

## Gift of land brings hope of home for 'forgotten children'

By Jan Pudlow, Associate Editor

In the dusty yard behind his senile grandparents' shack, they found Jose Miguel chained to cement blocks.

The 13-year-old boy's mother wanders the streets homeless, in a fog of mental illness. His poor, uneducated grandparents did the best they could, giving Jose Miguel all the medication they had in one dose to calm his mental disorders. But when medicine and money ran out, they chained their grandson's ankle to a pair of cement blocks, to keep him from running away like a wild animal.

Coming to the rescue was Miami lawyer O. Frank Valladares and his wife Lourdes, a teacher. They were on another mission trip to the Dominican Republic, where they care for the "forgotten children" in an orphanage through their non-profit Christian organization called Project ChildHelp, Inc.

Jose Miguel greeted them by throwing stones and bricks.

"He was crying out for help in the only way he could, but he did not try to harm us," Lourdes Valladares recalled.

Their team of volunteers brought food and water, which Jose Miguel gulped down so fast he vomited. After he was bathed, the Valladares found clothing and shoes in their van that were just his size.

They gave him the proper dose of medication. He hugged goodbye his grandparents, who cried, but knew letting him go with the kind strangers would be the best thing. He was taken to join the other 70-plus children at the orphanage that since 1999, the Valladares helped support through humanitarian aid, bringing food and medicine to children they had found kept in cages, living in squalor and stench, crying in hunger.

"All this occurred just the next day after we arrived in the Dominican Republic, so we saw him every day that week, and he was doing wonderful!" Lourdes said.

The rescue of Jose Miguel and his amazing turnabout was just one answered prayer for the Valladares,

who operate Project ChildHelp out of their garage on a shoestring budget, where they collect donations — baby formula, head lice treatment, mosquito nets, coloring books, clothing, sheets, and towels, you name it — with a heartfelt zeal they credit to God's plan for their lives.

Another reason to rejoice is that in March, the Dominican Republic government has given the Valladares a donation of about five acres of land for their future home and hospital for the severely disabled children. On April 2, the Consejo Estatal del Azucar (the State Counsel for Sugar), the Dominican agency that handles distribution of lands, officially donated the land that is about 10 minutes from the airport in Santo Domingo and about a quarter of a mile from the shore of the Caribbean Sea.

"I felt tremendous peace and joy standing on that land, and very, very grateful," said Lourdes Valladares. "Every day, we are a step closer to realizing the dream for the children. It is a non-deserved privilege to serve God and His children in this way."

When the Bar News first profiled the Valladares' volunteer efforts in October 2001, they talked about what keeps them going is envisioning their ultimate goal of buying land and building a true home for the children, now stuck on the third floor of a building where they never see the light of day. When Frank Valladares first visited the orphanage in 1999, it had no running water, no air-conditioning, no working toilets, exposed electrical wiring, broken windows, deteriorating walls, and leaky ceilings. These children, cast away like garbage, deserved better.

"It will be a place where the children live in a home environment, where they are loved, where there is plenty of laughter, and lots of room for them to play outside," Lourdes Valladares said of her dream.

"This place will have a few acres, with a big green space, and horses and flowers and a beautiful atrium where they will all congregate every day after meals. They will play and laugh together in their own world."

## Hope of home for 'forgotten children'



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Frank Valladares' progress report after their return from the Dominican Republic in April of this year was brimming with good news.

"This land is away from the congestion and pollution of the inner city in a sparsely populated area, which enjoys cool sea breezes year-round," he said. "This is the ideal location to build our home/hospital. We have consulted with an architect in Santo Domingo who has built several schools, clinics, and homes for the aged for the Episcopal Church, and we are in the initial process of developing plans for the construction of this facility. We are also in the process of establishing a construction fund to carry out this purpose. . . .

"We're not ready to stick the first shovel in the ground just yet. But we are working to get people motivated."

In the meantime, one by one, they are helping build happier children, who, as Frank Valladares describes them, are "severely developmentally disabled, many with neurological disorders that keep them from walking, talking, or communicating in any way. They live in a world of their own, shut out from the outside world."

But, as he said, "The disabilities that many of these children suffer from can be eased with the help of loving hands. Feeding a child who is incapable of feeding himself is a way of helping that child overcome his disability, one spoonful at a time."

On Frank Valladares' first mission trip in 1999, with his future wife, he met an 8-year-old boy they nicknamed Cappuccino. Naked, the boy was kept in a 3-foot-by-4-foot cage, with little

food and water, because he was hyperactive, the orphanage staff explained.

"This sight just broke my heart, and I have not been the same since then," Frank Valladares said in 2001.

In April of this year, Frank Valladares said happily: "Cappuccino is out of the cage now. He is flourishing. Our supervisor down there, he calls him 'Papa,' and Cappuccino throws up his hands to be hugged."

Several times a year, the Valladares take crews of volunteers to the orphanage. Never missing a trip and on the board of directors is Dr. William Muiños, who specializes in pediatric gastroenterology at Miami Children's Hospital. Currently, Project ChildHelp has hired 10 care givers, four of them nurses, and a part-time cook to work at the orphanage.

Explaining in an article why he is quick to volunteer his services to the orphans, Dr. Muiños wrote: "I will tell you of a place where children are not given water so they will not urinate, where meals are rationed out according to their ability to eat or availability.

I will tell you of a place where the bitterness of cold and suffocation of heat are treated with the same indifference; where the rejuvenating light of day is merely a stranger never to be seen, where a human touch, tenderness and compassion are just as scarce as bread and water."

It was a precious experience, Dr. Muiños continued, to see the medical mission team in action.

"There was a certain glowing beauty, which is generated in the presence of true love. You could see in the sweaty faces of the mission workers as they went about their endless tasks, slowly transforming that den of misery into a home of dignity."

Annette Lizardo, staff attorney for the office of the general counsel for the 11th Judicial Circuit in Miami, had clipped the 2001 Bar News article about the Valladares' Project ChildHelp, put it in a desk drawer, and forgot about it until recently. She and her husband, Tony Lizardo, a financial executive for Citicorp Investment Services and volunteer chaplain for the Miami-Dade Corrections Department,

met with the Valladares, felt their sincerity, and agreed to help. Tony Lizardo is from the Dominican Republic. His father is an industrialist there who owns Servicios Lizardo, S.A., and agreed to collect donated canned goods from Transagricola, S.A., and dry and canned milk from La Fabril, S.A., and deliver it to the orphanage each month.

The Lizardos have also enlisted help from their church, Ingelesia Palabra Viva (Church of the Living Word).

"We're hoping to remain actively involved as everything progresses," Annette Lizardo said.

When the Valladares take another mission trip in July, she plans to visit the orphanage with them this time.

No special skills are required, just a loving heart willing to lay hands on children who crave a gentle touch.

"The more we do, the more there is to do," said Frank Valladares. "Every trip is a blessing. It's amazing."

***For more information about Project ChildHelp, call Frank and Lourdes Valladares at (305) 271-0467, write to them at 10030 S.W. 84th St., Miami, 33173, email them at [Projectchildhelp@bellsouth.net](mailto:Projectchildhelp@bellsouth.net) or visit their Web page at [www.projectchildhelp.org](http://www.projectchildhelp.org)***