medicine, T-shirts, underwear, clothing without zippers or buttons and light clothes, because of the heat.

On their next trip, they will be scouting out real estate.

"Our vision is to build a home for them in the country," said Lourdes. "The orphanage is currently on the third floor of a five-story building, but a home would be in their best interest. We could focus primarily on the children."

The Valladares welcome anybody on their trips, as long as they can pay their own way.

A different church youth group goes on every trip so they can see the conditions that some kids in poorer countries live in.

The Valladares say PAN will keep going and may even spread to other places, such as Mexico and Guatemala.

"The job can never be finished," Lourdes Valladares said. "We're in this for life."