

COAR Children's Village

History of the Community of Oscar Arnulfo Romero – COAR – in El Salvador
1980 – 2005



- and -

Sembrando con amor

Historia de la Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero – COAR
1980 – 2005

Thérèse Osborne



COAR Children's Village

COAR Children's Village, founded in 1980, is part of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. It comprises a Residential Unit, Santa Teresita Clinic, and school for 800 children. Sister Santiago Mejía Vásquez CCVI is the Executive Director.

Coar Peace Mission

In 1985 COAR Peace Mission was formally established in Cleveland, Ohio, as a 501(c)(3) Charitable Organization to support COAR Children's Village in El Salvador. Father Joseph Kraker was elected president of the board and Rosemary Smith, who worked in El Salvador from 1964 to 1980 as a lay missionary, was named Executive Director. Today, the operation is headed by Mary K. Stevenson.

COAR Peace Mission carries out its mission through supporting COAR Children's Village as well as promoting and funding projects that benefit the entire community. Donors are found throughout the United States as well as in other countries.

MISSION STATEMENT

COAR Peace Mission strives to be the tangible and real expression of the Gospel to promote justice, community and peace in El Salvador through the support of effective programs in health, education and welfare which assist children and others, not only to develop their full human potential but also to contribute to the betterment of the world in which they live.

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COAR Peace Mission, Inc.

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All proceeds from the sale of this book go to support COAR.

Todos los ingresos de la venta de este libro apoyarán a COAR.

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The following address was given in Spanish by Sister Mary Patricia Driscoll CCVI in Zaragoza, El Salvador, on the occasion of COAR's 25th anniversary:

Dear brothers, sisters and friends:

“The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1, 14).

Today, August 15, 2005, is a day of much joy, jubilation and gratitude to God, the creator and giver of life. There are many reasons for us to remember and celebrate. In the church, today we are celebrating the feast of Our Lady of the Assumption, the mother and disciple of our Lord Jesus. We also remember with much love and affection our prophet and martyr, Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, whose birthday we celebrate today. He was born on August 15, 1917. In his homily of March 23, 1980, the day before he died, Archbishop Romero said, “Above all, it is the dignity of the human person that must be liberated.” Thus he has left us the task of continuing our work here. Finally, this is a great feast for COAR, the 25th anniversary of the Community of Oscar Arnulfo Romero which was founded by Father Kenneth Myers in 1980.

It is a privilege for me to be able to celebrate these events with COAR and be part of its holistic growth process, as is recorded on each page of its history. We admire Father Ken's praiseworthy, far-seeing initiative of solidarity in founding COAR with the goal of “building peace.” On behalf of all of us, I wish to express my gratitude to him for this legacy. The founding of this work and its life across the years have been possible thanks to the spiritual, moral and financial support of many people who love God in their neighbor as they love themselves. I wish to thank our benefactors, both living and deceased. I thank the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, who have served here tirelessly and wholeheartedly, with fidelity and joy, for the past 23 years. I especially recognize the generous labors of Sister Stanislaus Mackey and Sister Audrey Walsh, as recorded in the story of COAR. As Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word we have received from our founders a spirit of contemplation and apostolic zeal. We are called to be “gospels of love” responding to Jesus who suffers in a multitude of persons.

I wish to express my appreciation to the institutions of the Diocese of Cleveland and the people of Cleveland, who from the very beginning



Bishop Claude Marie Dubuis, Founder of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word

have walked with us on our journey. I wish to mention in a special way the contribution of COAR Peace Mission. Thanks also to the Archdiocese of San Salvador for all the support — moral, legal and spiritual — that we have received. It is important to remember here all the people who have given their service to this noble cause. I will not mention them by name because the list would never end. Nevertheless, some of them appear in this history. In a very special way we remember with love our graduates, residents and students both past and present. We thank the Lord for their lives, which have been and continue to be a gift of God.

Our challenge is to continue our work of formation and service based on Christian values. The foundation of our being and of our institution is the supreme and inalienable right to life — “life in abundance” (John 10, 10). In this way, our contribution to the community and to Salvadorean society will be to continue our emphasis on serving in the areas of education and health in a holistic manner. Bound together as brothers and sisters, complementing and supporting one another, together we make up one whole, according to Saint Paul’s image of the Body of Christ.

My last words, but no less important, are to express my gratitude to Thérèse Osborne, who with kindness and great commitment took on the work of writing the present document. She began a process of gathering information by means of interviews, study and research. She then proceeded to put the data into chronological order, telling COAR’s story in a clear way that is faithful to the reality. I know that others will be able to continue providing information in order to deepen and expand this history. That will be a task for future generations.

May the Incarnate Word and Our Lady of the Assumption pour down many blessings upon all of you and your families.

Praised be the Incarnate Word!

Sister Mary Patricia Driscoll CCVI

Sister Mary Patricia
Driscoll CCVI with baby
at COAR

*Hermana Mary Patricia
Driscoll con niño*



COAR Children's Village

History of the Community of Oscar Arnulfo Romero – COAR -- in El Salvador
1980 – 2005

Thérèse Osborne

Introduction

Kilometer 19 ½ in Zaragoza, on the road leading from San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, down to the Pacific port of La Libertad, marks the location of COAR Villa Infantil -- the Community of Oscar Arnulfo Romero. This children's village, comprising group homes for orphaned and abandoned children, a clinic and school from kindergarten to twelfth grade, was started in 1980 as a response to El Salvador's civil war.

Longtime lay missionary Rosemary Smith, interviewed before her death in 2004, explained: "Archbishop Romero had asked all priests to take in orphans and displaced people. There were so many people displaced by the war. Children didn't know where their parents were. There was no one to take care of them. They needed a safe haven. Refugees had settled in the hills around Zaragoza. There was no schooling or health facilities for them."

A country of refugees

Civil war had erupted in 1979, and as a result many people began to flee from their small villages to get away from fighting and bombing. State of siege was declared. At that time Zaragoza had a population of about five thousand. It was often called a bedroom community, because a large number of its inhabitants worked in the nearby cities of San Salvador, Santa Tecla or La Libertad. But by early 1980 Zaragoza's population had increased with the arrival of women and children who made their way to the parish looking for help and protection. The majority of the children's fathers had been killed in the war.

Father Ken Myers' initiative

Kenneth Carl Myers, a Catholic priest belonging to a team of priests, sisters and lay missionaries from the diocese of Cleveland, Ohio, ministered to the people of the large parish which covered La Libertad, Zaragoza and the surrounding rural communities. He had arrived in El Salvador in 1974.

According to his cousin Mark Myers, Ken was a quiet, shy person and a hard worker. He loved working with his hands like his father, Herman, who was very good with hammer and saw. The Rev. Robert J. Sanson, a fellow student in the seminary, recalled being surprised when Ken volunteered for the mission. "Not only did it take a lot of courage to reach out and talk

to people as a priest; but to learn Spanish and live in the ‘Third World’ was really brave in my book,” he said.

Trying to grow in awareness of the reality of the country, Father Ken began to visit the refugee centers that had sprung up almost overnight in churches and seminaries. He quickly saw that there were children in the centers who did not seem to have any older family members with them. Their parents had disappeared; some children had seen their parents killed. They were traumatized and fearful. Mindful of Archbishop Romero’s call to all parishes to help refugees, Ken thought of providing a safe home for these orphaned children.

Ken’s aunt and uncle, Jean and Martin Myers, said, “We have always remarked about his deep faith in God which we believe gave him the courage to attempt such a challenge. We fully believe it was his love for the little ones that Jesus often spoke of in the gospels that motivated Ken to take on such a huge project with practically no funds. His insight was tremendous, way ahead of anyone else’s at that time.”



Father Ken talks with helper at refugee center in Zaragoza, c. 1981.
Padre Ken conversa con orientadora, c. 1981.

The first orphans at COAR

On August 14, 1980, Father Ken visited the Domus Mariae refugee center run by the Congregation of the Somascos, and there he met an eleven-year-old boy, José Isidro Rodríguez, whose mother had been killed in the massacre of the River Sumpul in May 1980. José Isidro was wounded in the military operation. He fled across the river to Honduras where he lay ill for a month. Finally he joined a group of people who walked all night to get to San Salvador, arriving sick and malnourished. He went first to the refugee center on the grounds of the major seminary of San José de la



Dora Castro, one of first orphans at COAR. She arrived in 1983 with her four brothers and sisters.
Dora Castro, una niña huérfana que llegó a COAR en 1983 con sus cuatro hermanitos

Montaña, and then was transferred to Domus Mariae, accompanied by his grandfather.

Father Ken told José Isidro that he wanted to provide a home especially for children, and that there would be an opportunity to go to school. When the child hesitated, Ken said, “You could come for a couple of weeks to see if you like it.” José Isidro was thus the first of many orphans to arrive at the new shelter.

In an unused meeting room, Ken set up ten folding beds made of canvas. The room was part of a small night school for adults which had to be suspended in early 1980 because of the imposition of a nightly curfew. He informed the Archbishop’s office that the parish had room for 35 orphans. The archdiocese immediately sent ten children; and within four months, the number had grown to 200, all children under twelve years of age. Early on there were as many as 300 children at one time. Temporary dormitories were quickly constructed to accommodate them.

At the beginning, the place was a refugee center, not just a home for children, because widows and other relatives were housed there along with the children. A team of people from Zaragoza was organized to take care of the refugees. Francisco Román, whose medical studies were interrupted when the National University was closed in 1980, joined the effort.

Victoria Sánchez, one of the volunteers, said, “The refugee centers were very full. Padre Ken began bringing children here because they had nowhere to go. He also brought the grandparents of the children. The children were frightened. They didn’t even have clothes. You couldn’t talk to them – they would run away and hide. But when the children finally had enough to eat, when they were held and had shoes and clean clothes, they could begin to reach out to others. They were no longer panic-stricken. They trusted Padre Ken because he spent time with them. They found things here that they didn’t find in other refugee centers – they were freer and had more space and weren’t crowded together.”

Help and solidarity

Members of the Cleveland mission team who were working in the parish of Zaragoza in 1980 along with Father Ken helped care for the children – Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, Sisters of Charity Christine Rody and Elizabeth Kochik, lay missionary Jean Donovan and Father James P. Kenny, a native of Carrigallen, County Leitrim, Ireland. “Padre Jaime Kenny was close to us,” said José Isidro Rodríguez. “We children of COAR began to join in activities with the youths of the town. We joined the choirs and other groups.”

Sister Christine recalled, “One detail about the refugee center at Zaragoza that I think shows Ken’s concern for the dignity of the children

is this: he set up triple-deck bunk beds to save space because the numbers were growing so rapidly; but he had three drawers built into the space under each bottom bunk, so that the occupants of the beds could put their clothes and other things there. That way they could each claim at least some personal space.”

The missionaries were no strangers to the reality of refugees. In August 1980, Sister Christine began living and working in a makeshift refugee center in San Roque, a church in San Salvador where 154 people spent most of their time in a basement room measuring about 40 by 70 feet. Darrell Holland (1980), writing for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* newspaper, said: “It is dangerous for refugees to leave the building. Most stay within the walls all the time, going only to the unfinished second floor for sun and food and to hang up their washing.” Sister Christine’s bed was an examination table in a room that had once served as a clinic.

Sister Dorothy Kazel accompanied refugees gathered behind the *Basílica del Sagrado Corazón*. She and Jean Donovan also helped Maryknoll missionaries transport families from conflictive areas who were in danger to other centers in San Salvador. These centers were like refugee camps; hence Father Ken’s dream to build a home for refugee children that would prepare them for life in addition to providing food, shelter and protection from danger.

The Social Secretariat of the archdiocese of San Salvador, which had assumed responsibility for the feeding of displaced people and looking after their health, assisted COAR during the first several years of its existence. The Caritas program administered by the archdiocese provided food.

From the moment in 1980 that he began to accept orphaned children, Father Ken informed the Cleveland diocese of his work with the children, and a campaign was started to collect funds. The *Catholic Universe Bulletin* kept people of the diocese informed about events in El Salvador, dedicating its 1980 Christmas Fund to the orphanage (McKenna 1991). A network of donors was formed in the United States. Although the aid did not cover all the needs of the children, it was and always has been an essential means of sustenance for COAR, enabling it to continue its work with children. Fr. Ken wrote to friends in 1982 that over and above large grants, the most important help COAR received consisted of the small and large donations sent by individuals, schools, parishes, and organizations. “These are the monies,” he said, “used to care



Father Ken walks through streets of Zaragoza with children.

Padre Ken camina con jóvenes por las calles de Zaragoza.

for the children day to day in regard to food, medicine, and education. Without this important help, the children would not be here today, healthy, studying in school, and living with adults who love them so much.”

A community of families

Father Ken's idea was to found a community. He said, “When these children lost their parents through death, they lost two important aspects of their development: living with adults who love and motivate them, and also the opportunities of developing as mature persons. COAR is an innovative experience for Latin America to prove that these two aspects can be restored to orphaned children without institutionalizing them. COAR is a community or family, and that is why the spirit is always ‘home and family’ – physically, spiritually and emotionally.”

Accordingly, providing a family type of education was to be the goal of COAR, forming a new family with an adoptive mother and her group of children. Father Ken wrote, “The adoptive mother looks on these children as her true sons and daughters. The family will live in a simple, welcoming house, with enough room to move around in. Our pattern is the natural family, but not the model that society presents – an individualistic, static and male-dominated family. We want to form the family in its true sense, one in solidarity with its members and the rest of the community, one that will be the seed of individual and social change. Each mother, by word and example, will see to the nutrition, education, health and Christian living of her group of children.”

Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero

The Community of Oscar Arnulfo Romero – COAR – was the name chosen by Father Ken in memory of Archbishop Romero, to honor his witness and to keep his spirit alive. Archbishop Romero was killed by an assassin's bullet on March 24, 1980, as he celebrated mass at the Divina Providencia hospital in San Salvador. He was the central figure of the Catholic Church in El Salvador, a faithful opponent of abuses perpetrated by all sides. His voice was heard by the Salvadorean people and other peoples of the world. In spite of the threats he received and the numerous times the Catholic radio station YSAX was destroyed, he continued preaching, thus becoming the moral support of the poor. He had a premonition of his death, and proclaimed: “May my blood be the seed of liberty and a sign that hope will soon be a reality.”

The Most Reverend James A. Hickey, bishop of Cleveland in 1980 who attended the funeral of Archbishop Romero, said, “As a real prophet of our times he spoke out for justice in his country. He pointed out the exploitation of the farmers who have less than subsistence for their families

and themselves. . . He reminded soldiers that if they were ordered to kill innocent victims, they must refuse; they must rather obey the law of God, Thou shalt not kill! He warned that violence and hatred are never the answer; he preached only love and justice” (*Catholic Universe Bulletin*, April 4, 1980).

Deaths of four U.S. churchwomen

On the night of December 2, 1980, Sister Dorothy Kazel, Jean Donovan, and Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke were kidnapped at the El Salvador national airport by members of the Salvadorean National Guard. They were taken to a lonely spot near San Pedro Nonualco and killed. At that time there were 200 children and 23 widows living at the center in Zaragoza where Dorothy and Jean worked and the Maryknoll sisters often came to visit. The killing of the women was a severe blow to Father Ken, the children of COAR and parishioners of Zaragoza and La Libertad. Nevertheless, after attending the funerals of Dorothy and Jean in the United States, Father Ken returned to El Salvador to continue his work.

Relocation and expansion

COAR had begun as a refugee center, but in May 1981 Catholic Relief Services spearheaded a plan to give the children a permanent home where they could be prepared for their future as adults. There were 220 children at the time; and although new dormitories had been built in the parish to house them, there was no longer room enough for all. Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, named apostolic administrator of the archdiocese after the death of Archbishop Romero, appointed Licenciado Sinessio Rodríguez Elías and Monsignor Ricardo Urioste to help COAR find new property. Father Ken entered into negotiations with Mr. Alfredo Muyshondt, visiting him repeatedly and asking him to donate the first acreage; and in September 1981 the Sociedad Alfredo Muyshondt, Hermanos y Compañía donated a piece of property measuring 6.9 acres at the edge of Zaragoza, within walking distance of the parish, to be used exclusively for “religious worship and the construction of the children’s village of the Community of Oscar Arnulfo Romero.”

A second tract of land measuring 6.9 acres was obtained in March 1982 at a cost of 200,000 Salvadorean *colones*. The third piece of property, measuring less than an acre, was purchased for 300,000 *colones* and



Children at COAR, 1983
Niños de COAR, 1983

included a large house with seven bedrooms, kitchen and living room. At the official exchange rate of 2.5 Salvadorean *colones* to one U.S. dollar, the cost of the new site at that time was equivalent to U.S. \$200,000. Father Myers wrote to friends of COAR in October 1982: "The COAR Village that we have been planning for a year now is taking form. With the help of Bishop Rivera y Damas and the archdiocese of San Salvador, the sponsors and owners of COAR, we were able to make a down payment of U.S. \$44,000, leaving a balance of \$156,000 to be repaid at five per cent interest on the remaining principal each year, for as many years as it takes us to pay off the debt. The former owner, Mr. Alfredo Muyschondt, also gave us the deed, even though we owe on the property." In 1983, an additional 68 acres were purchased for 400,000 *colones* (U.S. \$160,000) to develop as farmland, bringing the total area of COAR to 82.85 acres.

The last of the widows who were still living at the center in Zaragoza with their children left COAR in January 1982 and were helped to find new homes. They took with them clothing, beds and other useful things they had acquired while living at COAR. Their departure left 25 orphans at the parish of Zaragoza, divided into small groups of brothers and sisters from the same family. Additional children kept arriving at COAR.

When the move to the new property began, 32 children aged four years and under were brought to the large house, called the *casona*, along with four women who became their adoptive mothers and other persons who served as volunteers. Twenty young men aged nine to fourteen were installed in a small red house on the property, accompanied by Francisco



Bunk beds for smallest children in the "big house," 1983

Camarotes para niños chiquitos en la casona, 1983

Román, whom everybody called "Doctor Román." The boys cared for the animals and planted and harvested crops. José Isidro Rodríguez recalled, "We fenced in and cleared the land, so we wouldn't forget our roots, for we had lived close to the land. Doctor Román started a soccer team, which helped us forget our difficult experiences. We had lived through uncertainty, terror, traumas. We had seen them torture our fathers and mothers.

We were able to share all that with each other. There was a daily schedule, with times for study. The religious activities – rosary and mass – helped us."

Sister of Charity Irene Therese Mraz, who had joined the parish team in Zaragoza in 1981, recalled that the older children learned to take care of

the little ones and do good housekeeping. She and Sister Elizabeth Kochik helped the children of COAR with sacramental programs, preparing them for the Eucharist and Confirmation.

Workshops and farm projects

Although Father Ken knew that it would be impossible for COAR to function without some external help, the goal was to be “almost” self-sufficient. In order to generate funds for the daily needs of the children, various vocational training and self-sustaining activities were begun. Six hundred chickens and hens were bought, providing eggs and meat for the children and for sale. Dairy cows produced milk and cheese. In addition to avocado, lemon and orange trees already on the property, 80 more fruit trees were planted, as well as corn, beans, tomatoes, radishes and cabbage. A former chicken coop was converted into a carpentry workshop where simple furniture was made for the new homes.



Children worked clearing the land for planting.
Los niños hicieron trabajo del campo.

Parochial school

A parish school was opened in Zaragoza in 1981 to give classes up to third grade to the children of COAR. In 1982 the parochial school opened its doors to other children living in the area, because there was no room for them in the local public school. There was an enrollment of 240, with classes up to fifth grade.

Construction of the new COAR Children's Village

COAR received its first large grants, totaling \$114,468, from Caritas of Germany, the Little Way Association of England, and the diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania, for the construction of the first nucleus of individual homes for the children and their adoptive mothers. After several months of preparation spent buying building materials and consulting with the architect, on July 5, 1982, approximately 90 workers under the direction of G rvis Cuadra began construction of ten homes on the new property.

Religious presence

Writing in COAR News in March 1983, Father Ken announced: “A new spirit has entered the community of COAR with the presence of four

religious women. Two Incarnate Word Sisters from Houston, Texas, arrived January 3, and are directing the clinic and the supervision of the homes. Two Salvadorean religious have joined the staff and are living in with the children of two homes.”

Members of the Cleveland mission team were already acquainted with the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of Houston, because Sister Francesca Kearns CCVI worked in El Salvador from 1976 to 1979 carrying out a study of the World Health Organization to test the effectiveness of the ovulation method of natural family planning. The congregation was founded in 1866 by Claude Marie Dubuis, second bishop of Galveston, Texas, a native of France. The founder’s motto was the following: “Our Lord Jesus Christ suffering in the persons of a multitude of sick and infirm of every kind seeks relief at your hands.” The congregation spread to other states and also to Ireland, Guatemala and Kenya; thus its multicultural character. The motherhouse in Houston is named “Villa de Matel.”

The Superior General, Mother Loyola Hegarty, accepted Father Ken’s invitation to send sisters to COAR. In the missioning ceremony of Sisters Audrey Walsh and Stanislaus Mackey she said: “The congregation is responding to the call to reveal the love of the Father to all nations in and through this new mission. Sisters, I invite you to receive this cross as a symbol of the love of God manifest in suffering. Through you may we as congregation make this love ever more visible to the suffering people of El Salvador.”

Sisters Audrey and Stanislaus, who were born in Ireland, each had more than 15 years’ experience working in the National Hospital of Huchuetenango, Guatemala. They took up their assignment at COAR on



Early photo of children with (back row, left to right) Sister Stan, Sister Audrey, Father Ken and Sister Mary Pat, 1983

Hermanas Stan, Audrey y Mary Patricia con Padre Ken Myers y niños de COAR, 1983

January 3, 1983, under humble and difficult circumstances. They had only one tiny room to themselves that served as dormitory and storeroom. Sister Gudelia and Sister María Segunda shared another bedroom. The smallest children lived in the house with the sisters, while some rooms were used for offices. There were children living in the small red house on the new property, and still others at the parish center in Zaragoza.

Soon after arriving, Sister Stan wrote in the annals of her congregation, “We were met at the airport on January 3 by Fr. Ken Myers

and 60 children. They sang for us when we got off the plane and gave us each a bunch of roses.

“Bishop Rivera y Damas visited us on January 6, as well as the U.S. ambassador. They had lunch with the children. On January 7 we went to register at the archdiocese. On the way we stopped at the refugee camp at San José de la Montaña Seminary. There were 1,250 children there. We brought one of them back to COAR with us.

“On January 15, we took in seventeen children, the majority suffering from malnourishment. Five of them are with us in the big house. Three or four of them can’t walk yet and there are twins less than a month old.

“Some of the children were moved to two new houses on January 21, and on January 25 other groups were moved to two more houses. The homes are simple, with three beds in each room, but adequate for the children’s needs. Everything is well distributed and built in a very practical way, thanks to the care, extraordinary initiative and perseverance of Father Ken.

“I began taking inventory and organizing the clinic on January 17. The medical student known as ‘the doctor,’ Francisco Román, will be going to Puebla, Mexico, in February to finish his studies. He will be gone for about two years, and another doctor will come twice a week to take his place. Francisco Román is dedicated to the children. He stays with them all the time and gives them the very best example. We will miss him very much when he leaves.”

Father Ken commented: “New people have come to help with the children, and one has gone on to fulfill a dream. Francisco Román has lived in and served the children as father and doctor for over two years, and contributed wholeheartedly to the spirit of the family of COAR.”

Sister Stan’s account continued: “Sister Audrey continues coordinating all the houses. It is hard work and her efforts deserve a lot of praise. We had mass on January 31 for the children, just before the school year started. And thus we come to the end of our first pleasant month in COAR.”

COAR News of March 1983 contained another note from the Sisters: “We are real happy. It is good for us to be here. Father Ken, with his extraordinary ability for planning, has all of our future goals lined up and written, even to the minutest details. We have enough work laid out for us,



Left to right: Sister Loyola Hegarty,
Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas,
Sister Audrey Walsh, 1983
*Hermana Loyola, Monseñor Rivera
y Damas, Hermana Audrey, 1983*

even if we lived to be 100 years old. Really, we are delighted to do what we can to help; we are just trying to get established right now and to become acclimatized. We feel the heat.

“Our family seems to grow every time we turn around, as Father Ken shows up with a few children every time he goes to the refugee camps. So as they say, we put a little more water in the soup. The new houses are most practical. Ten houses are already finished and occupied. The family atmosphere is growing each day more and more. This is a joy to us and we know most pleasing to Almighty God who knows the grief in their little hearts and their needs.”

A missionary friend of the sisters who visited them often at COAR recalled: “The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word who have come to work in El Salvador have always shown love for the children, an optimistic attitude and an open and welcoming spirit that is characteristic of their congregation. They are truly sisters of *charity*, because

they live the charity that is part of their name. Sister Audrey was 63 years old and Sister Stan 67 when they came to COAR, but they never mentioned the difficult sacrifices they made as they climbed the steep hills of the property many times each day to look after the children’s needs. When they first arrived they didn’t have a proper place to live themselves; yet within two weeks Sister Stan had the clinic organized with an enrollment card for each patient, files, medicines in order, everything arranged professionally; and Sister Audrey knew every child by name, visiting the houses to see to the children’s needs, correcting them when necessary, and encouraging and guiding the volunteer helpers who cared for them.”



Sister Stan with child at Santa Teresita Clinic, c. 1985

Hermana Stan baja las gradas de la Clínica Santa Teresita con niño, c. 1985.

Opening of new homes

Shortly after the arrival of the sisters, on February 13, 1983, the last group of children who had remained in the parish of Zaragoza moved to nine of the new houses of COAR Children’s Village, while the tenth house was kept free to receive new children who continued arriving at COAR. With help from Catholic Relief Services, construction of five additional homes was begun. Water in the new houses was scarce; electricity had not yet been

connected; more furniture was needed – but the children began to feel at home. In the COAR family there were now 140 children, the majority of them very small.

The children were distributed in the homes to form new families, with children arranged by age and family relationships. Older boys and girls were placed in various houses to help run the home. The role of the adoptive mothers, called *orientadoras* (guides), was crucial. They helped the children and youth assume responsibility for cleaning and cooking. They watched over their spiritual, moral and intellectual development, imparting values and encouraging the children to study. Sister Audrey supervised the women and provided formation for them.

Bishop Arturo Rivera y Damas had been named apostolic administrator of the archdiocese of San Salvador after Archbishop Romero's death in March 1980, while still remaining responsible for his own diocese of Santiago de María in eastern El Salvador. Pope John Paul II, on the eve of his trip to Central America in March 1983, announced that Bishop Rivera would be the new archbishop of San Salvador.

Santa Teresita Clinic

Sister Edis Marilú Yanes Reyes CCVI, director of the COAR clinic from 1993 to 1998, wrote in the *History of the Santa Teresita Clinic of COAR* (1999) that Father Ken Myers founded a little dispensary in 1981 in a building of the parish of Zaragoza in order to care for the children living in COAR, who by then numbered 200. The war intensified, producing more orphans and displaced people. A medical student and other young people of the area helped Father Ken.

When the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word arrived, she wrote, “they invited Dr. Pedro Napoleón Montalvo Martínez to support them with the work, and baptized the clinic with the name of Santa Teresita. This first team of people of good will started medical work under precarious financial conditions.” Not only children but also displaced persons and people living in the surrounding area were crying out for medical help. “Our relationship with the people has always been friendly,” she said, “and in that way we have been able to learn about their customs and their culture.”

Doctor Montalvo explained how



Sister Stanislaus Mackey CCVI with children in first dispensary of Santa Teresita Clinic, 1983

Hermana Stan con niños en la Clínica Santa Teresita, 1983

he became acquainted with COAR: “Francisco Román had been my student of anatomy in the National University. He brought me to COAR in 1982. I was impressed. I helped out for a month in Zaragoza, and was there the day the sisters arrived in 1983. ‘They are anxious to get to work,’ Father Ken told me. I thought to myself: these sisters have come from so far away, and they are elderly. My country is at war. How can I not help, for I am young? We began putting medicine in plastic bowls on the table and on makeshift shelves. We started the clinic in a room of the convent for the first two weeks, and then moved to what later became the kindergarten building.



Left to right: Sister Audrey Walsh, Sister Loyola Hegarty, Dr. Pedro Napoleón Montalvo, 1983
Hermana Audrey Walsh, Hermana Loyola Hegarty y Dr. Pedro Napoleón Montalvo, 1983

“During the first five years I worked without pay. Father Ken insisted that the children would not be put up for adoption. They were children traumatized by war. They were sad. They had sucked on rocks and eaten raw fish. They used to hide their food for later. They had not grasped the fact that we would give them food to eat. They had seen their parents die. They were fearful at first.

“Each day Stan and I visited the children at 6:30 in the morning, house by house, bringing everything the children would need. I saw changes in them: at first

their eyes were sad, and they wouldn’t look you in the face. They walked with their heads down. Now these children, who came to us traumatized, are people who serve the country. They left COAR with strong values.

“I was like an elder son to Stan. She treated me very well. We had very few differences of opinion. We thought alike. She carried out exactly all my instructions concerning prophylaxis and other procedures. With Audrey, who was a laboratory technologist, we began to do stool and blood tests. I learned from Audrey how to manage a clinical laboratory. The three of us worked in health and prevention. Sister Mary Pat, a pediatric nurse, joined us that year. I felt we were a team.”

Antonio Alberto Aquino, who went on to study law and work at the Supreme Court of Justice, was brought to COAR at the age of three. Describing Sister Stan’s work in the clinic from the viewpoint of a child, he said, “My parents died during the civil war that raged in my country. I was raised in COAR from the time I can first remember. I used to run after Sister Stan – I called her Madre Stan – and hold on to her long blue skirt and walk with her up to the clinic. It was for her that we went to the clinic and

submitted to the vaccinations, because we knew that after the pain she would give us hugs and a piece of candy. She was our mother. I remember her bending down to wash our knees, and how she would scold us and tell us not to climb trees or run too fast, and all the while the tears ran down my cheeks but her scolding didn't seem severe because she would pat my rumpled hair."

Sister Mary Patricia Driscoll, from Ireland, came to work at COAR on June 1, 1983. Antonio said, "I remember Madre Patty, my other mother, who took care of me when I was sick. She sat me on her knee and fed me chicken soup from a cup while the rest of the children ate at the table. My fever went away when she put a damp cloth on my forehead. Her love made the pain seem unimportant. She came to see me each afternoon until I was better."

In a letter to COAR on Mothers Day 2005, Antonio wrote, "You have made an impact on a new generation. You are mothers who have to listen to the sobs of one child while rocking another to sleep. Your work is to build a different world through these children who cling to your skirts when they feel afraid. You have to cook for ten children and see that they all eat; some nights you have to take care of two of your little ones who are sick, and stay awake watching over them so that they can sleep. When fatigue weighs you down, remember who it is who gives energy to the weary and strengthens them. Happy Mothers Day today and always, mothers of COAR. Each and every one of you is a reminder to me that God does not forget me and will never forget you. Go forward in your great work of caring for each one of those precious children. It is your love and commitment that will change each child into a beautiful, brilliant diamond that will shine for others."

Children with special needs

Sister Mary Pat had offered to spend two months of summer vacation in 1983 helping out at COAR, but at the end of the summer the other sisters refused to let her go back to Houston. They worked under difficult



Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word
Mary Patricia Driscoll, Stanislaus Mackey
and Audrey Walsh with early residents of
COAR, 1983

*Hermanas Mary Patricia Driscoll,
Stanislaus Mackey y Audrey Walsh con
niños y niñas de COAR, 1983*

conditions. The sisters lived in the big house, but the administrative offices were also located there. Many of the children were malnourished and late in developing, and some could not walk. “We had as many as 240 children at a time,” recalled Sister Mary Pat. “They didn’t know where their parents were, or even if they were still alive. When they got sick, we took them to the clinic or the hospital. An adult always stayed with a child who was



Children walking down steps at COAR, 1983

Niños y niñas bajando las gradas de COAR, 1983

hospitalized. We got therapy for children with physical disabilities. We did all we could for the malnourished ones. We had the children with us 365 days a year. Father Ken’s idea was to prepare young people to participate in society, in their country. He encouraged them to stay in El Salvador and to study. Padre Ken and we sisters wanted COAR to be a community where the gospel was lived out.”

Names of the houses

An update from Father Ken in November 1983 reads: “November for us is a month of change: the school year ends, the rains stop until next May, and the harvest of corn, beans, coffee and vegetables begins.

“During the 1983 school year, 140 children from COAR studied in our school from kindergarten to ninth grade, along with 350 other children from the Zaragoza area, especially children of families displaced by the war. After having cleared most of our land earlier this year, we planted about fifteen acres of corn and four acres of beans. Our vegetable production is small but constant. Five more homes were built with the help of Catholic Relief Services, and the high school building and a new expanded clinic are under construction.

“From the 130 children last January, we now have 180 children living in thirteen of the fifteen homes. The homes have been given names to signify persons and places that have played an important part in the development of COAR.”

The houses were named:

- **Casa Jean**, in honor of Jean Donovan, lay missionary from Cleveland who was killed on December 2, 1980

- **Casa Dorotea**, for Dorothy Kazel, Cleveland Ursuline who was killed on December 2, 1980
- **Casa Maura** and **Casa Ita**, in honor of Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, Maryknoll sisters who died with Jean and Dorothy on December 2, 1980
- **Casa de Matel**, honoring the Foundress of the Order of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament, Jeanne de Matel, whose spirituality continues to inspire the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word to share the gospel of love



Children in each group home form a family.

Los niños de cada casa constituyen una familia.

- **Casa San Patricio**, patron saint of Ireland
- **Casa Alemania**, named for the Catholics of Germany whose donations made the construction of the new homes possible
- **Casa Cleveland**, for the diocese and people of Cleveland, who from the beginning supported COAR
- **Casa Juan Bosco**, patron saint of youth
- **Casa San Antonio** and **Casa San José**, named for two children who died at COAR and in honor of St. Joseph, father of Jesus
- **Casa Guadalupe**, named for the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of all
- **Casa Juan Pablo II**, in honor of the Holy Father who visited El Salvador on March 6, 1983. The children of COAR sang for him in the cathedral of San Salvador.
- **Casa Chalatenango**, named for the Department of El Salvador from which many of the children of COAR came
- **Casa Romero**, named for Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero who was assassinated on March 24, 1980

Father Ken's update continued: "All the children are healthy and well, and a few have found their families and returned to them, but many more have come here to make COAR their home."

Principles regarding children serviced by COAR

In a document published by Father Ken on December 20, 1983, outlining criteria for accepting children into COAR, the following principles are listed:

- They must be orphans or children whose parents have disappeared, or

children who are completely abandoned and have no one to care for them.

- All the brothers and sisters of a family under the age of eighteen must come to live in COAR together.
- No child can be put up for adoption, for the following reasons: (a) to preserve their peace of mind, that they will not be separated from their brothers and sisters; (b) to give them stability, that they will not be removed from an atmosphere of safety, trust, and development as a Salvadorean person; and (c) to educate them for the future of El Salvador as good citizens, good Christians and good persons who will be useful to society.

In response to numerous inquiries about adoptions, Father Ken had explained in *COAR News* of November 1983: “No children of COAR have been given over to adoptions, for various reasons. Many children have arrived at COAR apparently abandoned and forgotten. However, most – except those who are here for a longer time – are reunited with their families or relatives when they are found. Those who remain here are happy and want to stay here with their brothers and sisters. We would encourage all adoption inquiries to be directed to the government and private agencies which handle the children available in El Salvador for adoptions.”

Education and health

At the beginning of 1984 there were 900 children enrolled in the COAR school. The agricultural high school opened its doors that year on COAR property, with 33 first-year students. On October 1, 1984, Mario Parussolo, a native of Italy, was named director of the COAR school, which had classes from kindergarten through ninth grade in addition to the high school. Sisters Miriam Medrano and Ermitania Hernández Gómez joined the community, studying part time and ministering at COAR.

Caritas of Austria donated funds to build the Juan Pablo II library, which also served as a study center where the children could do their homework. There were workshops in carpentry, tailoring and welding for the youth.

Santa Teresita Clinic moved to a larger building in 1984. Doctor Pedro Montalvo continued to serve in the clinic two days per week. A dental clinic was opened in October 1984, with Dr. Wilber Barquero attending to the dental needs of the children two days per week.

In 1985 the clinic organized a new program to help rural communities. Thirteen men and women attended an intensive course for a month on



Sign listing medical and dental services available at Santa Teresita Clinic
Rótulo con listado de los servicios que ofrece la Clínica Santa Teresita

curative and preventive medicine, with monthly follow-up meetings. These health promoters looked after the needs of poor and displaced people in Zaragoza and neighboring areas. The house mothers of COAR were given a course in first aid. The clinic team was composed of Sister Stanislaus Mackey, Dr. Pedro Napoleón Montalvo, Dr. Wilber Barquero, Reynaldo Cornejo, Alfredo Castro and Dora Eugenia de Martell. Ana María Rivas de Zavala was the clinic secretary.

COAR Peace Mission

The kindness and generosity of donors acting in solidarity with the suffering people of El Salvador made it possible for COAR to continue in existence, grow and develop. For the first several years, the Cleveland office of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith acted as the U.S. contact for COAR, channeling monies received, receipting donations, and seeing that they were deposited in COAR's account. The Rev. Alfred H. Winters was director of the mission office at that time. Julie Fekete, secretary of the office since 1961, talked about her memories of Father Ken. She said, "He never asked for money. People simply gave. They were drawn to his work and to him, because he was genuine, unassuming, and sincere when he talked about the kids. He never talked about himself. He believed in what he was doing. It's been a privilege for me over the years to help the missionaries. It's been fulfilling: it's given me a whole life and family in addition to my own family."

Rita Cimperman, who also worked for many years at the mission office -- from 1963 until her retirement in 2006 -- added: "Father Ken gave our office a plaque in 1985 to thank us for helping him with the donations. He was one hundred per cent dedicated, kind and pensive. His idea of group homes with house mothers gave the children stability, so that they felt they belonged somewhere and were safe. He opened a horizon to young people in El Salvador so they could have a better life without leaving their country."

Concern for the sustainability of COAR in the long term prompted Father Ken to seek incorporation for COAR as a nonprofit organization with tax-deductible status. On January 29, 1985, he established COAR Peace Mission, Inc. in Cleveland, Ohio. Father Joseph Kraker was elected president of the board, and Rosemary Smith, who had worked in El Salvador from 1964 to 1980, was appointed executive director of the new organization. Its mission statement reads: "COAR Peace Mission strives to be the tangible and real expression of the gospel to promote justice, community and peace in El Salvador through the support of effective programs in health, education and welfare which assist children and others not only to develop their full human potential but also to contribute to the betterment of the world in which they live."

Interviewed in the *Journal* (Lorain, Ohio, May 12, 1985), Rosemary Smith said: "I feel this is one of the hopes for the country, if you give young children an opportunity to grow and develop outside of an environment of fear."

Peggy McBride volunteered at COAR Peace Mission for a few months in February 1985 and ended up staying on for 15 years as secretary. She said, "I liked the fact I was doing mission work, doing something for the children of COAR. Rosemary Smith was executive director and very nice to work with. Julie Fekete of the diocesan mission office showed me how to do the bookkeeping and receipting of donations. Gail and Jerry Bresnahan also did a lot of work. Father Ken did the work of ten people but you wouldn't know it. His dad put up partitions at the new office and his aunt washed drapes and got the place ready. We started at St. Patrick's on Bridge Avenue and later moved to premises at St. Patrick's in West Park [Cleveland].

"When I visited the orphanage in 1986 I could see the happiness in the children's faces. COAR has given hope to El Salvador by educating kids and training them so that they can go out and get jobs. It has also made people in the U.S. more aware of poor and underprivileged children. It was an honor and privilege to be connected with COAR because of the work that has been done."

Fifth anniversary of COAR

COAR celebrated its fifth anniversary on August 15, 1985, which was the birthday of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero (1917-1980). The program for the celebration stated: "The Community of Oscar Arnulfo Romero, known as COAR, is an institution that has the goal of sheltering children and young people who have been affected by the political and social violence that has reigned in our country, El Salvador, since 1979. We try to follow the teachings of Archbishop Romero, taking care of innocent victims who have no options. Nearly all are orphans or their parents have disappeared; they are disoriented and far from home. We try to help them preserve their identity. The trauma of war, the pain and sorrow which comes from the loss of a family member may be very difficult to eradicate, especially if the loved one was assassinated or has been kidnapped. It is, then, the task of all of us to respond to the urgent needs which the situation of war and violence has produced."

New programs

In 1986 Father Ken announced several new programs, in addition to the programs already in existence - the COAR school, the Santa Teresita Clinic, and the COAR Children's Village. He founded an office of financial

development. Hilda Gloria Salazar was named Director of Development. The Administrative Unit was established, and Mario Parussolo, Director of the COAR school, became Administrator of COAR, freeing up more time for Father Ken, the General Director, to look for funds to maintain COAR. Psychologist Telma Delgado and the Supervisor of Studies helped the General Director in his sensitive work with the children. The Director of the Residential Unit was responsible for the welfare of 225 children accompanied by twenty adoptive mothers who were carefully chosen.

Sister Audrey Walsh saw her dream fulfilled with the opening of a multi-purpose center called the *casa comunal*, with space for the children to meet for special programs and a room for teaching pre-schoolers. Construction of a new home began, Casa San Juan, to house 50 older boys.

Brothers of the Christian Schools

An important event for COAR was the arrival of three Brothers of the Christian Schools, commonly known throughout Central and South America as the Hermanos de La Salle, to assume responsibility for the Educational Unit of COAR. The new school year began on February 5, 1986, with Brother Steve Caplice as director and Brothers Ivan Castinon and Jorge Alvarado as teachers. In a news release recounting his first impressions, Brother Steve said: "The children keep the school spotless, sweeping and mopping in the very early morning as part of their household chores. In spite of the heat of the late morning hours and the whole afternoon, the boys and girls are very attentive to their lessons. They would be a teacher's delight in any country."

The following year, Brothers José Renato Pérez Joya, Jorge Antonio Sánchez and Marcelo Salvador Aguilar joined the staff. The brothers lived in a new house, Casa San Miguel. They put special emphasis on developing the leadership ability of the students under their care, and improved the academic standard of the school during the two years they served at COAR.

Formation experience

Preparing for the sisters' silver jubilee in Central America, a committee in Guatemala wrote "A Brief History of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word 1963-1988: Twenty-five years of service to the people of God in Guatemala." The history begins: "On March 19, 1988, a significant event will take place in the city of



Two boys at COAR, 2003
Niños de COAR, 2003

Huehuetenango to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival there of the pontifical congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word. This congregation has greatly helped strengthen the forces promoting the development and well-being of all classes in Guatemala.

“The milestone represented by March 19, 1963, truly marks the beginning of a missionary religious work which at first would develop its activities in the Department of Huehuetenango and then later in other parts of Guatemala. After some years, it would extend its missionary action, which clearly reflects the social teachings of the Church, to other countries of Central America.

“Numerous are the fruits which the congregation has yielded in the quarter of a century that it has been with us, and many are the people who have benefited in some way from its rich missionary apostolic spirit. Because of this, and also because of the courtesy and care with which each member of the congregation exercises her charism, we know that the work which has developed has been inspired by God, who providentially cares for all his children.”

Sister Mary Loyola Hegarty CCVI (1967) explained that in 1961, Pope John XXIII asked all religious superiors of congregations of men and women to contribute ten per cent of their personnel to Latin America. The general superior of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, Mother M. Fidelis Flynn, wrote to all the sisters suggesting that they study Spanish and consider volunteering for a new mission. The response was immediate: formal classes in Spanish were begun in most convents, and many sisters offered to go out as missionaries. Mother Fidelis learned from Father Robert



Eduardo, held by Sister Juana Margarita Flores CCVI, 2003

Eduardo en brazos de la hermana Juana Margarita CCVI, 2003

Maxwell, a Maryknoll missionary serving in Houston, that Bishop Hugo Gerbermann, also a Maryknoller, needed a community to work at the government hospital in his prelature of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. When Mother Fidelis and Sister M. Stephanie Ryan visited Huehuetenango in July 1962 and saw the poverty of the people and the desperate need for nursing sisters, they felt sure that the Incarnate Word was calling the congregation to work there.

Sister Stanislaus was one of the four founding members of the mission which was established at the National Hospital in Huehuetenango. Twenty-five years later she would recall: “I had read a lot about Central America and had heard priests talking about it. I remember thinking that if God wanted

me it would be nice if I went and helped. I volunteered for the mission, and to my delight I was chosen to serve, along with Sisters Paulette Shaunfield, Margaret Kelly and Dermot Cahill.”

She described the difficult conditions that the sisters encountered at the hospital: “There were so many needs, with two and sometimes three very sick patients to a bed, no inside running water, no electric power except one small outlet, and no medical or surgical supplies available. Since most of the

patients who had traveled long distances to get to the hospital were already too sick to recover, I thought that if we got to them sooner we could save their lives. I worked with the people of one village and taught a small group of them how to recognize symptoms of illnesses and how to use simple remedies to relieve pains and aches. The men and women of this educated group discovered the sick people in the area and helped them by getting them to the hospital sooner. This plan spread throughout the villages. Today the health promoters are truly making a difference as they travel to the most remote areas to help the poorest of the poor.”

María Piedad Ramos Monzón was a young Guatemalan teacher who met the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word in 1963 when they established their mission in Central America in Huehuetenango. At Bishop Gerbermann’s suggestion, the sisters asked María Piedad to teach them Spanish, but she wryly observed that two of them – Sister Margaret and Sister Stan – were much more interested in going out to clean the hospital and nurse the sick than in studying. In 1965 María Piedad moved to the U.S., and entered the congregation at the Villa de Matel in Houston in 1966, the centenary year of the congregation. She took the name Sister Carolina María, thus becoming the first native professed sister from Central America in the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word. On August 15, 1969, she made her first vows in her home parish of Huehuetenango. Bishop Gerbermann presided at the ceremony, and Sister Stanislaus Mackey, as delegate of the major superior, received her into the congregation. After studies in the U.S. and Mexico, Sister Carolina María returned to Guatemala and directed the formation of young Guatemalan and Salvadorean sisters.

Interviewed in 2004 a few months before her untimely death, Sister Carolina Maria recalled that it was in 1974 that girls first entered the



Sister Stanislaus Mackey CCVI with children at Santa Teresita Clinic, 1983
Hermana Stanislaus Mackey con niños en la Clínica Santa Teresita, 1983

Incarnate Word convent in Guatemala, but they later left. In 1976, Ermitania Hernández from Guatemala and Miriam Medrano, Jesús Rivera and Juana Margarita Flores from El Salvador entered the convent in Huehuetenango, to be followed by many other Guatemalan and Salvadorean women who joined the congregation.

A house of formation was established in Guatemala City in 1980. When young sisters from El Salvador would return home for vacation to visit their families, they usually stayed at COAR overnight, since they would not be able to reach their homes the same day. A number of sisters were sent to study in El Salvador as part of their formation. They lived at COAR and helped minister to the children. In this way many Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word made a great contribution to COAR, including those who worked only part time in the children's village while they continued their studies. Sister Ermitania recalled: "We would visit the houses at night to see that everything was in order. At that time all the children were orphans. They would tell us how they had seen their parents and relatives die. Some of them were starved for love. The long-term goal, of course, was to give them a holistic education and enable them to leave COAR with a professional career."

Sister Juana Margarita Flores was among the first young sisters to serve at COAR, arriving in 1985. In addition to her studies, she did pastoral work with fifteen classes of the school, and also took charge of the storeroom, distributing shoes, clothing and other articles to the children. "Father Ken was brave to name COAR after Archbishop Romero," she said. "COAR was the first to do this, although other charitable works were later named after him."

While completing high school and studying nursing in Santa Tecla from 1988 to 1993, Sister Vicenta Miranda, who had entered the congregation from the parish of La Libertad, helped take care of the children. "I feel that COAR is my home," she said, "and I believe in the ministry. We have tried to give the children a well-rounded formation. The majority have overcome their difficulties and have triumphed in life."

As director of formation in Central America from 1983 to 1990, coordinator of overseas ministries for her congregation from 1990 to 1998, and member of the board of the COAR Peace Mission, Sister Rose Scanlan witnessed the growth and development of COAR. "This work is in line with



Sister Stanislaus Mackey CCVI with child in Guatemala, c. 1965
Hermana Stanislaus Mackey con niña en Guatemala, c. 1965

the charism of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word,” she said. “We were founded to serve those with health care needs. In the nineteenth century epidemics were common and many children became orphans, so our work quickly came to include the education and care of orphans. Ten of our sisters along with 90 children in our orphanage in Galveston died in 1900 in one of



Family of Sister Vicenta Miranda CCVI (far right) with Sisters (left to right) Audrey Walsh CCVI, Stanislaus Mackey CCVI, and Elizabeth Kochik VSC

La familia de Hermana Vicenta Miranda con Hermanas Audrey, Stan, Elizabeth y Vicenta

the biggest storms in U.S. history. The application of our charism varies according to the culture and the times. COAR is accomplishing a great mission in forming Salvadoreans for the future. A lot of work is involved. The scholarship program alone, administered by the COAR Peace Mission to enable children to live and study at COAR, is labor intensive. We try to follow up with the young people after they leave COAR.”

Father Myers read Sister Loyola Hegarty’s book *Serving with Gladness* (1967), the history of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, and wrote in the sisters’ magazine *The Word* in 1983: “We are all ready to celebrate our mass on September 8 for the orphans and sisters who perished in the storm of 1900. I think it is very significant that 83 years later there will be over 150 orphans under the care of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word remembering those who have died. It is as if that community has resurrected and lives again in the needy of today. Sisters Audrey, Mary Pat, Judy [Miffleton], Stan and myself remember all of you each day at prayer and in our work as we struggle to make his love incarnate to children who have lost the parents who loved them so much.”

Sister Antonia Márquez Martínez spent three months of her novitiate experience in COAR. She said, “I helped in the clinic dispensary. They were all poor, simple people who didn’t have any money. We saw 80 to 100 patients each day. I weighed the patients. The doctor examined them, we gave them their medicines and they were very happy when they left for home.

“The children residing in COAR were of all ages. They were in an environment where no one mistreated them. The houses were clean. But they were children who had experienced a great lack of affection and love. You had to spend time with them, listening to them, because they were

vulnerable and anyone could hurt them.

“COAR is a great work but also a great responsibility. It’s not enough just to give the children food. You must be dependable and alert to see how things are going and what results are being achieved. The children depend on us. We have to try to give the best of ourselves. We have to be awake every minute, always evaluating, not saying that everything is fine. We need to be aware of how the children are doing in their spiritual growth. I am grateful that the congregation has taken on this work.”



Postcard of COAR children
Tarjeta postal de niños y niñas de COAR

Saint Joseph's Chapel

Religious training has always been part of life at COAR. During the early years, mass was frequently celebrated outside in front of the sisters' house, with the children sitting on the steps. But on August 15, 1986, the sixth anniversary of COAR, Archbishop Rivera y Damas joined the staff and children to break ground for a permanent chapel dedicated to Saint Joseph to be built at the village. Although there were not as yet any funds available for the chapel, the work was inaugurated with faith in divine providence. *COAR News* of July-August 1986 stated: “There are still many needs at COAR and many problems that sometimes seem insurmountable to both staff and children. Perhaps this is why they place so much value on having a chapel where they can gather together or enter in solitude to give thanks and praise and bring their hopes, struggles, joys and sorrows.”

1986 earthquake

Sister Moira Noonan joined COAR in July 1986. A letter written to her family in Ireland gives a picture of the reality when she arrived: “The houses are very nice and there are about 20 to 25 children in each house. Our youngest child is eight months old and the oldest is almost twenty. The older ones remain so that they can finish school. They are all taught trades – welding, carpentry, basket weaving, tailoring – and are also taught to work in the fields.

“The school is run by the La Salle Brothers. The children from grades one through eight go to the school in the parish; kindergarten and grades nine through twelve are taught on the grounds of COAR. The children walk about a mile and a half to school and only go for four and a half hours per

day because there are so many children. Some go in the mornings and some go in the evenings.

“At the present time we have almost 300 children here at COAR. There are many other orphanages here in El Salvador. The majority of the children do not have parents. Some have been killed in war or for other reasons and some are missing. Some of the parents have been displaced and are living in refugee centers and are unable to care for their little ones. The children have so many needs materially, spiritually, psychologically and physically. A lot of the children are in very poor health when they are admitted to COAR. It takes lots of clothes and food to care for these children. God bless the many good friends and benefactors that support them.

“I am working in the clinic located on the grounds. It serves the children of COAR and the other children who attend the school, but the clinic is also for the poor people who wish to come. Some may take two buses and come a long distance. The buses are always full. Sometimes you see people on top of the bus and hanging out the back doors. Working in the clinic has taught me a lot of things. You learn to treat the patient from symptoms rather than depending on blood tests and x-rays alone. The doctors that work here are very good for explaining the different things that are wrong with the patient.

“There are many things we enjoy back home and take for granted, but here we do not have hot water. I have learned to take a shower in cold water and enjoy it. It feels good and refreshing after the initial shock. Electricity is scarce and can be turned off anytime but you learn how to find the candles or flashlights in the dark.

“There are many soldiers and other military groups and military police. You get very aware of their presence but life has to go on. You never know when you will be stopped and you always have to have your passport with you. Some days on the buses everyone could be searched and other days there are no problems. El Salvador is a very troubled country at the present time, but please God some day there will be peace.”

Just before noon on October 10, 1986, Sister Moira, Sister Stan and Dina Castro, one of the first orphans to arrive at COAR, were walking along a street in San Salvador near the government offices when, in Sister Stan's words, “it seemed as if the sidewalk moved up and down and back and forth. We couldn't hold our balance. Sister Moira fell first and then Dina, and then I fell. We were frightened to death and thought it was the end of the world. We were so frightened we couldn't pray, but I'm sure Our Lady was right there protecting us. We got up and walked to the car. Concrete was falling off houses. The electricity went out. People were running out of buildings, buildings were caving in, it was awful. When we were in the car there was another tremor and the car moved from side to side. Ambulances started coming, and the Red Cross, police, soldiers. Thousands of people

were running to and fro. In a short time there was a terrible traffic jam. It took us over two hours to get home. We found COAR in good shape, a few wall and ceiling cracks but, thank God, nothing happened to our children. Lots of supplies fell off shelves, some medicines were destroyed, but nothing happened that cannot be replaced and repaired. The country at large, especially the capital, is in bad shape. Please pray for all of the poor people of this country.”

The earthquake left 2,000 persons dead, 15,000 injured and 300,000 homeless. It destroyed homes, schools, hospitals and government offices. Hospitals and government offices resorted to carrying out their work in tents in the parks, while homeless families set up cardboard shacks and tents wherever they could find space. Those who lived in the overcrowded, poorly built sections of the city suffered most. Many of these were refugees who were unable to return to their own villages, where aerial bombing and strafing still continued.

Damage to the buildings of COAR was minimal, but Dr. Pedro Montalvo lost both his home and his office in San Salvador. Two of the COAR staff contracted typhoid, a disease that tends to spread after disasters. The sisters and COAR staff made more than a thousand tortillas for a poor community that was badly hit, and they gave out medicines to people who were injured.

First graduates of COAR Children's Village

The first issue of *COAR News* for 1987 stated: “Sixteen young people who are over the age of eighteen are now preparing to leave COAR and begin a new life away from ‘home.’ For the past year, Father Ken and the staff have been working with them to help plan for their future. Two of the young men will serve as counselors at a small orphanage run by the Carmelite Missionary Sisters of Santa Teresa in Santa Tecla. They have received scholarships from COAR to continue their studies.” One of these was José Isidro Rodríguez, the first orphan who had been accepted into COAR in 1980. He pursued his career and eventually became mayor of Zaragoza.

Five additional classrooms were built in 1987 to enlarge the high school. Construction of the chapel had to be suspended for several months because of landslides produced by heavy rains.

Don and Vera Pahler drove from Cleveland to El Salvador in early 1987 in a car packed with shoes, clothing and gifts for the children. Don and Vera had raised funds for COAR in northern Ohio by showing pictures, writing letters and visiting church and social groups. With the help of many friends and neighbors, they collected money to build one of the homes at COAR.

Bakery and workshops

A bakery was opened in 1987 where the boys and girls of COAR learned to bake bread and sweet rolls. The tortilla kitchen was already in operation as well as several workshops – carpentry, welding, tailoring, crafts and others. The uniforms for COAR students were made in the tailoring shop. Each year in October a fair was held to exhibit the articles made by the children. Profits from the sale of these articles were put back into COAR. In this way, the children saw their efforts help with the sustenance of COAR. There was also an office for the Agricultural Unit. The children learned to work the land, sowing and harvesting and thus preparing for their future integration into society in a country where there were few opportunities for employment and where war still raged.

Tragedy continued to touch the children's lives. Gérvís Cuadra, a man who made a great contribution to COAR, was assassinated in 1988.

He had been the superintendent of all construction since 1982. A memorial mass was celebrated for him, with all the children and personnel of COAR in attendance.

Religious education

Sister Miriam Medrano became director of the school in 1988, and Sister Ann Mary Brangan joined the team, coordinating the teaching of religion in grades seven through twelve and also in the Residential Unit, assisted by Sister Juana Margarita Flores and catechist Amilcar Eduardo Escobar. Sister Ann Mary said, "Children learn religion by seeing it lived. I want to include all the teachers at COAR in our pastoral program so that they will express the values that COAR represents. All the staff members need to live out these values on a personal level and on a working level in order to impart a more complete Christian message. Our long-range goal is to integrate school



Young women cut cloth in tailoring workshop.

Grupo de cuatro señoritas cortando tela en el taller de costurería



Young woman making tortillas at COAR

Señorita trabajando en la tortillería de COAR



Girls in front of their group home with Sister Ann Mary Brangan CCVI (back row, far left), c. 1988
Niñas y señoritas con Hermana Ann Mary Brangan CCVI, c. 1988

life with daily life at COAR, bringing together the taught message and the lived message.

“The children are learning to deal with what’s happened to them – with their experiences of violence – and to accept it. They’re versatile and adaptable. If we can give them stability and show them that we care, they will continue to develop self-esteem, which is a basis for appreciating who they are and those with whom they live. Peace starts inside!”

Craig B. Wick visited COAR in February 1988 and shared the following reflection in the summer 1988 issue of *COAR News*: “What is unique to the COAR community is its philosophy of conscience espoused by the adults and reflected in the children. The intention is to break the cycle of violence, to sow the seeds of peace and justice. There is community there – children looking after each other and taking care of each other. The children are encouraged to work out their disputes in nonviolent ways. What distinguishes these children from others raised in war zones and refugee camps is that COAR tries to dispel their fears, hostilities, and prejudices before they become self-perpetuating. COAR offers a haven from the physical and emotional violence of their elders, who all too often are committed to violence.

“Just as important, the children of the COAR community grow and flourish within their own homeland, not as refugees in some other country. They are able to absorb their own rich cultural heritage, relatively insulated from its upheaval. It seems especially fitting that COAR Children’s Village is nestled on a hillside in the mountainous Zaragoza terrain. ‘A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.’ Indeed, its light will dispel the darkness.”

Salvadorean missionary vocations

For a long time Father Ken had been reflecting on the call of the Third Latin American Episcopal Conference of 1979 to the peoples of Latin America to live out their missionary vocation by going to other countries to preach the gospel. Article 368 of the Documents of Puebla (1979) reads: “Finally, the hour has arrived for Latin America to intensify mutual help between local churches and to go beyond its own borders ‘to the nations’ (*ad gentes*). It is true that we ourselves need missionaries; but we must give out of our own poverty. It is also true that our churches have something

original and important to offer: their strong sense of salvation and liberation, the richness of their popular devotion, the experience of Christian base communities, their flourishing ministries, their hope and the joy of their faith. We already have missionary efforts that can be deepened and must be extended.”

In that spirit, Father Ken began to promote priestly missionary vocations in El Salvador. In 1987 there were four Salvadorean seminarians living at COAR, and in 1989 there were six, as the first candidates of a new foreign missionary society called the

Missionaries of Pastoral Charity (MCP in Spanish). With the approval of Archbishop Rivera y Damas, plans were made to found a seminary to foster vocations for future missionaries from El Salvador who would be sent to serve in other parts of the world. Father Armando Espinoza of the Missionaries of Guadalupe of Mexico arrived at COAR in February 1989 to assist in the formation of the young men, and contributed much to the spirit of COAR with his presence and pastoral care. Father Ken extended his own ministry to the parish of Ciudad Merliot, near Santa Tecla.



Left to right: Fr. Manuel Córdova, Fr. Ken Myers and Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas celebrate mass in San José Chapel.

Padre Manuel Córdova, Padre Ken Myers y Monseñor Arturo Rivera y Damas celebran misa en la Capilla San José.

Medical Unit

Sister Stan celebrated 50 years of religious life on May 13, 1989. *COAR News* of March-April 1989 stated: “This is a year of jubilee for the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word at COAR, and for all of us here, because of Sister Stan’s 50 years of serving Christ and her community. She merits any recognition possible for her service to the sick, but especially for her service and love for the children of COAR the past six years.”

Reporting on the apostolate of the Medical Unit, Sister Stan said, “With the addition of new equipment and trained personnel our laboratory is flourishing. This service is only for our COAR children, our school, and the very poor; consequently, our work is for service and not for income. We charge about a dollar to those from the outside who can afford it; most of them can’t.

“Brother Regis Fust from New Holstein, Wisconsin, sends us tons of medicine and medical supplies from the Salvatorian Mission Warehouse, and we share them with the poorest of the poor. He and his staff deserve a

special 'thank you.'

"The program for rural health promoters and midwives allows COAR to extend medical services far out into the rural areas where they are badly needed. Each promoter in the program receives continuing education here at COAR and then takes care of his own community and the surrounding villages. The promoters share their concerns as they come together at COAR to reflect on their experiences. They are helping to solve a real problem here in our area, but more medicines are needed so that COAR can continue sharing medicines with remote areas."

Attempt on Sister Stan's life

On June 21, 1989, Sisters Stanislaus, Juana Margarita and Ann Mary were traveling towards Zaragoza intending to stop at the post office, after having gone to the Banco Salvadoreño in Santa Tecla on business. At five o'clock in the evening, as Sister Ann Mary drove along the highway that leads to the Port of La Libertad, at kilometer 19 1/2 just 300 meters past the principal entrance to COAR, a yellow pickup truck carrying six men began to follow them. "The pickup truck seemed to be passing, only it didn't pass - it stayed on the side," said Sister Ann Mary later in a news conference reported in the *Houston Chronicle* (McCarthy 1989). "A person was standing in the back of the truck and shot downward, diagonally hitting Sister Stan. When I realized where the wound was and I saw the blood, I feared the worst. I stopped the car, but the men left immediately."

Sister Ann Mary said that just before the shooting, Sister Stan turned around to say something to Sister Juana Margarita who was in the back seat, and so she happened to see the man who fired at her. Later, in the hospital, she told one of the sisters, "He looked at me. I saw him. I don't know why he shot me. I didn't do anything. May the Lord forgive him."

It took about twenty minutes to get Sister Stan to the San Rafael Hospital in Santa Tecla, where she received first aid and had x-rays taken. She was then taken by ambulance to the Policlínica Salvadoreña for neurosurgery. The doctors were not able to save the sight in her left eye or extract the bullet, which was lodged in the back part of her larynx.

Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chávez, auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, said in his homily in the cathedral on June 25 that Sister Stan was called an "angel of mercy" because of the tender care she gave patients in the COAR clinic. "Just like so many deeds which bring sorrow and tears to El Salvador," said Bishop Rosa, "perhaps we will never know who Sister Stan's attackers were or why they shot this holy woman 73 years of age. But thanks to the tireless service of journalists, the entire nation knows that the people of our country who suffer are not alone, because the Lord inspires Christians of other countries to come to share the drama we live daily, a drama

exacerbated by the war. The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word have told me they want to continue serving the Salvadorean people. We thank them and pray that Sister Stan will have a satisfactory recovery.” (*Orientación*, July 2, 1989)

Most Rev. Anthony A. Pilla, bishop of Cleveland, issued the following statement: “Once again we experience the sadness of personal violence. Sister Stanislaus Mackey, known throughout El Salvador as Madre Stan, has for six years devoted all her strength, her time, her life to restoring health to those most wounded by the civil war – the orphans of the war. When Father Ken Myers of the diocese of Cleveland founded COAR, Sister Stanislaus joined him as director of the clinic at the orphanage. At that time she was already 67 years old. Since then she has supervised the construction of the clinic, has staffed it with Salvadorean doctors and nurses, and has attended to the physical and psychological health of hundreds of orphaned children. And then, just weeks after her 50th anniversary as an Incarnate Word Sister, she is struck down in an act of cruel and senseless violence. . . We pray for her and we pray for the children of COAR that they not give up hope that some day (and God grant that it be soon) peace may return to their beautiful country. We bless and affirm the work that Sister Stanislaus and the others at COAR have done and are doing for the children. We grieve at her loss of health. And we pray in the words of the psalmist, ‘How long, O God, how long?’”

Sister Stan was transferred to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Houston on June 23, where doctors removed a 38-caliber bullet fragment lodged in her brain and reattached the severed retina of her left eye. They saved the eye but could not restore the vision in that eye. In a brief statement, Sister Stan thanked her doctors and nurses and the sisters of her congregation for their support. “God has taken me completely into his hands, and I thank everybody who has played a part in my recovery,” she said. Sister Stan’s recovery was miraculous, and enabled her to leave the hospital on August 4, 1989. After receiving therapy and needed rest, she took up pastoral ministry among the patients of St. Joseph’s Hospital and served as a translator for Spanish-speaking patients in the intensive care unit. She forgave the person who shot her, and remained concerned about the children of COAR, whom she kept close to her heart. “Every time I have a chance to talk to anybody in public or private,” she said, “I tell people about these children and ask for help and prayers for them. I could have died the day I was shot in El Salvador, but God kept me alive. I think there was a reason for that.”

Continuation of the apostolate

Sisters Ann Mary, Juana Margarita, Miriam and Vicenta and Father Ken wrote to friends of COAR in July 1989: “We are here as your representatives

to accompany the children and personnel of COAR after the shock and impact of this act of violence against Sister Stan, the last person in the world who should have been a victim. The children unnecessarily had to recall many past bad memories of violence in their lives and the lives of their parents. However, as one family in COAR in solidarity with the Salvadorean people, we are doing the best we can to adjust to the situation and pray and work for a better future.”

The ninth anniversary of COAR was marked on August 13, 1989, with a mass in St. Joseph’s chapel, which was still under construction.

An unspeakable act of violence was perpetrated when Jesuit Fathers Amando López, Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes, Juan Ramón Moreno and Joaquín López of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) were killed by members of the armed forces on the night of November 16, 1989, along with an employee, Elba Ramos, and her sixteen-year-old daughter Celina Ramos.

At the end of the 1989 school year the agricultural high school was phased out because the enrollment was not sufficient to justify the expense and requirements of a high school. The classrooms were converted into storerooms.

A comprehensive report prepared by Sister John Marie Crowley CCVI in October 1989 made the following observations:

- COAR is not a corporation but a religious project under the auspices of the archdiocese of San Salvador. It is owned by the archdiocese, does business in the name of the archdiocese, and has legal recognition under the archdiocese.
- Presently it is serving 202 children. It strives to provide a loving, peaceful family life for the children as well as educational and vocational opportunities, also religious formation and health care within the children’s own land and culture.
- Pre-school, primary, junior high and high school education is established for the COAR children and those children coming from the nearby villages and surrounding areas. The children from the surrounding areas are poverty stricken due to ten years of war and a shattered economy. Also, there is very poor education provided in these areas due to the fact that teachers are not held accountable to be present or give quality education. In making education available to these children, COAR not only helps them, but also provides a more normal learning environment for the children of COAR. These children do pay tuition according to their means. The total number of students attending all grades is approximately 750. Of this number 202 are from COAR.
- Vocational programs and courses in seven workshops have been established to give the children a chance to do their part in the upkeep

of the COAR community. Every child aged twelve and over goes to these workshops three hours a day, Monday through Friday. The following workshops are open to them: gardening, carpentry, welding, tailoring, sewing and embroidery, tortilla making and baking.

- A director of agriculture supervises the farm workers and enlists the bigger boys to help with the planting, harvesting and animal care. The animals include 25 cows, 3,000 chickens, a number of pigs and 90 rabbits. The skills learned by the children in agriculture, dairy farming, carpentry, welding and other crafts are incorporated into their daily lives and shared with the COAR family.
- Net annual expenses per child in the Residential Unit were calculated to be \$1,096.45, after income from school fees, medical clinic fees, farm products sales and crafts sales was subtracted. A question has been asked as to how COAR's expense budget compares with similar institutions providing the same services in El Salvador. The response stated that compared to similar institutions, COAR is much more economical in its expenses. The reason given for this was that COAR has a more centralized administration. The larger institutions in El Salvador are usually owned and supported by the state even though religious groups may staff them.

Sister John Marie's report (Crowley 1989) concluded: "It seems apparent that there still is and will continue to be a great need for a ministry such as COAR in El Salvador."

New chapel

Father James P. Kenny died on February 12, 1990, in Cleveland, Ohio. Padre Jaime worked at the parish of Zaragoza from 1980 to 1985. He loved the children of COAR and always helped them and the other refugees who found shelter in the parish and children's village. Upon his return to Cleveland, he became a board member of COAR Peace Mission, and faithfully attended all the meetings to add his encouragement to the efforts to support the children.

Father Steve Vellenga said, "Jim Kenny was a priest who loved the church and especially the Church's missionary apostolate. Born in Ireland, he came to the diocese of Cleveland as a missionary. After 30 years of service in five parishes, at the age of 55, he volunteered for the diocesan mission in El Salvador, where he worked fulfilling the great demand for a priest in a parish that was bigger than any he had known. After five years in El Salvador, Jim continued working with Hispanics until he was named director of the diocesan mission office. In his work as mission director, he extended hospitality to missionaries from all over the world and supported



Father Ken celebrates mass in St. Joseph's Chapel with COAR residents and schoolchildren, c. 1990.

Padre Ken celebra la Santa Misa en la Capilla San José con niños y niñas de COAR, c. 1990.

the efforts of many mission groups. Perhaps more than anything I will remember Jim Kenny as a man of hospitality."

On March 19, 1990, feast of Saint Joseph, mass was celebrated in St. Joseph's chapel by Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas. It was an especially



St. Joseph's Chapel at COAR
Capilla San José

joyous occasion because Sister Stanislaus Mackey returned for the first time to El Salvador since the attempt on her life the previous June. She was welcomed at the airport in San Salvador by 50 of the children and workers at COAR and the sisters of her congregation.

Sister Stan attended a St. Patrick's Day party in the convent on March 17, as well as other functions in her honor. Many

friends came to see her during the week she spent at COAR, and then she went to Guatemala to visit her many friends there as well. Sister Stan later recalled, "I didn't think I would ever be going back to Central America. I wasn't sure if I was even going to live. But thanks be to God I have been able

to return to see the lives touched by our ministry. It is not what I did there, but what God did for me and how we were able to be his instruments in helping to relieve the suffering.”

Sister Judy Miffleton, who had helped out at COAR during the summer of 1983, returned to El Salvador and became Director of the Residential Unit in 1990. “I loved the children,” she said. “I struggled with the Spanish and they laughed when I made errors and would correct me. I had responsibility for fourteen houses, along with the house mothers, and had to see that the children got baths every morning, clean clothes and food – and see that they ate their food.”

Sister Lelia McNamara was Director of the clinic from 1990 to 1995. “They were the best five years I ever spent in my life!” she said. “It was a fantastic place. The staff and clients were so easy to work with.

They could be starving but they would share their last bit of food or money generously.

“We continued the work with health promoters that Stan had started, and trained more promoters. We had monthly meetings with them, and they would send people to the clinic if they needed attention. We nuns were always busy. We liked what we were doing and had a lot of fun. COAR has all the aspects of our charism. I hope the spirit of Oscar Romero will remain in the hearts of the children.”



*Sister Lelia McNamara CCVI with
COAR resident and visitors, c. 1990
Hermana Lelia McNamara CCVI
con niño y familiares, c. 1990*

New administration

In October 1990, at Father Ken Myers’ request and after many consultations and meetings, the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word accepted responsibility for the management and operation of COAR. Sister Audrey Walsh, who served as coordinator of COAR from 1983 to 1986, was installed as director by Archbishop Rivera y Damas on January 17, 1991. Sister Rose Scanlan was appointed by her congregation as General Councilor for the COAR mission.

In a letter to friends of COAR, Sister Audrey explained: “I want to assure you that we will continue to love and care for these children of war in the same spirit as Father Ken has done for the past ten years. The economic situation in El Salvador is grim. Prices of food have doubled in the last few

months. And yet with your help we hope to provide the nourishment and education the children need to become 'sowers of peace' in Salvadorean society."

Father Ken said that the move would enable him to spend time establishing the San Carlos Borromeo seminary in Santa Tecla for diocesan missionary priests of the Society of Missionaries of Pastoral Charity, and continue promoting priestly vocations for the missions. "There are 200,000 missionaries in the world," he stated, "but only 2,000

of them are from Latin America. Archbishop Rivera y Damas would like to send some missionary priests from El Salvador to other parts of the world where they will make known to others the love of Christ."

Sister Audrey added, "Father Ken's philosophy in regard to the admission and formation of the children will remain the same, and he will always remain in the minds and hearts of all of us who live and work here at COAR. Our prayers accompany him in this new missionary effort."

Sister Ann Mary Brangan was named director of development for COAR Peace Mission in July 1991, and in 1993 became the director of COAR Peace Mission, having received a Master of Arts in Philanthropy and Development. "We had a great board of trustees," she said, "and a good accountant in Justin Noetzel. He set the financial policy for the board."

One of the board members, Bill Head, said, "I joined the board of COAR Peace Mission because I wanted to stay involved in peace and justice. The social mission can get lost in the daily grind of business, and you can lose the sense of the mission of the Church. Being on the board reminded me on an official plane that there are people that need help and are suffering."

Peace Accords

On January 16, 1992, the Peace Accords ending El Salvador's twelve-year civil war were signed in Mexico City by the two opposing sides of the war. Before leaving for Mexico City, Archbishop Rivera y Damas asked every parish church in the nation to celebrate a mass at 12 noon, the time of the signing. All the COAR children with their house mothers traveled the road into Zaragoza to celebrate with the people of the town. Throughout the country people gave thanks for an end to the time of violence and death. In San Salvador crowds came out into the streets shouting and welcoming



Father Ken chats with seminarian and religious in Santa Tecla.
Padre Ken conversa con seminarista y religiosas en Santa Tecla.

ONUSAL, the United Nations supervisors of the ceasefire which was to begin on February 1. Official ceremonies to declare an end to the war took place in El Salvador on December 15, 1992. The war had left more than 70,000 persons dead.

New residents

COAR News of July-August 1992 stated: "The first six months of 1992 have been busy ones for the personnel at COAR. Forty-three new children were admitted to the children's village. There is still a great deal of confusion in the country regarding the whereabouts of family members. Due to the ceasefire, many persons are surfacing who were either missing or presumed dead. For example, the father of three of the children in COAR came to visit them for the first time in eight years. It was unsafe before.



Sister Ann Mary Brangan CCVI with group of COAR children, c. 1990

Hermana Ann Mary Brangan con grupo de niños y niñas, c. 1990

"The fathers of the majority of children in COAR died during the armed conflict, and the mothers, being refugees, lost all their possessions. Now the mothers are working and trying to support themselves and their children. COAR has accepted some of the children until the mothers are better equipped to support them.

"A large percentage of the children have lost their mothers through either death or abandonment. The fathers have asked COAR for help. Each case is different. COAR responds as best as it can to such sad situations."

Sister Ann Mary explained to readers of *COAR News* the importance of the house mothers: "The position of house mother is essential and at the heart of the success of the COAR project. This special type of person has the immediate and direct contact with and care of the children. The house mothers are dedicated to the creation of a homelike atmosphere and guidance of the children. It takes day-to-day patience and understanding to give the children the attention and discipline they need so that they can grow as responsible persons. Sister Audrey meets with the house mothers on a regular basis to discuss nutrition, child care, education and health topics."

In 1992 Sister Audrey, the General Director of COAR, was honored with

a golden jubilee celebration remembering her 50 years of service in the U.S., Guatemala and El Salvador.

Expansion of the school

At the end of 1989, the agricultural high school at COAR was closed and the building which housed the high school classrooms was transformed into much needed storerooms. However, at the beginning of 1994 the registration of new students for elementary and junior high classes put the student population at 800, so the space had to be reclaimed to make room for the increased number of students. Many of the new students came from distant rural areas, some walking for more than an hour to get to school.

A special study room was set up in the Residential Unit, with good lighting, books and encyclopedias, giving the children a place to prepare their assignments in the evening.

New personnel

Sister Marilú Yanes became Director of the clinic in 1994, and Mr. Luís Violantes Mata was named Director of the school.

The archbishop of San Salvador, Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, died suddenly of a heart attack on November 26, 1994. He had been a good friend to the children of COAR and supportive of the work. Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle was named by Pope John Paul II as his successor.

In February 1995 a new high school course of studies in commerce and administration was established, with 58 students. To provide space for the high school, the kindergarten was moved to another spot near the edge of the property.

Sister Audrey wrote to friends and supporters in early 1996: "We have 120 children between the ages of three and fifteen, and there are 840 students in the school, 61 more than last year. We are giving special emphasis this year to the expansion of our workshops. We are gradually adding new equipment so that the children can learn a trade and can support themselves when they leave the children's village.

"Unfortunately here in El Salvador the poor seem to be getting poorer and food prices continue to rise. Recently a young woman 26 years old, appearing pale and undernourished and expecting her fourth child, came



Sister Audrey Walsh CCVI, 1996
Hermana Audrey Walsh, 1996

to the COAR office explaining that her husband had been physically abusive and had recently abandoned her and the family. She said she had no food to give the children. We accepted her two oldest children, a four and a five-year-old. This is just one case among many more. Many people ask us to take in more children, but we have to give priority to those most in need.”

Paul Kunkel was a member of a COAR Peace Mission delegation to El Salvador organized by Sister Ann Mary Brangan in 1996. In his travel notes, Paul said: “Sister Audrey Walsh, our gracious hostess at COAR, worked hard on the preparations for our visit from the reception on the drive with the children and band to the final farewell with gifts and speeches at the *casa comunal*. Role models today are few and far between. Audrey provides a superb example, a daily inspiration for her staff as well as for the children, including us. Her drive, dedication and tireless efforts are to be seen everywhere, not only in the physical plant with its buildings but in the self-sufficiency of the farm and workshop programs, the school and its staff, and the cottages with their loving housemothers. God smiles down on this beautiful Irish colleen every day!”

Sister Rosa Ayala was named Director of COAR at the end of 1996, replacing Sister Audrey who returned to the U.S. after many years of ministry in Central America. *COAR News* of September 1997 recalled the direction and guidance that Sister Audrey had given all members of the COAR family, and her wisdom and experience. During her farewell party in El Salvador, Sister Audrey said, “I will miss all of you. Always remember to take care of the little ones.”

In assuming her new post of responsibility, Sister Rosa said, “I want COAR to provide the children with a type of help that is good and effective so that they can become persons with a positive attitude and can have a constructive effect on their society.” The following year Sister Juana Elizabeth Cruz joined the school staff as guidance counselor, giving special attention to young people in junior and senior high, because there seemed to be more personal and family problems for the students at that level.



The Director of the school, Mr. Luís

Sister Olive CCVI with children at COAR, 2003
Hermana Olive con niños y niñas de COAR, 2003

Alberto Violantes, reported: “We began our school year full of hope on January 13, 1997. From January 13 to 17 the teachers planned the work for the year. On January 20 the children came to school and met their teachers for the first time. The teachers greeted their classes warmly and enthusiastically, looking forward to working with them for the coming year. We also have our religious activities such as mass. We will celebrate Holy Week one week early because the students will not be in school during Holy Week. The members of the band have already begun practicing for the celebration of the seventeenth annual COAR Intramural Sports Day, which will take place in April.”

Sister Ann Mary Brangan’s 1997 report “The Community of Oscar A. Romero” described the magnitude of COAR’s impact: “Approximately 120 children live permanently at COAR in a cottage-type situation of about eight children in each of fifteen cottages. Together with about 680 other students, they attend the school which is located on the same grounds as the Children’s Village. The medical clinic begun in 1983 also aids about 75 to 100 patients daily. These are persons of few resources who come from the neighboring area. Therefore more than 30,000 persons benefit yearly: some receive daily, constant help while others come when there is a need for assistance. UNICEF and the Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood recognize the Children’s Village as a model for helping children in war-like situations.”

The report continued: “COAR has now been in existence for seventeen years. While the children originally came from families affected by the violence of civil war, most recently the children coming to COAR are from destitute single-parent families in which one of the spouses is dead, has abandoned the family or had no commitment to the family unit. Children whose parents are professional beggars, street people or mentally disturbed are being referred to COAR by judicial and social organizations. COAR’s basic service to children and marginalized persons of El Salvador did not terminate with the end of the war. Rather, it continues to protect children’s rights.”

Vocational training

The following workshops were offered at COAR in 1997: carpentry, silk screening, welding, tailoring, sewing, crafts, baking and tortilla making. Each child was invited to choose three areas and then



Child with carpentry instructor,
c. 1983

*Niño con instructor en taller de
carpintería, c. 1983*

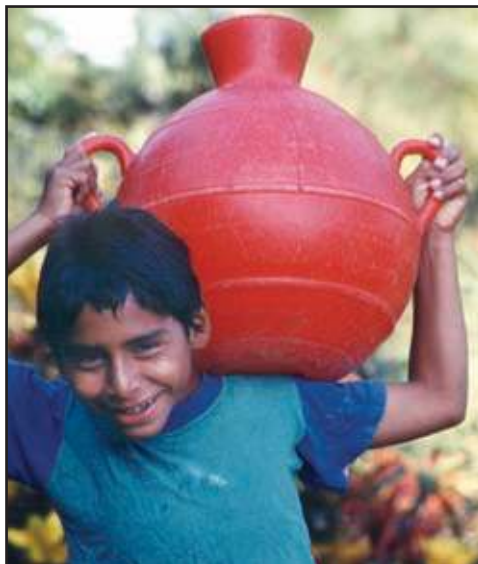
was assigned to one of the three. All the children were incorporated into the ecology committee and took part in keeping the grounds clean and attractive.

The spring 1998 issue of *COAR News* described a typical learning day for one of COAR's residents, Nelson López: "Nelson is 13 years old and has lived at COAR for several years. Every morning he gets up at 6 a.m. and after breakfast does chores. At nine o'clock he arrives at the silk screening and native crafts workshop, taught by Carlos Castellanos, and prepares the materials he will need for the day. Because Nelson began his education when he was older, he is only in the fifth grade, but has developed drawing and creative design skills far past the age level of his classmates. He works with total concentration for two hours, and at 11 a.m. puts away his utensils, has his work evaluated by the teacher and requests suggestions for the next day's work. He returns to his house cottage by 11:30, has lunch and attends the afternoon school session which begins at 1 p.m."

Water shortage

Water access had always been a problem at COAR. During the rainy season, rainwater was collected in barrels and storage tanks. In the dry season, the children went to the river banks to collect water for washing and bathing. The national water company, ANDA, supplied a small amount of water, but each

year deforestation depleted the water supply. The discovery of an abundant underground spring of good, clean water on COAR property in April 1997 was therefore a cause for joy. Engineers drilled through hard rock to a depth of 75 meters. A cistern was built at the top of one of COAR's hills, a pump was installed and pipes were laid to conduct the water to the children's houses, the school and the farm.



From the beginning, children helped fetch water in large jugs called "cántaros."

Desde un principio, los niños y niñas acarrearaban agua en cántaros.

Closing of Agricultural Unit

Because of lack of funds to finance the running of the COAR farm, a

decision was made at the end of 1997 to close the Agricultural Unit. The farm supplied corn, beans, eggs, fruit, milk and chicken for the children's consumption; but there was not enough income from the sale of produce to help with COAR's expenses. COAR was experiencing a critical shortage of funds that made this difficult decision necessary. All the departments of COAR – educational, administrative, medical, residential, and vocational – undertook income-generating initiatives to reduce the budget deficit.

New high school course of study

A high school degree in business and administration had been offered since 1995; in November 1997, fifteen students in that program were graduated with a secretarial degree and 25 in accounting. That same year, in compliance with El Salvador's educational reform, COAR also graduated its first group of 34 students with a general high school degree.

The parents' association helped build outdoor tables and seats where the young people could relax and eat. A small bookstore was set up to sell low-cost school supplies. In January 1998, the school population comprised 35 children in kindergarten, 248 in grades one through three, 218 in grades four through six, 173 in grades seven through nine, and 73 in the general high school course.

Tropical Storm Mitch

Channeling aid through Brother Regis Fust and the Salvatorian Mission Warehouse in New Holstein, Wisconsin, COAR Peace Mission in Cleveland organized the delivery of medical supplies and other materials from the U.S. to COAR Children's Village for distribution to victims of Tropical Storm Mitch which hit El Salvador and neighboring countries at the end of October 1998. Marissa Roth, a student at Ashland University, was part of a study tour to COAR led by the Rev. Kevin Conroy, who had worked in El Salvador for several years. She said: "I witnessed first hand the poverty of a third world country, but worse of all the lingering devastation and destruction that hurricane Mitch caused. To my surprise, the people of El Salvador don't feel sorry for themselves; in fact the opposite occurs. These people who must walk miles every day only to gather bacteria-infested drinking water still seem more content and happy to be alive than most Americans do. This joy of life I found was especially present in the children my group and I spent time with at COAR. My experiences in El Salvador have had a profound impact on my life."

The problem of frequent power outages was addressed by the COAR Peace Mission's "Light in the Darkness" project, in order to provide better electricity to the Children's Village, school and clinic. Although sometimes power failure had to do with intermittent supply by the national power

company, at other times it was a problem of the poor electrical system which was hastily installed during the war in the early days of COAR. The project to provide more stable electrical service was completed in January 1999. New wiring, transformers and junction boxes were installed, replacing much of the original equipment.

A computer center was established in the high school with the aid of the Society of Mary (Marianists), who said in a letter to Sister Ann Mary, “We feel it is important to provide technical education of this kind to third world countries and therefore were happy to support your request.”

Two new kindergarten classrooms, bathroom facilities and a playground for infants became a reality in 1999 with the help of COAR Peace Mission. Overcrowding in the high school had necessitated moving the kindergarten to a remote area of the grounds in February 1995; the new construction enabled the smallest children to be educated in a safer and more modern building in the same school area as the other students. Father Adonay Chicas, pastor of Zaragoza and spiritual guide to the children of COAR, blessed the building. He recalled that the COAR school had started on parish grounds in Zaragoza in 1981, and had always been and continued to be the parochial school for the parish of Zaragoza. Father Mario Adín Cruz Zaldívar of the neighboring parish of San José Villanueva also took a great interest in the COAR children and cared for their spiritual needs.

Sister Ann Mary Brangan CCVI, who had served at COAR Peace Mission since 1991, left for a sabbatical year in June 1999 and was replaced by Jerry A. Jarc, who in turn was succeeded by Astrid Martínez-Jones in 2000. During Sister Ann Mary’s term as director of COAR Peace Mission, more children were enabled to benefit from the services of COAR, and medical attention to those in rural communities was expanded. Sister Mary Pat Driscoll observed: “Sister Ann Mary was an enthusiastic worker both at COAR in El Salvador and at the COAR Peace Mission in the U.S. She made a truly professional contribution to COAR, going everywhere to spread awareness, and was very successful in raising funds for the work to continue. We are eternally grateful to her for her great efforts.”

Clinic expansion

Sister Ermitania Hernández succeeded Sister Rosa Ayala as Director of COAR in 1999. Sister Emirian Alicia García, who arrived at COAR in 1998, served as Director of



Sister María Méndez CCVI with children at COAR, 2003

Hermana María Méndez con niños de COAR, 2003

Santa Teresita Clinic until 2001. In the year 2000, an average of 70 patients per day sought treatment at the clinic. In order to provide better service and comply with new government regulations, in early 2001 construction was begun to double the size of the clinic and provide separate laboratory rooms, examination rooms, toilet facilities and a storeroom for medicine. The waiting area was improved to accommodate the daily crowds of ill and infirm children and adults. A computerized program was created to facilitate the running of the clinic.

“COAR has been able to prevent mental deterioration in children due to malnutrition,” said Sister Emirian. “They have also been helped psychologically. They suffered because of the war and family breakup. They have actually been rescued from the streets, because if it were not for COAR, some would have ended up as street children. I liked working at the clinic very much, being with the people, visiting them in their homes to see if they needed medical help; in other words, being there as a congregation to help those who suffer.”

The Medical Unit continued its program for rural health promoters. Each month the promoters received training, vitamins, medicine and instructions on the use of medicine in order to help needy people. Sister María Méndez became director of the Medical Unit in 2001.

Transition

Ten girls finished their time at COAR in the year 2000 and went to live at the Divina Providencia home in Santa Tecla run by the Carmelite Missionaries of Santa Teresa. COAR helped the Carmelite sisters raise money for this project. Twenty-nine young men moved on to the Divino Salvador home for youth in Sonzocate. These transitional programs provided lodging and care while the young people entered the job market or continued their studies.



Child washing clothes
Niña lavando ropa

Peace award for first COAR child

José Isidro Rodríguez, the first child to enter the COAR orphanage in 1980, lived at COAR between the ages of eleven and eighteen. He went on to work at an orphanage in Santa Tecla, giving orientation to children whose parents were dying of cancer. He was a social worker at COAR in 1995, and served as Mayor of Zaragoza from 1997 to 2003. In an interview quoted by the *New York Times International* (Navarro 1999), José Isidro said: “For

everybody who lived through the conflict, the great utopia is to prepare the conditions so that war never returns to the country.” He was guest speaker in Cleveland at the Eighteenth Annual Peace and Justice Awards Dinner of the Commission on Catholic Community Action on October 30, 1999. The program for the dinner referred to Mayor Rodríguez’ “strong sense of civil duty and deep commitment to peace through justice, his work to create opportunities for youth development, and his dedication to economic, social and human rights and community participation in government.”

José Isidro Rodríguez was honored in the year 2000 at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York by the Path to Peace Foundation. He was named a Servitor Pacis (Servant of Peace), an award bestowed on individuals in recognition of their commitment to the development of peace in the national and international arenas. Archbishop Renato R. Martino, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Vatican to the UN, bestowed the award on José Isidro for his contribution to building a community of justice and peace in El Salvador.

In speaking of COAR’s influence, José Isidro said, “COAR has been an important experience in my life. It was the space in which I learned to begin a new life, seek other horizons, and find a road to follow. They taught us how to face life from our parents’ experience and our own. COAR was there to reaffirm my faith and my values, when I saw that there were many people who cared about us. They taught me to have a spirit of service.”

Technical high school

The year 2000 marked several important anniversaries. It was the 20th anniversary of the death of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero (August 15, 1917 – March 24, 1980), for whom COAR was named. The retired bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, Bishop Samuel Ruiz, said: “Oscar Romero was converted by suffering: the suffering of a friend, of the people he served, and then finally his own. There are many ways to be converted, but perhaps the best way is to live among the poor and to discover in them, as Romero did, the presence of Christ.”

It was also the 20th anniversary of the deaths of Sister Dorothy Kazel, Jean Donovan, and Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke. *COAR News* of Summer/Fall 2000 stated: “Like Archbishop Romero, the four missionaries were friends of COAR who lived and worked among the poor, advocating peace and social justice in a country torn by civil war and socio-economic inequalities.”

The COAR Benefit Luncheon, an initiative of Sister Ann Mary Brangan, was held annually in Cleveland by the COAR Peace Mission to raise funds for special projects such as electricity, water, kindergarten improvement and clinic expansion. In announcing the Benefit Luncheon “Creating New

Opportunities” to be held on September 26, 2000, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the founding of COAR, an article in *COAR News* explained: “This year’s project is the expansion of the COAR high school to include a certified technical high school. Technical high schools are common throughout Latin America as they impart skills and knowledge necessary to be competitive in the job market. Traditional high school prepares youths for entry into college; but since most of the young people studying at COAR will not continue to college because they will need to find jobs upon graduation, the technical high school will better prepare them to gain employment. By constructing two additional classrooms and a science laboratory, we will again be creating new opportunities for youths. The Salvadorean Ministry of Education requires that all technical high schools have a life science component – hence the science lab – regardless of what other skills they are imparting.”

With this step, COAR’s general high school course was extended to include a technical qualification in accounting and a technical qualification in secretarial skills. Local families donated equipment, material and time to the project, making it a “community partnership in progress” (*COAR News*, Summer/Fall 2000). The Benefit Luncheon, attended by 155 friends of COAR, raised \$26,000 for the construction of the two classrooms and science laboratory.



COAR children, 2003
Niños de COAR, 2003

In addition to other fundraising activities, the COAR Peace Mission devised two highly successful sponsorship programs to aid children in El Salvador. “Give a Child a Home” has provided home care and necessities for children living at COAR, including clothing, shoes, electricity, water, food, medicine, supplies and other basic items. “Give a Child a Chance” has helped children living at COAR, children studying at COAR and those who have left COAR but still need support, and provides expenses for education, including registration, tuition, fees, extracurricular activities, school supplies and the like. Sponsors pledge to donate a specified amount annually or monthly, and maintain correspondence with the child they sponsor. Since the vast majority of children who study at the COAR school are from needy families, sponsorship makes education possible for children who might otherwise not have the opportunity to study.

Mary Stevenson, who had visited COAR in Zaragoza several times between 1991 and 2002 and volunteered many hours as treasurer at COAR Peace Mission in Cleveland, became director of COAR Peace Mission in

2004, replacing Teodosio Feliciano who had been director since 2001. In reflecting on the COAR Peace Mission's role and responsibility, she said, "Education gives children tools to change the world as adults. Education is part of COAR's mission. It is a service to society and community.

"The COAR Peace Mission has to run like a business," she continued, "because we are responsible for donors' money, hard work and sacrifice. It needs to function efficiently in order to maximize the aid sent to El Salvador so that in spite of inflation it will meet the needs. At the same time, COAR is the face of charity in the developing world. People seek to respond to needs, so our work also includes education and outreach to people who want to help. The Board of Trustees, while overseeing COAR Peace Mission and making decisions, follows the nonprofit model by providing an ethical stance and keeping us on mission."

The Reverend Robert J. Sanson, who became treasurer of the Board of Trustees in 2005, remarked that even though COAR is not part of the diocesan Cleveland Latin American Mission (CLAM), it is part of the Cleveland heritage to the people of El Salvador. "Ken named COAR after Archbishop Romero at a great risk to his own life at that time," he said, "and Ken helped enshrine Romero's memory and sacrifice in the very children formed under his name. I have always been an admirer of this work and wanted to support it any way I could. I continue to enjoy my association as a board member."

Earthquakes in 2001

Although the Agricultural Unit had been discontinued in 1997, in the year 2000 there were still some agricultural activities going on at COAR. For example, there were 2,920 hens that produced 2,415 eggs daily, some for consumption by the children and some for sale. COAR also had a cow and three calves. Beans, corn, cucumbers and watermelon were planted and harvested, and fruit trees provided oranges, lemons and other fruit. However, at the end of 2001 the hens and other animals were phased out because of high running costs, marketing difficulties, lack of space and the amount of time and effort



Sister Mary Patricia Driscoll CCVI
with children at COAR, 2003
*Hermana Mary Patricia Driscoll
con niños, 2003*

needed to maintain hygienic conditions.

Sister Mary Pat Driscoll, who had served at COAR in the early days from 1983 to 1985, returned to COAR as director at the end of the year 2000. On January 13, 2001, a major earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale hit El Salvador, followed by a series of strong aftershocks. Four classrooms and five houses at COAR had structural damage. The children were still visiting relatives, since the school year had not yet begun. Sisters Mary Pat and Emirian went out visiting people in Zaragoza. Many people were left homeless because their houses were made of adobe and could not resist the tremors. They had no water. Many slept outside because they were afraid of another earthquake. The sisters and staff of COAR prepared food which they delivered to people in the villages who had nothing to eat. They got medicine and distributed it. Father Adonay Chicas, pastor of Zaragoza, and the sisters joined the emergency plan of the archdiocese, and assembled relief packages containing beans, rice, sugar, salt, cooking oil, cornmeal for tortillas, blankets and soap. They took the packages to shelters that had been organized for people who had nowhere to live. They also went with Father Adonay to help a community in need in Cojutepeque, while Dr. Pedro Montalvo took supplies to Jayaque and Comasagua. COAR Peace Mission raised funds which the sisters used to help many earthquake victims.

Sister Mary Pat Driscoll wrote to COAR Peace Mission on January 18, five days after the first earthquake: "Today the staff at COAR are preparing 1,300 plates of food to take to three communities of Zaragoza - Corinto, Coralito and El Zaité. With that visit they can do an evaluation of the situation and find out what the greatest needs are. Those who are sick can go to the clinic and present a voucher from the parish to get free treatment.

"Yesterday our social worker came back to work. It took her several hours to travel because the highway is still not open. Of the COAR children we know of two that have lost everything. On Sunday we will have an emergency package ready for the families when they bring their children back to COAR and we will see how we can best help them. Just in food alone yesterday we spent \$2,500 buying the beans, rice, sugar, etc. After our meeting we feel that we need to respond to the basic needs of the people - food, clothing, medicine and shelter - as an emergency measure.

"Yesterday Sister Emirian and I went to visit the Cafetalón in Santa Tecla where many people have congregated. It is a big field where they have set up temporary shelters. Different groups bring them food. It was emotional to see all the people lined up to receive food. Thanks again for everything and we will continue to keep you informed. Thank God last night we had no significant tremor. We hope the worst is over. Let's continue to be united in prayer. Please extend our sincere thanks to all the donors."

Father Ken Myers was at the San Carlos Borromeo Seminary in Santa

Tecla when the first earthquake occurred. The seminarians were at home visiting their families. While there was some damage to the walls of the seminary, and all the books in the library fell off the shelves, what shocked Father Ken the most was the huge loss of life in a small community of Santa Tecla, Las Colinas, just a few blocks away from the seminary. “I was standing outside talking with neighbors about the earthquake,” he said, “when people began coming by looking for shovels to dig out their relatives.” About one thousand people died in Las Colinas when a hill collapsed and covered their houses.

A second strong earthquake occurred on February 13. This time the children were back at COAR, having returned from vacation. The children were terrified, and the sisters and house mothers had to try to reassure them. Children who were traumatized received psychological help. Many sick people came to the clinic, the majority with respiratory problems or diarrhea.

It was a joy and welcome relief when several more members of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word arrived at COAR in January 2001. Sisters Otilia Guerra, Marta Irene Agüero, Ana Julia Granados and Benigna Mejía began working in the school and Residential Unit. Subsequently, Sisters Elfa Esperanza López Castillo and Silvia Morán began to teach in the school, Sister Magdalena Rodríguez became coordinator of the pastoral department in the school, and Sister Ruth Nohemí Tigüilla was named coordinator of the scholarship program sponsored by the Christian Fund for Children and Aging, working closely with the young people receiving aid and their families.

Sister Elfa Esperanza López Castillo shared thoughts on the vocation of a teacher at COAR. She said, “Teaching at COAR was a profound experience for me. What struck me most was seeing children who were abandoned, or whose parents were mentally ill. I taught first grade. You had to know the reality of each child and adapt your teaching to that reality. When children don’t have the love of a mother or father, it is difficult to reach educational objectives. You have to look for ways to apply the learning, treating the children with love but at the same time maintaining standards, trying to obtain an educational balance. This work is difficult and you can only do it if you have the vocation to be a teacher and can put up with children’s



Sister Elfa Esperanza López CCVI with COAR students, 2001

Hermana Elfa Esperanza López CCVI con estudiantes de COAR, 2001

reactions, misbehavior or lack of interest. But I love it. We bring Jesus to these scorned children who have suffered so much. We give them attention during their first steps of life. They see the love of God in us.”

Death of Father Kenneth Myers

COAR’s founder, Father Kenneth Myers, died at the age of sixty of a massive heart attack during the night of March 2, 2002, at the San Carlos Borromeo Seminary in Santa Tecla. A native of Norwalk, Ohio, he was raised in Lorain, Ohio, and ordained a priest of the diocese of Cleveland in 1968. He began his missionary work in El Salvador in 1974 in the parish of La Libertad and Zaragoza.

His cousin Don Myers and Don’s wife Donna said, “Father Ken was a very sincere person and typical of his family, who were very compassionate people. We recall Aunt Mildred [Fr. Myers’ mother] telling us she had received a telephone call from Father Ken expressing the need to build what is now COAR Children’s Village. Father Ken was driving from La Libertad to Zaragoza and found two little girls wandering along the road. After trying unsuccessfully to locate their families, he brought the children to the parish in Zaragoza. When Ken described what his plans were, his mother said her reply to him was, ‘Oh, Ken, how will you ever do that?’ Father Ken said, ‘I will do it, Mom.’

“Ken knew that children must be secure in their surroundings and they need to share love and be loved. Not only did he want the children to be prepared academically, but he also incorporated the vocational skills. Father Ken was most proud of the school available to the children of COAR because he often said, ‘Their education cannot be taken from them. They will be prepared to make their world a better world with it.’”

Father Myers was also the founder of the Missionaries of Pastoral Charity, a society of Salvadorean missionary priests. He was a man of few words, but had the courage to respond to violence with compassion and practical action. His brother Ron Myers recalled, “As far back as I can remember, Ken was always a very quiet, easy going and peaceful person. He never talked much about his inner thoughts but his actions spoke volumes. We spent our entire childhood in the same house in Lorain, Ohio, with many trips to the family farm outside of Norwalk, Ohio. Our parents were wonderful, rock-solid, religious and hard working people who gave us a most secure environment and a happy childhood. I observed that Ken always seemed to have inner peace and in his own way methodically went about serving God and accomplishing his goals. He never hurried but never lost focus. It is amazing what he accomplished in his lifetime. His is a lasting legacy.”

Children at risk

In early 2002, forty children under the age of six were accepted into COAR. They were malnourished and their state of health was precarious. The house mothers and clinic personnel carried out special treatment plans for these at-risk children.



Sister Mary Pat with Maynor, 2003
Hermana Mary Patricia con Maynor, 2003

Sister Stan

Sister Stanislaus Mackey died at the age of 88 in Houston, Texas, on March 17, 2004, the feast of Saint Patrick. She founded the Santa Teresita Clinic and worked at COAR from January 3, 1983, to June 21, 1989, the day she was shot in Zaragoza. Soon after coming to El Salvador, Sister Stan said, "What moves me the most is the children's longing for love. They miss their parents. We can't take the place of their



Sister Stanislaus Mackey with young people of COAR, c. 1984
Hermana Stan con jóvenes, c. 1984

parents, but we can help them bear their loss. I know that God is always with me. I feel that I should put my life at stake for something as important as the lives of these children. I love them very much. We sow our destiny here. I'm sure all the sisters feel privileged that the Lord has called us here."

International Children's Games

A COAR team of 24 student athletes and twelve coaches and chaperones represented El Salvador at the International Children's Games held in Cleveland, Ohio, from July 28 to August 2, 2004. More than 2,500 young athletes from 56 countries took part in the games. Arline Nosse, President of the Board of Trustees of COAR Peace Mission, and the entire board and staff toiled endless hours to plan the event and raise money for the COAR contingent's participation. The children from El Salvador played very well and made new friends with children from other countries. They were overwhelmed by the warmth, generosity and care that they experienced from COAR supporters in Cleveland.

Back in Zaragoza, a long-awaited cafeteria was opened in 2004 at COAR, serving hot meals and a variety of hot and cold snacks at reasonable prices to students, employees and visitors. It helped the local economy by employing several workers and strengthening the local supply chain.



COAR athletes present program of song and dance during trip to Cleveland, Ohio, for 2004 International Children's Games.

Atletas de COAR presentan un acto cultural en Cleveland, Ohio, en 2004.

Memories of a COAR child

Francisco Heriberto Chicas was brought to COAR in 1985 at the age of ten, after having witnessed the assassination of his mother and his four-year-old sister who were shot in the back as they tried to escape from the Salvadorean army. Francisco lived at COAR for eight years. He said, "My experience at COAR was beautiful, with the other children, the sisters, house mothers and workshop

instructors. At the beginning I found it very hard to adjust, but God gave me the light to accept what they were trying to teach me. If you want to succeed in life, you have to accept guidance."

After furthering his studies, Francisco returned to COAR in 2000 as an employee, working with the school choir, teaching English and helping children with learning difficulties, and finally began work as a driver at COAR. "Today COAR is like an oasis in the suffering society of El Salvador," he said. "Here children can feel peaceful, find the water that is the word of God, and breathe freely. COAR gives tools to children so that they can face life and know how to get along when they have to leave here."



COAR children, 2003

Niños chiquitos de COAR, 2003

25th anniversary celebrations

Sister Mary Pat Driscoll wrote in *COAR News* (February 2005): “Friday January 21, 2005, all the employees, students and their parents, children living at COAR, many townspeople from Zaragoza, and several special guests accompanied us in the opening of the school year, the 25 years of the foundation of COAR, and the naming of the street leading to COAR as Calle Padre Kenneth Carl Myers Brown. The ceremony began at the monument of Archbishop Romero on the street leading into Zaragoza. We were reminded of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero and of the four U.S. churchwomen. We had the Eucharistic celebration on the basketball court at the school celebrated by Fr. Adonay Chicas and Fr. Manuel Cardona, the rector of San Carlos Borromeo Seminary. We invite you to join us in celebrating and giving thanks to our God for so many blessings.”

The high point of the year was the main anniversary celebration on August 15, 2005, with mass celebrated by Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle and many events to mark the 25 years of COAR. María Ana Portillo de Rugamas, director of the COAR school, said, “I admire the vision that created this good work in the midst of most difficult times. COAR makes a great contribution to Salvadorean society. It educates 800 children each year and has an impact on their families as well. It forms future citizens, responsible workers, and women who can assume a decision-making role in society. Our challenge is to preserve this legacy.”



Zonia Argentina Núñez de Godínez, secretary of COAR Children's Village, 2003

Zonia Argentina Núñez de Godínez, secretaria de COAR, 2003



Sister Mary Patricia Driscoll CCVI with COAR children, 2003

Hermana Mary Patricia Driscoll CCVI con niños, 2003

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Note: interviews and other sources in Spanish used in the text were translated into English by Thérèse Osborne, unless otherwise indicated.

COAR TIMELINE 1980 - 2005

1980

- Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of San Salvador requests parishes to shelter orphans and refugees from El Salvador's civil war.
- Archbishop Romero assassinated on 24 March.
- Father Kenneth Myers sets up small refugee center in parish of Zaragoza. First widows and children arrive.
- Numbers grow to 300 and additional buildings erected at parish.
- Sister Dorothy Kazel, Jean Donovan, and Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford assassinated on 2 December.

1981

- New property purchased in Zaragoza for future home of COAR Children's Village.
- Parish school opened in Zaragoza for refugees and other children in the area.

1982

- Widows leave refugee center at parish.
- Some children move to large house on new property.
- Ten new homes built.

1983

- Sisters Audrey Walsh, Stanislaus Mackey and Mary Patricia Driscoll of Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word begin work at COAR Children's Village.
- Santa Teresita Clinic opened.
- All children remaining at parish refugee center move to new homes at COAR Children's Village.
- Five additional homes built, bringing number of group homes to fifteen.
- Land cleared for vegetable and fruit crops.

1984

- Agricultural high school opens, and classes from kindergarten to ninth grade continue.
- Dental treatment offered at Santa Teresita Clinic, in addition to regular health services.

1985

- Santa Teresita Clinic establishes outreach program to train rural health promoters and midwives.
- COAR Peace Mission founded in Cleveland, Ohio, to support COAR Children's Village in El Salvador.

1986

- Brothers of Christian Schools assume responsibility for Educational Unit.
- Ground broken for St. Joseph's Chapel.
- Earthquake leaves 2,000 dead in El Salvador and 300,000 homeless. Some COAR buildings damaged.

1987

- First graduates leave COAR to begin new life.
- Bakery opened.

1988

- Carpentry, welding, tailoring and crafts workshops in operation, as well as Agricultural Unit and Medical Unit.

1989

- Sister Stanislaus Mackey shot by unknown assailant on 21 June.
- Assassination of six Jesuits and two women at Catholic University (UCA) in San Salvador on 16 November.
- Agricultural high school closes.

1990

- St. Joseph's Chapel officially opens with mass celebrated by Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas.

1991

- Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word assume responsibility for management and operation of COAR.
- Father Ken Myers founds San Carlos Borromeo Seminary in Santa Tecla.

1992

- Peace Accords signed, ending El Salvador's twelve-year civil war.

1993

- Tenth anniversary of the arrival of Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word at COAR.

1994

- Elementary and junior high schools expanded.

1995

- New high school course of studies in commerce and administration established.

1996

- Vocational training expanded.

1997

- Water discovered on COAR property; new well dug.
- Agricultural Unit closes.

1998

- Tropical Storm Mitch hits El Salvador. COAR staff deliver food and medical supplies to victims.

1999

- Improved electrical system installed.
- New kindergarten classrooms built.

2000

- Santa Teresita Clinic expanded.
- Young people finishing at COAR enter transitional programs in order to continue studies or take up employment.
- Technical high school program launched.

2001

- Series of earthquakes strike El Salvador. Buildings at COAR damaged. Sisters and staff of COAR distribute food and medicines.

2002

- Death of Fr. Kenneth Myers, founder of COAR, on 2 March.

2003

- Special treatment program continues for malnourished small children at risk taken into COAR in 2002.

2004

- Death of Sister Stanislaus Mackey, founder of Santa Teresita Clinic, on 17 March.
- COAR athletes participate in International Children's Games in Cleveland, Ohio.
- Cafeteria opened at COAR.

2005

- Celebration of COAR's 25th anniversary.

Queridas hermanas y hermanos, amigas y amigos:

“El Verbo se hizo carne y habitó entre nosotras y nosotros” (Jn 1, 14).

Hoy 15 de agosto de 2005 es un día de mucha alegría, júbilo y agradecimiento al Dios Creador y Dador de Vida. Hay varias razones para recordar y celebrar. En la Iglesia, este día estamos celebrando la Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, madre y discípula de nuestro Señor Jesús. También recordamos con mucho amor y cariño a nuestro profeta y mártir Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, cuyo día de nacimiento estamos conmemorando. Él nació el 15 de agosto de 1917. En sus palabras “La dignidad de la persona es lo primero que urge liberar” (Homilía del 23 de marzo de 1980), Monseñor Romero nos ha dejado una tarea para continuar. Finalmente, es la gran fiesta de la fundación y el XXV aniversario de la Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero que fue fundada por el Padre Kenneth Myers en 1980.

Para mí es un privilegio poder celebrar estos acontecimientos con COAR y acompañar su proceso de crecimiento integral tal como está escrita en cada página de nuestra historia. Es digna de admirar la loable iniciativa solidaria y visionaria del Padre Ken al fundar esta comunidad con la meta de “construir la paz”, por lo que manifiesto en nombre de todos y todas mi gratitud a él por este legado. La fundación y vida de esta obra a través del tiempo ha sido posible gracias al apoyo espiritual, moral y económico de un sinnúmero de personas que aman a Dios en el prójimo como a sí mismas. Quiero agradecer a nuestros bienhechores tanto vivos como fallecidos. Agradezco a las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado, quienes incansablemente han servido aquí con entrega, fidelidad y alegría durante veintitrés años. Reconozco especialmente la labor generosa de las Hermanas Stanislaus Mackey y Audrey Walsh, tal como se relata en la recopilación histórica de COAR. Como Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado hemos recibido de nuestros fundadores y fundadoras el espíritu de la contemplación y del celo apostólico. Somos llamadas a ser “evangelios de amor” respondiendo a Jesús que sufre en una multitud de personas.

Quiero expresar mis agradecimientos a todas las personas e



*Monseñor Claudio
Marie Dubuis,
Fundador de las
Hermanas del la
Caridad de Verbo
Encarnado*

instituciones de la Diócesis y ciudad de Cleveland, Ohio, quienes desde la fundación de COAR han acompañado este caminar. Menciono de manera especial la contribución de COAR Peace Mission (Misión COAR para la Paz). Agradecemos al Arzobispado de San Salvador por su apoyo moral, espiritual y legal. Es importante recordar aquí a todas las personas que han prestado sus servicios a esta noble causa. No las mencionaré por nombre porque la lista sería interminable. Sin embargo, algunas aparecen en el presente documento. Con mucho amor recordamos de manera muy especial a nuestros graduados y graduadas, internos e internas, alumnos y alumnas del presente y del pasado. Le damos gracias al Señor por sus vidas, que han sido y son un don de Dios.

Nuestro reto es continuar formando y sirviendo; nuestros ejes centrales son los valores cristianos. Fundamentamos todo nuestro ser y quehacer institucional en el valor supremo e inalienable que es el derecho a la vida, “una vida en plenitud” (Jn 10, 10). De este modo nuestro aporte a la comunidad y sociedad salvadoreña será el seguir priorizando y sirviendo en las áreas de educación y salud de forma integral. Estrechamos los lazos de fraternidad, complementariedad y solidaridad como un todo, siguiendo la imagen paulina del Cuerpo de Cristo.

Mi última palabra, pero no por ello menos importante, es para expresar mis agradecimientos a Thérèse Osborne, quien con amabilidad y gran entrega realizó el trabajo de escribir el presente documento. Inició un proceso de recopilar información por medio de entrevistas, estudios e investigaciones. Seguidamente procedió a organizar la información en forma cronológica, clara y fiel a la realidad. Sé que otros u otras podrán seguir aportando datos, profundizando y ampliando esta historia. Eso será tarea de las futuras generaciones.

Que el Verbo Encarnado y la Virgen de la Asunción derramen muchas bendiciones sobre cada uno y una de ustedes y sus familias.

¡Alabado sea el Verbo Encarnado!

Hermana Mary Patricia Driscoll CCVI

*Hermana Mary Patricia
Driscoll con niño*



Sembrando con amor

Historia de la Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero – COAR

1980 – 2005

Thérèse Osborne

El fenómeno de los refugiados

Hace veinticinco años, El Salvador se convirtió en un país de refugiados. La guerra civil había estallado en 1979, y como resultado llegó mucha gente a San Salvador y sus alrededores que huía de la violencia de sus lugares de origen. Se declaró un estado de sitio; reinaba el terror que siempre trae una guerra.

La Villa de Zaragoza, a veinte kilómetros de la capital camino al Puerto de La Libertad, en ese entonces tenía unos cinco mil habitantes. Solía calificarse como pueblo dormitorio: por su cercanía a San Salvador, gran parte de la población trabajaba en la capital, en Santa Tecla o en La Libertad, otras ciudades no lejos de Zaragoza. Pero en 1980 se incrementó el número de habitantes con la llegada de mujeres y niños que se dirigían a la iglesia católica de Zaragoza buscando ayuda y protección. La mayoría de los padres de los niños habían sido víctimas de la violencia.

La iniciativa del Padre Kenneth Myers

El sacerdote Kenneth Myers, miembro de un equipo de misioneros estadounidenses de Cleveland, Ohio, ejercía su ministerio en el Puerto de La Libertad y en Zaragoza, que junto con sus respectivos cantones y caseríos formaban una sola parroquia. Siempre atento a la realidad de este país donde trabajaba desde hacía seis años, y conciente del llamado de su pastor, Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Arzobispo de San Salvador, a que todas las parroquias corrieran en ayuda a la gente desplazada, empezó a visitar los refugios que rápido se improvisaron dentro y alrededor de las iglesias y seminarios.

Inmediatamente se dio cuenta de que andaban niños y niñas en los refugios que no pertenecían a ningún grupo familiar. Sus padres habían desaparecido; algunos habían sido asesinados frente a sus hijos e hijas. A consecuencia de lo ocurrido, los niños quedaron traumatizados y llenos de miedo. Al Padre Ken se le ocurrió la idea de establecer un hogar seguro para estos huérfanos.

Un día el Padre Ken llegó al refugio Domus Mariae, dirigido por los religiosos Somascos, donde encontró a un niño de once años, José Isidro Rodríguez, cuya mamá había muerto en la masacre del Río Sumpul el catorce de mayo de 1980. José Isidro fue herido en el operativo. Huyó a

Honduras donde estuvo en recuperación un mes. Por fin, caminando toda la noche con otras personas, llegó enfermo y desnutrido a San Salvador. Se dirigió primero al refugio del Seminario San José de la Montaña y después lo pasaron a Domus Mariae, junto con su abuelito.

Los primeros huérfanos de COAR

Ese día 14 de agosto de 1980, el Padre Ken le dijo a José Isidro que quería tener un hogar sólo para niños y niñas y que le daba la oportunidad para estudiar. Cuando el niño se mostró un poco dudoso, el Padre Ken le dijo: “Puedes ir a conocer, por quince días, para ver si te gusta”. José Isidro contestó, “Voy a probar”. Así llegó el primer niño huérfano a la parroquia de Zaragoza.

El Padre había colocado diez camas de lona en un salón. Informó al Arzobispado que la parroquia tenía un lugar donde podía recibir a treinta y cinco niños huérfanos en una pequeña escuela nocturna de adultos. La escuela había dejado de funcionar a principios de 1980 por el toque de queda nocturno.

Una semana después, llegaron diez niños; cuatro meses más tarde, ya había doscientos niños, todos menores de doce años. Así empezó a crecer. Había hasta trescientos niños en un momento. Al principio no fue solo hogar de niños sino refugio, con unas viudas y otros familiares. Se organizó un equipo de personas de Zaragoza para cuidarlos. Un estudiante de medicina, Francisco Román, cuyos estudios fueron interrumpidos cuando se cerró la Universidad Nacional en 1980, también se incorporó a la obra para acompañar a los niños en sus necesidades. María Julia Chávez, con dos ayudantes, cuidaba a veintitrés niños de los más enfermos y pequeños. “Yo entendía a los niños”, dijo. “Querían un abrazo. Si íbamos a repartir dulces u otra cosa, teníamos que llamar a los niños a una reunión para hacer el reparto, todos iguales”.

Ovidia Magdalena Guzmán, de Zaragoza, recuerda: “Lo que me impresionó más, que me dio tristeza y a la vez me animó, fue cuando el Padre Ken traía a los niños en su camioneta. A veces traía a cuatro o cinco niños tiernitos, de brazo; o de seis meses, de un año, año y medio, hasta de doce años, niños huérfanos de mamá y papá, y aquí encontraron amor, paz, tranquilidad, techo y una familia. Los traía de iglesias donde ya no cabían. Había niños temerosos y otros difíciles. Teníamos que jugar con ellos, y los niños empezaron a sentirse con confianza. El temor a ellos se les iba yendo poco a poco, y empezaron a contar sus historias”.

Misioneras y misioneros colaboradores

La religiosa Ursulina Dorothy Kazel y las Hermanas Vicentinas Cristina Rody y Elizabeth Kochik, junto con una misionera laica, Jean Donovan, todas del

equipo de Cleveland, también trabajaban en la parroquia y colaboraban con el cuidado de los niños, a igual que el Padre Jaime Kenny, un sacerdote irlandés del mismo equipo.

Durante los primeros meses de la existencia del refugio, al ver a cualquier misionero todos los niños venían corriendo, abrazándolo, tocándolo, brincando sobre él, en busca de atención y cariño; pero con el tiempo no manifestaron la misma desesperación, porque ya tenían más confianza y se sentían protegidos.

Sostenimiento de COAR

El Secretariado Social del Arzobispado de San Salvador se preocupó por la alimentación y salud de los desplazados y refugiados, colaborando con el proyecto de COAR durante los primeros años de su existencia. Desde 1980, momento en que comenzó a traer niños, el Padre Kenneth Myers informó también a la Diócesis de Cleveland, Ohio, sobre el trabajo con niños huérfanos, y se inició allí una campaña para recaudar fondos. El periódico diocesano de Cleveland, el *Catholic Universe Bulletin*, dio a conocer lo que sucedía en El Salvador. Se formó una red de donantes en los Estados Unidos, aunque la ayuda no resultó suficiente para cubrir todas las necesidades de los niños.

Una comunidad de familias

La idea del Padre Ken fue fundar una comunidad. Él dijo: “El mayor problema de los niños huérfanos es haber perdido a sus padres y familiares. Por lo tanto, una educación que más se asemeje a la familia es lo que se busca. Se pretende lograr esto formando una nueva familia con una mamá adoptiva y un número determinado de niños. La mamá adoptiva ve a esos niños como sus verdaderos hijos. La familia vivirá en una casa sencilla, acogedora y de un tamaño adecuado para que haya movilidad. Se pretende copiar la familia natural, pero no la del modelo que brinda la sociedad: una familia individualista, machista y estática. Se quiere formar la familia con el sentido que debe tener: solidaria entre sí y con el resto de la comunidad, para que sea el germen de un cambio individual y social. Cada mamá velará por la alimentación, educación, salud y vida cristiana de su grupo con la palabra y el ejemplo”.

Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero

A la comunidad el Padre Ken le puso el nombre de Oscar Arnulfo Romero en memoria de Monseñor Romero, como un homenaje a su testimonio y para que se conservara vivo su espíritu. Monseñor fue una figura central para la Iglesia Católica de El Salvador, un fiel oponente a los abusos. Su voz era escuchada por el pueblo salvadoreño y por los demás pueblos del

mundo. A pesar de las amenazas y de la destrucción varias veces de la radio católica YSAX, continuó con su predicación, por lo que él se convirtió en el sostén moral de los pobres. Esta situación provocó su muerte martirial el veinticuatro de marzo de 1980, mientras celebraba la Santa Misa en la capilla del Hospital de la Divina Providencia, un día después de haber hecho un llamado a los soldados para que no mataran a sus hermanos y hermanas a pesar de las órdenes recibidas. Monseñor Romero presentía su muerte. Él proclamó: “Que mi sangre sea semilla de libertad y la señal de que la esperanza será pronto una realidad”.

Muerte de cuatro misioneras

El dos de diciembre de 1980, la Hermana Dorothy Kazel, Jean Donovan, y dos hermanas estadounidenses de Maryknoll que trabajaban con refugiados en Chalatenango, Ita Ford y Maura Clarke, fueron capturadas en el aeropuerto internacional de Comalapa. Esa misma noche fueron violadas y asesinadas por agentes de la Guardia Nacional. Para entonces COAR tenía a doscientos niños y veintitrés viudas. La muerte de las hermanas fue un golpe duro para el Padre Ken y para los niños de COAR y demás gente de la parroquia. Sin embargo, el asesinato de estas colaboradoras de COAR no fue motivo para detener la obra. Luego de los funerales de Dorothy y Jean en los Estados Unidos, el Padre Ken regresó a El Salvador para continuar cuidando a los niños.

Expansión y reubicación

COAR comenzó siendo un refugio, pero posteriormente, en mayo de 1981, con la iniciativa del personal de Catholic Relief Services (Servicio Católico de Socorro), se hicieron planes para darles a los niños un hogar permanente donde pudieran tener una preparación para sus vidas futuras como adultos. El número de niños había llegado a doscientos veinte; aunque se había construido nuevos dormitorios en la parroquia para recibirlos, ya no cabían. El Padre Ken empezó a buscar una propiedad más amplia, ayudado por el Lic. Sinessio Rodríguez Elías y Monseñor Ricardo Urioste, que habían sido nombrados por Monseñor Rivera y Damas para que colaboraran con la organización de COAR. En noviembre de 1981 la Sociedad Alfredo Muyshondt, Hermanos y Compañía donó un predio de cuatro manzanas a la orilla de la Villa de Zaragoza “única y exclusivamente para el culto religioso y para la construcción de villas infantiles”. Un segundo inmueble se compró en marzo de 1982 con una extensión de cuatro manzanas. El costo del inmueble fue de doscientos mil colones. El tercer inmueble fue de una extensión superficial de media manzana y costó trescientos mil colones. Ese inmueble tenía una casona de siete dormitorios, cocina y sala. Todo el terreno estaba cultivado con diferentes tipos de árboles, entre ellos frutales

y de café.

En ese entonces el cambio oficial fue de 2.5 colones salvadoreños por dólar estadounidense; así es que el costo de estos primeros inmuebles habrá sido el equivalente de doscientos mil dólares estadounidenses. Posteriormente se compró un cuarto inmueble con una extensión de 39.5 manzanas. El precio fue de cuatrocientos mil colones. Todas las compras de los inmuebles antes mencionados han sido exclusivamente para “el culto religioso y la construcción de Villas Infantiles de la Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero”.

En enero de 1982 salieron las viudas que todavía estaban en COAR con sus niños. Fueron ayudadas a reubicarse con familiares, y se llevaron con ellas ropa, camas y otras cosas que habían adquirido mientras vivían en COAR. Quedaron en las instalaciones de COAR en la parroquia de Zaragoza ciento veinticinco niños huérfanos de mamá y papá, divididos en pequeños grupos de hermanos y hermanas de la misma familia.

Fueron a vivir en la casona del nuevo predio treinta y dos niños pequeños de cuatro años para abajo, acompañados por cuatro mujeres que se convirtieron en madres adoptivas, con otra gente voluntaria que se incorporó con los niños en su lucha para sobrevivir. Veinte jóvenes varones de nueve a catorce años de edad fueron a vivir en la pequeña casa roja de la propiedad, junto con Francisco Román. Todos los niños le decían “Doctor Román”.

José Isidro Rodríguez dijo: “Trabajábamos cercando terrenos y haciendo limpieza, para no desconectarnos de nuestras raíces, porque éramos cercanos a la tierra. El Doctor Román organizó un equipo de fútbol, lo que nos ayudó a olvidar nuestras experiencias duras. Habíamos vivido incertidumbre, terror y traumas. Habíamos visto torturar a nuestros papás y violar a nuestras mamás. Pudimos compartir eso, y nos ayudábamos. Las actividades religiosas, como por ejemplo las misas y el rosario, también nos ayudaron. Hubo un horario, con tiempo dedicado al estudio”.

Talleres y proyectos agrícolas

El Padre Myers sabía que si COAR iba a continuar en el futuro, siempre necesitaría algunos fondos de afuera; pero también quería que COAR fuera casi auto sostenible. Con el afán de generar fondos para las necesidades diarias de los niños, instituyó varias actividades y talleres. Compró seiscientos pollos, pollitos y gallinas para el consumo de los niños y para producir huevos que se podían vender. Consiguió unas vacas que producían leche y queso en suficientes cantidades para alimentar a los niños. Además de los árboles que ya producían frutos como aguacates, limones y naranjas, se sembraron ochenta árboles frutales más, y también maíz, frijoles, tomates, rábanos y repollo. Se abrió una carpintería donde los jóvenes fabricaron muebles sencillos para las nuevas casas.

Escuela parroquial

La escuela parroquial de Zaragoza empezó en 1981 a dar clases hasta tercer grado a ochenta niños de COAR. En 1982, dada la carencia de aulas en la escuela pública, la escuela parroquial recibió también a otros niños que vivían en la región de Zaragoza, dando clases hasta quinto grado a un total de doscientos cuarenta estudiantes. El Ministerio de Educación ayudó proporcionando dos profesores.

Construcción de COAR Villa Infantil

El Padre Ken hizo este análisis: cuando los niños perdieron sus papás, perdieron dos aspectos importantes de su desarrollo: la vivencia con adultos que los querían y los motivaban; y la oportunidad para desarrollarse como personas maduras. COAR, dijo el Padre, es una experiencia innovadora para América Latina, porque se pueden restaurar estos dos aspectos para niños huérfanos sin encerrarlos en una institución. COAR es una comunidad, una familia; y por lo tanto el espíritu físico, espiritual y afectivo siempre es de “hogar y familia”.

La idea central del nuevo plan de construcción fue de restaurar el ambiente de hogar, con pequeñas casas de tres dormitorios, cocina y baño para albergar a un grupo de diez a quince niños en cada casa. Caritas de Alemania, la Asociación Little Way de Inglaterra y la Diócesis de Allentown, Pennsylvania, proporcionaron un total de doscientos ochenta y seis mil ciento setenta y dos colones para la construcción del primer núcleo de diez casas. Después de varios meses de preparación, período en que se compraron materiales de construcción y hubo consultas con el arquitecto, la construcción comenzó el cuatro de julio de 1982 bajo la dirección del maestro de obra, Gervis Cuadra. La mayor parte de la construcción de los edificios terminó en diciembre de 1982; después fueron instalados los sistemas eléctrico y sanitario.

Influencia religiosa

A principios de 1983, el Padre Ken escribió una carta a los amigos de COAR en los Estados Unidos en la cual dijo: “Un nuevo espíritu ha entrado en la comunidad de COAR con la presencia de las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado de Houston, Texas”.

El Padre Ken ya conocía a esa Congregación porque una de sus miembros, la Hermana Francesca Kearns, trabajó en El Salvador entre 1976 y 1979 colaborando en un estudio de la Organización Mundial de la Salud para verificar la eficacia de los métodos naturales de la planificación familiar. La Congregación fue fundada en 1866 por Claudio Marie Dubuis, originario de Francia y segundo obispo de Galveston, Texas. Su lema al fundarla fue la

siguiente: “Nuestro Señor Jesucristo sufriendo en las personas de muchos enfermos y necesitados de toda condición busca alivio en nuestras manos”. La Congregación se fue extendiendo poco a poco hacia otros estados de los Estados Unidos y también a Irlanda, Guatemala y Kenya. Por eso la Congregación es multicultural, con una Casa Madre llamada “Villa de Matel” en Houston, Texas.

Respondiendo a la invitación del Padre Ken para trabajar en COAR, la Congregación con su Superiora General, la Madre Loyola Hegarty, aceptó el llamado “para revelar el amor del Padre a todas las naciones por medio de esta nueva misión”. En la ceremonia de despedida, la Madre Loyola ofreció una cruz a las Hermanas Audrey Walsh y Stanislaus Mackey, diciendo: “Hermanas, les invito a recibir esta cruz como símbolo del amor de Dios manifestado en el sufrimiento. Por medio de ustedes, que nuestra Congregación haga siempre más visible ese amor al pueblo sufrido de El Salvador”.

Las Hermanas Audrey y Stanislaus, originarias de Irlanda, cada una con más de quince años de experiencia de trabajar en el Hospital Nacional de Huehuetenango, Guatemala, empezaron sus labores en COAR el tres de enero de 1983. Se hicieron responsables de dirigir la Clínica de COAR y administrar las casas de huérfanos. El comienzo fue humilde y difícil. Sólo tenían un cuartito que sirvió de dormitorio, comedor y bodega para las hermanas. Los niños pequeños también vivían en la casona. La Hermana Audrey asumió la coordinación de actividades en las nuevas casas, y la Hermana Stan asumió la dirección de la Clínica y la educación en la salud.

Cuenta la Madre Stan – los niños les decían “madre” a todas las hermanas religiosas – en un informe dirigido a su congregación: “El mes de enero de 1983 marca otro paso en la historia de la Congregación de las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado, con la llegada de Madre Audrey Walsh y Madre Stanislaus Mackey a COAR, Villa de Zaragoza, Departamento de La Libertad, El Salvador, Centro América, para ayudar a cuidar a los niños que han quedado huérfanos como resultado de la guerra, la cual todavía sigue en el país.

“Fuimos recibidas en el aeropuerto el tres de enero por el Padre Ken Myers, un sacerdote diocesano de Cleveland que dirige el Proyecto COAR, y sesenta niños. Ellos cantaron para nosotras cuando arribamos y nos entregaron a cada una un ramo de rosas.

“Nosotras empezamos a vivir en uno de los siete cuartos de la casa. Dos hermanas salvadoreñas, Hermana Gudelia y Hermana María Segunda, viven en otra habitación de la misma casa. Las demás habitaciones son ocupadas por los niños y las oficinas. Otros niños viven en la parte de abajo del terreno, en una casa que llaman “la Casa Roja”, y otros viven en la casa parroquial de Zaragoza. Son aproximadamente ciento treinta niños por todos.

“Nos visitó Monseñor Rivera y Damas el día seis de enero, así como el Señor Embajador de los Estados Unidos. Almorzaron en COAR con los niños y con nosotras. El viernes siete de enero nos registramos en la Arquidiócesis de San Salvador. En el camino visitamos el campo de refugio del Seminario San José de la Montaña. Había mil doscientos cincuenta niños allí. Trajimos a uno a casa.

“El quince de enero, diecisiete niños ingresaron, la mayor parte de ellos sufriendo de desnutrición. Tenemos a cinco de ellos en la casa grande, tres o cuatro que todavía no pueden caminar y gemelitas de menos de un mes de edad.

“El día veintiuno de enero, algunos niños se trasladaron a dos nuevas casas; y el veinticinco de enero, otros grupos se trasladaron a dos casas más. Las casas son sencillas, con tres camas desarmables en cada cuarto, pero adecuadas a sus necesidades. Todo está muy bien distribuido y construido de una manera muy práctica, gracias al cuidado, la extraordinaria iniciativa y la perseverancia del Padre Ken.

“Empecé a hacer un inventario y la organización de la Clínica en la Casa Roja el veintisiete de enero. El estudiante de medicina conocido como ‘el doctor’, Francisco Román, irá a Puebla, México, para finalizar sus estudios en el mes de febrero. Estará ausente por dos años más o menos; otro doctor vendrá dos veces a la semana para tomar su lugar. Francisco Román es una persona dedicada a los niños. Permanece con los niños todo el tiempo y les da ejemplo de lo mejor. Nosotros le extrañaremos mucho cuando él se haya ido.

“La Madre Audrey continúa ayudando a coordinar el servicio de todas las casas. Es un trabajo abundante y digno de elogio el esfuerzo.

“El treinta y uno de enero hubo misa por los niños de COAR antes de empezar el año escolar. Y así finaliza nuestro primer mes agradable en COAR. Nosotras estamos muy contentas de estar aquí”.

Al leer este informe, una amiga de las hermanas que venía a visitarlas a menudo dijo: “Estas palabras de la Madre Stan demuestran el cariño para con los niños, la actitud optimista y el espíritu abierto y acogedor que siempre han caracterizado a las hermanas que han venido a trabajar en COAR. Son realmente hermanas de la caridad, porque viven la caridad que es parte del nombre de su congregación. La Madre Stan no menciona los duros sacrificios que hicieron esas dos mujeres, que tenían más de sesenta años de edad cuando llegaron a COAR, subiendo y bajando las cuestas del terreno varias veces cada día para velar por las necesidades de los niños. Yo me asusté cuando fui a verles por primera vez en COAR, apenas quince días después de su llegada al país. No tenían ellas donde vivir, sólo un pequeño cuarto con una mesita en que tenían un calentador de agua para su taza de té; pero la Madre Stan ya había organizado la Clínica, con fichas para cada paciente, archivos, medicinas bien ordenadas, todo arreglado de una

manera sumamente profesional; y la Madre Audrey, que ya conocía a cada uno de los niños por su nombre, visitaba las casas preocupándose por ellos, corrigiéndoles cuando era necesario, y animando a las personas voluntarias que los cuidaban”.

Traslado a las nuevas casas

Poco después de la llegada de las hermanas, el trece de febrero de 1983, el último grupo de niños que todavía estaban en la Parroquia de Zaragoza fue a vivir en nueve de las nuevas casas de COAR Villa Infantil, dejando vacía por el momento la décima casa para los niños que iban a seguir llegando a COAR. La construcción de otras cinco casas comenzó, con un donativo de Catholic Relief Services (Servicio Católico de Socorro). Hubo escasez de agua; todavía no estaba conectado el sistema eléctrico; se necesitaban más muebles – pero los niños empezaron a sentirse en casa. La familia COAR había crecido: ya había ciento cuarenta niños, la mayor parte de ellos muy pequeños.

Los niños fueron colocados en las casas según sus edades y relaciones familiares, para formar familias, con las y los jóvenes más grandes distribuidos para poder ayudar con la dirección de cada casa. El papel de las mamás adoptivas se hizo aún más importante. Se les dio el nombre de “orientadoras”. Ayudaron a los niños y jóvenes a asumir sus responsabilidades con la limpieza y preparación de las comidas. Velaron por su desarrollo espiritual, moral e intelectual, dándoles valores y animándoles a estudiar. La Madre Audrey las asesoró y las acompañó.

La Clínica Santa Teresita

La Hermana Edis Marilú Yanes Reyes CCVI, quien fue directora administrativa de la Clínica entre 1993 y 1998, escribió en la *Historia de la Clínica Santa Teresita de COAR* (1998): “En 1981 el Padre Kenneth Myers fundó un pequeño dispensario asistencial en los edificios de la Parroquia de Zaragoza, cuyo objetivo fue dar atención a los niños internos de COAR, que para esa fecha existía ya un número considerable de doscientos niños. La guerra fue tomando más fuerza; los huérfanos y desplazados aumentaron cada día. Un estudiante de medicina y otros jóvenes de la pastoral local ayudaban al Padre Ken.

“Con la llegada de las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado, decidieron invitar al Doctor Pedro Napoleón Montalvo Martínez para que les apoyara con la obra, siendo hasta entonces que bautizaron a la clínica con el nombre “Santa Teresita”. Este primer equipo de gente de buena voluntad inició la labor médica bajo escasas condiciones económicas. La guerra siguió recrudeciendo; la demanda de los niños se unió a la demanda de los desplazados y de las personas de los cantones aledaños que también

visitaban la Clínica. Un noventa y cinco por ciento de los pacientes eran del área rural y el cinco por ciento del área urbana. Las personas se hicieron más y más asiduas a las consultas y también más amigables. La relación con los pacientes ha sido familiar y es así como fuimos conociendo a la gran mayoría con sus costumbres y patrones culturales”.

El Doctor Montalvo explica cómo llegó a conocer COAR: “Francisco Román era mi alumno en anatomía en la Universidad Nacional. Él me trajo a COAR en 1982. Me impresioné. Estuve el día que llegaron las hermanas, en 1983. ‘Ellas tienen ganas de trabajar’, me dijo el Padre Ken. Entonces quedé admirado de conocer a dos religiosas mayores en un momento en que mi país estaba en plena guerra. Fue así como pusimos medicinas en huacales sobre la mesa y estantes improvisados. Comenzamos en un cuarto del convento, por quince días. Después fuimos al kinder y pusimos el nombre Santa Teresita a la Clínica. Se elaboró un proyecto con la Madre Stan. Yo pensé: Ellas vienen de tan lejos, y son de edad. ¿Cómo es que no voy a ayudar, siendo joven?

“Durante los primeros cinco años, trabajé gratuitamente. El Padre Ken insistía en que los niños no iban a ser ni regalados ni vendidos. Eran niños con trauma de la guerra, tristes; chupaban piedras; guardaban la comida. No estaban ubicados en la realidad de que les iban a dar a comer. Habían visto morir a sus papás. Tenían miedo al principio.

“Con Stan visitábamos a los niños a las 6:30 a.m., casa por casa, con todo lo necesario. Vi cambios en los niños: venían con ojos de tristeza. No miraban a la cara a uno. Caminaban agachados. Ahora estos niños – nuestros albergados, que vinieron con traumas – son gente de servicio al país. Han salido con valores fuertes.

“Yo fui el ‘hijo mayor’ de Stan. Me trataba muy bien. Pensábamos en común. Ella cumplía al pie de la letra con las instrucciones de profilaxis y otras indicaciones. Nos complementamos. Con Audrey empezamos a hacer exámenes de heces y de sangre. Con ella aprendí cómo manejar un laboratorio clínico. Los tres trabajábamos en salud y prevención. Me sentí como en equipo”.

Antonio Alberto Aquino, ahora estudiante en leyes, que vino a COAR en 1982 a la edad de tres años, comparte su impresión del trabajo de la Madre Stan en la Clínica desde el punto de vista de un niño: “Mis padres murieron durante la guerra civil que azotó mi país. Me crié en COAR desde que tengo memoria. Lo que más recuerdo son las personas cuyos rostros y cariño guardo en mi corazón y en mi mente. Una de ellas es la Hermana Stanislaus Mackey, a quien yo llamaba Madre Stan. Recuerdo correr tras ella y agarrarme fuerte de su larga falda azul y caminar con ella hasta la Clínica. Era por quien íbamos a la Clínica, por quien soportábamos las vacunas, porque sabíamos que luego del dolor teníamos sus caricias y un dulce de recompensa. Era nuestra mamá. Era callada pero las palabras no eran

necesarias si teníamos su mano que nos alborotaba el cabello y limpiaba nuestras lágrimas mientras nos curaba alguna herida o rasguño que sufríamos. Recuerdo verla ahí agachada mientras lavaba nuestras rodillas con agua oxigenada, y sus pequeños regaños de que no subiéramos a los árboles o que no corriéramos, mientras yo desconsolado lloraba, pero sus regaños no me parecían severos porque siempre los acompañaba de una caricia en mi alborotado pelo”.

Antonio Alberto Aquino recuerda también a la Hermana Mary Patricia Driscoll, irlandesa, quien llegó a trabajar en COAR el primero de junio de 1983: “Madre Patty, mi otra mamá, fue quien me mimó y cuidó en cierta ocasión que enfermé. Recuerdo estar sentado en sus rodillas mientras me daba sopa de pollo en una taza, mientras los demás comían en la mesa. Mis fiebres tenían fin cuando ella subía por mi camarote para colocarme un paño húmedo en mi frente. Su amor y cariño hacía que el dolor no importara mientras ella llegaba cada atardecer hasta que mi salud estuvo bien”.

Niños y niñas con necesidades especiales

La Hermana Mary Patricia se había ofrecido para trabajar en COAR supuestamente por unos dos meses de vacación; pero después de los dos meses las otras religiosas no la dejaron regresar al convento de Houston. “Con la llegada de Patricia”, dice el Doctor Montalvo, “Audrey, Stan y yo pudimos descansar más, porque ella era enfermera pediátrica”.

Las condiciones eran difíciles. Las hermanas vivían en la casona, pero todavía estaban allá las oficinas administrativas. Muchos niños estaban desnutridos, con un desarrollo lento, y unos no podían caminar. “Teníamos hasta doscientos cuarenta niños”, dice la Madre Patricia. “Los niños no sabían dónde estaban sus papás, o si habían muerto. Cuando se enfermaban, los llevábamos a la Clínica o al hospital. Siempre había un adulto que se quedaba con el niño si estaba hospitalizado. Arreglábamos terapia para los que tenían limitantes físicas. Hacíamos todo lo posible por los niños desnutridos. Teníamos a los niños con nosotros trescientos sesenta y cinco días del año. La idea del Padre Ken fue preparar a los jóvenes a participar en la sociedad, en su país. Les animaba para que se quedaran y estudiaran. Padre Ken y nosotras las hermanas queríamos convertir a COAR en una comunidad que viviera el Evangelio”.

Nombres de las casas

En noviembre de 1983, había ciento ochenta niños que vivían en trece de las quince casas nuevas. Se pusieron nombres a las casas para recordar a las personas y lugares que jugaron un papel importante en el desarrollo de COAR:

- **Casa Jean**, por Jean Donovan, misionera laica de Cleveland que murió el dos de diciembre de 1980
- **Casa Dorotea**, por Dorothy Kazel, Ursulina de Cleveland que murió el dos de diciembre de 1980
- **Casa Maura y Casa Ita**, por Maura Clarke e Ita Ford, Hermanas de Maryknoll, que murieron con Jean y Dorothy el dos de diciembre de 1980
- **Casa de Matel**, en honor a la fundadora de la Orden del Verbo Encarnado y Santísimo Sacramento, Jeanne de Matel, cuya espiritualidad sigue inspirando a las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado a compartir el evangelio del amor
- **Casa San Patricio**, por el Santo Patrono de Irlanda
- **Casa Alemania**, por los católicos de Alemania cuyos donativos posibilitaron la construcción de las nuevas casas
- **Casa Cleveland**, por la diócesis y gente de Cleveland, Ohio, que desde el principio apoyaron a COAR
- **Casa Juan Bosco**, por el Santo Patrono de la juventud
- **Casa San Antonio y Casa San José**, por dos niños que murieron en COAR y en honor a San José, padre de Jesús
- **Casa Guadalupe**, por la Virgen María, la madre de todos y todas
- **Casa Juan Pablo II**, por el Santo Padre, que visitó El Salvador el seis de marzo de 1983. Los niños de COAR cantaron para él en la Catedral de San Salvador.
- **Casa Chalatenango**, por el Departamento de Chalatenango, El Salvador, del cual muchos niños de COAR eran originarios
- **Casa Romero**: por nuestro arzobispo asesinado, Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero

Escuela

Durante 1983, ciento cuarenta niños internos de COAR estudiaron en la escuela de COAR en Zaragoza, de kinder a noveno grado, junto con trescientos cincuenta niños de Zaragoza, la mayor parte siendo de familias desplazadas por la guerra. Se empezó la construcción de una escuela secundaria en el terreno de COAR a finales de 1983.

Reglamentos

Entre los “Reglamentos de Ingreso y Permanencia de Niños Huérfanos en COAR” que el Padre Myers publicó el 20 de diciembre de 1983 están los siguientes:

- Tienen que ser huérfanos de padre y madre, de padres desaparecidos, o niños completamente abandonados, es decir, que no tienen absolutamente a nadie que pueda atenderlos.

- Deben ingresar todas las hermanas y hermanos de la familia juntos (los de dieciocho años para abajo).
- Ningún niño puede darse en adopción por las razones que (1) para su tranquilidad, no será separado de sus hermanos; (2) para su estabilidad, no será separado de un ambiente de seguridad, confianza y desarrollo como persona salvadoreña; (3) para el futuro de El Salvador, será educado como buen ciudadano, buen cristiano y buena persona útil a la sociedad.

Educación y salud

A principios de 1984 había novecientos niños en la escuela de COAR. Se inauguró el Bachillerato Agrícola ese mismo año en el terreno de COAR, con treinta y tres estudiantes del primero año de bachillerato. El primero de octubre de 1984, el Señor Mario Parussolo, originario de Italia, asumió la dirección del Colegio COAR, que comprendía clases de kinder a noveno grado más el bachillerato. Ese mismo año se integraron a la comunidad de COAR las Hermanas Miriam Medrano y Ermitania Hernández, quienes estaban estudiando y colaborando a tiempo parcial en el ministerio.

Con fondos de Caritas de Austria, se construyó la Biblioteca Juan Pablo II, que también sirvió de centro de estudios donde los niños podían preparar sus tareas para la escuela. Hubo talleres de carpintería, sastrería y soldadura para los jóvenes.

La Clínica Santa Teresita adquirió un nuevo local más amplio en 1984. El Doctor Montalvo siempre venía dos veces a la semana. Se empezó el servicio de odontología en octubre de 1984. El Dr. Wilber Barquero atendía las necesidades dentales de los niños de COAR dos veces a la semana.

En 1985 la Clínica organizó un nuevo programa para las comunidades rurales. Trece hombres y mujeres asistieron a un curso intensivo durante un mes sobre la medicina curativa y preventiva, con seguimiento mensual. Estos promotores de salud se preocuparon por las necesidades de los desplazados y pobres de Zaragoza y las áreas aledañas. También se dieron cursos de primeros auxilios a las orientadoras de COAR. El equipo de la Clínica estaba conformado por las siguientes personas: Madre Stanislaus Mackey, Dr. Pedro Napoleón Montalvo, Dr. Wilber Barquero, Reynaldo Cornejo, Alfredo Castro, Dora Eugenia de Martell; y Ana María Rivas de Zavala, secretaria.

COAR Peace Mission (Misión COAR para la Paz)

Siempre atento a la necesidad de que COAR tuviera una base firme para la sostenibilidad de la obra, el veintinueve de enero de 1985 el Padre Ken fundó una oficina en Cleveland, Ohio, para recaudar fondos en los Estados Unidos. El Padre Joseph Kraker fue elegido presidente de la directiva, y

Rosemary Smith, quien trabajó en El Salvador de 1964 a 1980, fue nombrada Directora Ejecutiva de la nueva oficina, llamada “COAR Peace Mission” (Misión COAR para la Paz). Su meta fue “ser una expresión visible y real del Evangelio, para promover la justicia, un espíritu de comunidad, y la paz en El Salvador por medio del apoyo a programas efectivos de salud, educación y promoción que ayuden a niños y a otras personas a desarrollar su capacidad humana y contribuir al mejoramiento del mundo en que viven”.

Quinto aniversario de COAR

El quince de agosto de 1985, día del nacimiento de Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero (quien nació en 1917), se celebró el quinto aniversario de COAR. Dice el folleto para la celebración: “La Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero, conocida por COAR, es una institución que tiene como fin albergar a niños y jóvenes que han sido afectados por la violencia política y social que impera en nuestro país, El Salvador, desde el año 1979. Con esto tratamos de seguir las enseñanzas de Monseñor Romero, atendiendo a víctimas inocentes que no tienen opciones, casi todos huérfanos o con sus padres desaparecidos, encontrándose desorientados y alejados de sus lugares de origen. Tratamos de que los niños y jóvenes conserven su identidad. Posiblemente el trauma de la guerra, el dolor y la tristeza por la pérdida de algún familiar es algo muy difícil de erradicar, principalmente si han sido asesinados o se encuentran desaparecidos. Es pues tarea de todos dar una respuesta a las urgentes necesidades que nos plantea la situación de guerra y de violencia. La tarea es ardua”.

Nuevos programas

En 1986 Padre Ken anunció varios programas nuevos, además de los programas ya existentes que eran el Colegio COAR, la Clínica Santa Teresita, y COAR Villa Infantil. Fundó una oficina de desarrollo económica. La Señora Hilda Gloria Salazar fue nombrada Directora de Desarrollo. Se formó la Unidad Administrativa, y el Señor Mario Parussolo, Director del Colegio COAR, asumió la responsabilidad de Administrador de COAR, así dejando más libre al Director General, el Padre Ken, para salir en búsqueda de los fondos necesarios para el mantenimiento de COAR. La Señora Telma Delgado, psicóloga, auxiliaba al Director General para realizar tan delicada labor con los niños, junto con el Supervisor de Estudios. El director de la Unidad Residencial se encargaba de velar por el bienestar de doscientos veinticinco niños, los que fueron atendidos por veinte mamás adoptivas (las orientadoras), todas escogidas detenidamente.

La Hermana Audrey Walsh vio realizarse un sueño con la apertura de un centro multiuso, la Casa Comunal, con espacio donde los niños podían reunirse para programas especiales, y con un local especial para la

enseñanza de los niños de parvularia. Se empezó la construcción de la Casa San Juan para albergar a unos cincuenta jóvenes varones de los más grandes.

Los Hermanos Cristianos de La Salle

Un hecho muy significativo para el desarrollo de COAR fue la llegada de tres hermanos religiosos de La Salle para asumir la dirección del Colegio COAR. En 1985 el Hermano Álvaro Rodríguez, Provincial de la Provincia Centroamericana, había aceptado la invitación del Padre Ken para que la congregación colaborara con COAR en la Unidad Educativa. El cinco de febrero de 1986 el año escolar inició con el Hermano Esteban Caplice de Director y los Hermanos Ivan Castinon y Jorge Alvarado como maestros en el Colegio. El año siguiente, llegaron los Hermanos José Renato Pérez Joya, Jorge Antonio Sánchez y Marcelo Salvador Aguilar. Los hermanos vivieron en una casa nueva, la Casa San Miguel, y prestaron atención especial al desarrollo integral de los jóvenes varones más grandes. Ellos mejoraron la calidad académica del Colegio durante los dos años en que trabajaron en COAR, y fueron una inspiración a todos los demás profesores y profesoras para que vivieran su vocación sirviendo a sus alumnos y alumnas.

Hermanas colaboradoras

Desde hacía varios años la Congregación de las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado recibía a hermanas salvadoreñas y guatemaltecas en el postulanteado y noviciado. Cuando las hermanas salvadoreñas regresaban de la casa de formación en Guatemala para visitar a sus familiares durante las vacaciones, normalmente se quedaban en el convento de COAR, como no podían llegar a sus casas el mismo día. Unas hermanas estudiaban en El Salvador como parte de su formación y vivían en COAR, colaborando con la obra. Así es que muchas miembros de la Congregación hicieron una gran contribución a COAR, aún las que no estaban trabajando a tiempo completo en el orfanato.

Entre las primeras hermanas jóvenes que colaboraron con COAR estaba la Hermana Juana Margarita Flores, quien llegó a COAR en 1985 y colaboró con el apostolado hasta 1992. Además de sus propios estudios, se encargó de la pastoral de la fe de quince secciones de la escuela. También era coordinadora de la bodega, repartiendo zapatos, ropa y otros artículos a los niños. “El Padre Ken tuvo valentía cuando puso el nombre de Monseñor Romero a COAR”, dijo la Hermana Juana Margarita. “COAR fue la primera fundación que surgió con el nombre de Monseñor, aunque otras surgieron después”. Ella regresó a COAR en 2001 como responsable de la Unidad Residencial. “Hay que escuchar y comprender a las orientadoras y velar por la salud de los niños, sus útiles, y su menú”, ella comentó. “Yo lo he hecho con mucho gusto. Es muy buena obra. Aunque cuesta, muchos niños se

pueden salvar”.

Mientras estudiaba bachillerato y enfermería en Santa Tecla de 1988 a 1993, las Hermanas Vicenta Miranda y Deysis Contreras trabajaban a tiempo parcial en COAR, cuidando a los niños y ayudándoles con su higiene. La Hermana Vicenta había entrado a la Congregación en 1983, siendo originaria del Cantón El Zunzal, jurisdicción del Puerto de La libertad. Era colaboradora de la Parroquia de La Libertad. “COAR es el lugar donde conocí a las hermanas”, dice. “Siento COAR como mi casa, y creo en el ministerio. Hemos querido dar una atención integral a los niños. Se han superado la mayoría. Son triunfadores en la vida”.

Nueva capilla

La formación religiosa siempre ha sido parte de la vida de COAR. Durante los primeros años, se celebraba la misa con frecuencia regular en las gradas de la casona. Pero el día quince de agosto de 1986, en el sexto aniversario de COAR y en presencia de Monseñor Arturo Rivera y Damas, se inició la construcción de una capilla permanente. Aunque todavía no había fondos para la obra, fue inaugurada con fe.

El terremoto de 1986

El diez de octubre de 1986 un fuerte terremoto sacudió El Salvador. Estuvo focalizado en el area metropolitana de San Salvador, causando gran pérdida de vidas. Las Hermanas Stanislaus Mackey y Moira Noonan, quienes estaban trabajando de enfermeras en la Clínica, junto con Dina Castro, una joven residente en COAR, estaban en San Salvador ese día y vieron mucha destrucción, con edificios cayéndose y la gente huyendo de la catástrofe. El daño a los edificios de COAR fue mínimo, pero el Doctor Montalvo perdió su propia casa y oficina en San Salvador. Las hermanas y demás personal de COAR hicieron más de mil tortillas para los habitantes de una comunidad pobre que fue damnificada, y proporcionaron medicinas a la gente afectada.

Los primeros graduados de COAR Villa Infantil

En 1987, dieciséis jóvenes que habían cumplido dieciocho años empezaron una nueva vida fuera de COAR. Entre ellos estaba José Isidro Rodríguez, el primer huérfano que había sido aceptado en COAR en 1980. Los jóvenes habían sido ayudados a planificar su futuro. José Isidro consiguió trabajo en otro hogar de niños y progresó en su carrera, llegando a ser alcalde de Zaragoza.

Ese año fueron construidas cinco aulas adicionales para ampliar el Bachillerato. Se suspendió por unos meses la construcción de la capilla, habiéndose suscitado muchos problemas con las lluvias que causaron varios derrumbes.

Vocaciones misioneras salvadoreñas

El Padre Myers desde hacía mucho tiempo reflexionaba sobre el llamado de la Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericano de Puebla, México (1979) para que el pueblo latinoamericano asumiera su vocación misionera para ir a otros países y predicar el Evangelio. Con ese afán, empezó a promover las vocaciones sacerdotales misioneras en El Salvador. En 1987 había cuatro seminaristas salvadoreños, y en 1989 seis candidatos estaban viviendo en COAR. A la nueva sociedad misionera le puso el nombre “Misioneros de la Caridad Pastoral” (MCP). El Padre Ken también ejerció su labor pastoral en la Parroquia de Ciudad Merliot.

Panadería y talleres

En 1987 se abrió la panadería, donde los niños y niñas aprendieron a hornear bajo la dirección de un panadero. Ya había una tortillería y varios talleres: de carpintería, bancos, sastrería, costurería, artesanías y otros. En los talleres de sastrería se hicieron los uniformes para los alumnos del Colegio COAR. En el mes de octubre de cada año había una exposición de los artículos que los niños fabricaban durante el año. Las ganancias de la venta de artículos fueron invertidas en COAR: de esta manera, los niños pudieron ver que sus esfuerzos ayudaban al mantenimiento de COAR. También había una oficina para la Unidad Agrícola. Los niños aprendieron a trabajar la tierra, sembrando y cosechando, así preparándose para su futura integración en la sociedad de un país donde había pocas fuentes de trabajo y donde continuaba la guerra.

En 1988, murió asesinado un hombre que contribuyó mucho a COAR, Gervis Cuadra, quien fue el maestro de obra de todas las construcciones desde 1982. Se celebró una misa por su eterno descanso, con la asistencia de todos los niños y personal de COAR.

Educación religiosa

La Hermana Miriam Medrano asumió la dirección del Colegio en 1988, y la Hermana Ana María Brangan se incorporó al equipo de COAR, coordinando la educación religiosa en el tercer ciclo y bachillerato del Colegio y también en la Unidad Residencial, junto con la Hermana Juana Margarita Flores y el catequista Amílcar Eduardo Escobar. “Quiero incluir a todos los maestros y maestras en nuestro plan pastoral para que manifiesten los valores que COAR representa”, dijo la Hermana Ana María. “Nuestra meta es la integración de la catequesis con la vida diaria, para que los niños pongan en práctica el mensaje que reciben”.

Unidad Médica

La Hermana Stan celebró cincuenta años de vida religiosa el trece de mayo de 1989. Reflexionando sobre el apostolado de la Unidad Médica, dijo: “Ahora tenemos un laboratorio bien equipado y personal bien preparado. Este servicio se ofrece sólo a los niños internos de COAR, a los alumnos del Colegio y a la gente más pobre de la región. Nuestro trabajo está para prestar un servicio, no para sacar una ganancia. Cobramos un dólar a las personas que pueden pagarlo, pero la mayoría no puede pagar nada. Llega mucha gente desplazada a la Clínica. Hemos contratado a una enfermera auxiliar para ayudar a esta gente.

“Los promotores de salud siguen sirviendo a la población rural, igual que las parteras. Somos cuatro en el equipo de la Clínica; atendemos a unas ochocientas cincuenta a mil personas cada mes. Para colocar nuestro trabajo en un contexto de la evangelización, cada mañana leemos una lectura bíblica en la Clínica y todos los que estamos presentes compartimos sobre la lectura. Aprendemos mucho de los pobres: ellos nos enriquecen y nos ayudan a crecer en el amor de Dios”.

Atentado contra la Hermana Stan

El día veintiuno de junio de 1989, las Hermanas Stanislaus, Juana Margarita y Ana María se dirigieron a Zaragoza para pasar por el correo, después de haber salido del Banco Salvadoreño de Santa Tecla para efectuar asuntos administrativos. A las cinco de la tarde, cuando venían sobre la carretera que conduce al Puerto de La Libertad, a la altura del kilómetro 19½, trescientos metros después de pasar por la entrada principal de COAR, un pick-up color amarillo se les acercó. Hubo un disparo. La Hermana Stan fue herida de un balazo en la cabeza, derramando mucha sangre. La Hermana Ana María, quien conducía el vehículo de las hermanas, fue primero a la Parroquia de Zaragoza y corrió a llamar un médico, pero al no encontrar a nadie, llevó a la Hermana Stan al Hospital San Rafael de la ciudad de Santa Tecla. Allí le proporcionaron los primeros cuidados tomándole las primeras radiografías. Después la Hermana Stan fue trasladada en ambulancia a la Policlínica Salvadoreña para una operación de neurocirugía. Fue atendida por un neurocirujano, un otorrinolaringólogo, un oftalmólogo y un neumólogo. Los médicos no pudieron salvarle la vista en el ojo izquierdo ni pudieron extraerle la bala, la cual estaba en la parte de atrás de la laringe.

El obispo auxiliar de San Salvador, Monseñor Gregorio Rosa Chávez, dijo en su homilía del domingo veinticinco de junio en la Catedral que a la Hermana Stan le llamaban “ángel de la misericordia” por la ternura con que trataba a los pacientes que pasaban cada día por la Clínica de COAR. “Como tantos hechos que traen dolor y lágrimas en El Salvador”, dijo Monseñor Rosa, “quizás nunca se sabrá quiénes fueron los agresores de la

Hermana Stan ni las razones que tuvieron para disparar contra esta santa mujer de setenta y tres años. Pero toda la nación pudo conocer, gracias al esmerado servicio de los periodistas, que no están solas las personas que sufren, porque el Señor inspira a cristianos de otros países para que vengan a compartir el drama que se vive entre nosotros, drama agravado tan duramente por la guerra. Las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado me han dicho que desean seguir sirviendo al pueblo salvadoreño. Nosotros agradecemos este gesto y oramos para que la Hermana Stan se recupere satisfactoriamente en el Hospital que su Congregación posee en Houston, Texas”.

La Hermana Stan fue trasladada a Saint Joseph’s Hospital en Houston el veintitrés de junio, donde fue intervenida quirúrgicamente. Tuvo una recuperación milagrosa, pudiendo salir del hospital el cuatro de agosto. Después de un período de terapia y descanso, asumió un nuevo ministerio en Houston, atendiendo las necesidades pastorales de los pacientes de Saint Joseph’s Hospital y sirviendo de traductora para la gente hispana en la unidad de cuidados intensivos. Perdonó a la persona que la atacó, y siguió preocupada por los niños de COAR, a quienes llevaba siempre en su corazón. “Cada vez que tenga la oportunidad en público o en privado”, dijo la Madre Stan en una entrevista, “hablo sobre estos niños con la gente y pido su ayuda y sus oraciones. Yo hubiera podido morir ese día que fui herida en El Salvador, pero Dios me mantuvo con vida. Creo que hay una razón por eso”.

Continuación del apostolado

La violencia de la cual fue víctima la Madre Stan tuvo un gran impacto en los niños de COAR, recordándoles la violencia que habían experimentado en sus propias vidas. Fueron consolados por las Hermanas Juana Margarita Flores, Vicenta Miranda, Ana María Brangan y Miriam Medrano, por el Padre Ken y demás personal de COAR. El trece de agosto se celebró el noveno aniversario de la fundación de COAR con una misa en la Capilla San José, que todavía seguía bajo construcción.

Otro acto de cruel violencia fue el asesinato de los Padres Jesuitas Amando López, Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes, Juan Ramón Moreno y Joaquín López de la Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA). Fueron asesinados por miembros de la Fuerza Armada el dieciséis de noviembre de 1989 durante una ofensiva general, junto con una empleada, Elba Ramos, y su hija Celina Ramos.

A finales de 1989 el Bachillerato Agrícola se suspendió por la falta de suficientes alumnos, la situación de guerra y otros problemas. Las aulas se convirtieron en bodegas.

Inauguración de la Capilla San José

Un gran amigo de COAR, el Padre Jaime Kenny, murió el doce de febrero de 1990 en Cleveland, Ohio. El Padre Jaime, originario de Carrigallen, Irlanda, trabajó en la Parroquia de Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Zaragoza, de 1980 a 1985. Siempre apoyó a los niños y demás refugiados que acudieron al refugio de la parroquia y que posteriormente fueron reubicados en COAR.

El diecinueve de marzo de 1990, fiesta de San José, la santa misa fue celebrada en la nueva Capilla San José por el arzobispo, Monseñor Arturo Rivera y Damas. Hubo mucha alegría, porque la Hermana Stanislaus Mackey pudo regresar a COAR y estuvo presente en la celebración. Fue su primera visita a El Salvador después del atentado contra su vida en junio de 1989. Cincuenta niños de COAR fueron a encontrarla al aeropuerto el día de su llegada. Estuvo ocho días en COAR, y después fue a Guatemala para visitar también a sus muchos amigos y amigas de ese país.

La Hermana Judy Miffleton asumió la responsabilidad de la Unidad Residencial en 1990, y la Hermana Lelia McNamara fue nombrada Directora de la Clínica Santa Teresita. La Hermana Lelia dijo: “De ninguna manera podré yo tomar el lugar de la Madre Stan en los corazones de las personas que ella ha servido. Pero voy a hacer todo lo posible para servir a la gente, con la ayuda de Dios”.

Nueva dirección

El diecisiete de enero de 1991, el Padre Ken entregó la administración y dirección de COAR a la Congregación de las Hermanas de la Caridad del Verbo Encarnado, para dedicar más tiempo a la obra de fundar el Seminario San Carlos Borromeo en Santa Tecla y seguir promoviendo las vocaciones sacerdotales para las misiones. “Hay doscientos mil misioneros católicos en el mundo”, explicó el Padre Ken, “pero sólo dos mil de ellos son de América Latina”.

Dijo la nueva Directora de COAR, la Madre Audrey, quien había regresado a El Salvador después de trabajar varios años en Guatemala, “COAR Villa Infantil sigue bajo el Arzobispado de San Salvador. Queremos dar a estos niños de la guerra la formación y educación que necesitan para ser ‘sembradores de paz’ en la sociedad salvadoreña. La filosofía del Padre Ken en cuanto al recibimiento y formación de los niños será la misma; y él siempre quedará en las mentes y los corazones de los y las que vivimos y trabajamos aquí. Nuestras oraciones lo acompañan en este nuevo esfuerzo misionero”.

Acuerdos de Paz

El dieciséis de enero de 1992 fueron firmados los Acuerdos de Paz en

México, poniendo fin a la guerra civil en El Salvador después que duró más de doce años. Monseñor Arturo Rivera y Damas pidió que todas las parroquias del país celebraran una misa a las doce del mediodía, hora en que se iban a firmar las iniciativas. Los niños de COAR y las orientadoras fueron a la iglesia parroquial de Zaragoza para celebrar con toda la gente, dando gracias a Dios por la paz. Llegaron al país los oficiales de las Naciones Unidas para supervisar el cese de fuego que empezó el primero de febrero de 1992. El quince de diciembre de 1992 se celebraron las ceremonias oficiales en El Salvador para declarar el fin de la guerra, que había dejado más de setenta mil personas muertas.

Nuevos residentes

Los primeros seis meses de 1992 fueron de mucha actividad para el personal de COAR. Se admitió a cuarenta y tres niños a la Unidad Residencial. Sólo dos de estos niños habían asistido a la escuela antes de llegar a COAR. Aún existía gran confusión entre la población sobre dónde se encontraban sus familiares. Debido al cese de fuego, muchas personas que se daban por pérdidas o muertas estaban apareciendo.

Los padres de la mayoría de los niños de COAR murieron durante la guerra, y sus madres, como refugiadas, perdieron todas sus pertenencias. Estaban trabajando y tratando de mantener a la familia. COAR aceptó a algunos de los hijos de esas madres viudas hasta que ellas pudieran mantenerlos mejor. Otros niños se encontraron viviendo en las calles. El juez de paz le pidió a COAR que aceptara a cuatro de esos niños.

Hermana Ana María Brangan, nombrada en 1991 como directora de promoción de la Misión COAR para la Paz en Cleveland, Ohio, la oficina que fue establecida en 1985 para apoyar la obra en El Salvador, explicó la importancia de las orientadoras: “El papel de las madres encargadas de las casas es esencial, porque estas personas especiales tienen contacto inmediato y directo con los niños así como la responsabilidad del cuidado de ellos. Son dedicadas a crear un ambiente hogareño y guiar a los niños. Se necesita mucha paciencia para poder entender a los niños y darles la atención y disciplina que necesitan para crecer y llegar a ser personas responsables. La Hermana Audrey se reúne con frecuencia con las orientadoras. Juntas hablan sobre temas como nutrición, cuidado, educación y salud, para mejorar los servicios de COAR”.

Expansión del Colegio

En 1994 se incrementó el número de alumnos en el Colegio. Algunos caminaban más de una hora para llegar a la escuela. Varias aulas que se estaban utilizando como bodegas fueron transformadas en espacios para dar clases a los ochocientos alumnos. También se creó una sala especial

de estudios para los niños internos de COAR, con iluminación suficiente y libros como enciclopedias, para que prepararan sus tareas en la noche.

Nuevo personal

La Hermana Marilú Yanes asumió la dirección de la Clínica en 1994, y el Profesor Luís Violantes Mata fue nombrado Director del Colegio.

El veintiséis de noviembre de 1994 murió el Arzobispo de San Salvador, Monseñor Arturo Rivera y Damas, fiel amigo de los niños de COAR.

En febrero de 1995 se inició el Bachillerato en Comercio y Administración con cincuenta y cinco estudiantes. Para tener suficiente espacio para el bachillerato, la parvularia se trasladó a otro local aparte, a la orilla de la propiedad.

La Madre Audrey escribió en su informe en 1996: “Tenemos a ciento veinte niños internos de tres a quince años de edad, y hay ochocientos cuarenta estudiantes en el Colegio. Estamos poniendo énfasis en los talleres, para que los niños aprendan un oficio para defenderse económicamente al salir de COAR. Desafortunadamente, cada día los pobres se hacen más pobres y los precios de los alimentos están subiendo. Mucha gente nos pide que aceptemos a más niños, pero tenemos que dar chance a los más necesitados. Algunos son huérfanos; otras vienen de situaciones de extrema pobreza y sus padres no pueden cuidarlos por diversas razones”.

A finales de 1996, la Hermana Rosa Ayala fue nombrada directora de COAR. El año siguiente, la Hermana Juana Elizabeth Cruz se incorporó al Colegio como consejera, ayudando a los jóvenes sobre todo en el tercer ciclo y bachillerato, porque en ese nivel se habían detectado más problemas tantos familiares como personales. El Director de la escuela, Luís Alberto Violantes, dijo en su informe: “Comenzamos nuestro año escolar con muchas esperanzas el día trece de enero de 1997. En la semana del trece al diecisiete de enero los profesores nos dedicamos a planificar el trabajo con el cual trabajaremos todo el año con los estudiantes. Luego el día veinte de enero se presentan los niños a la escuela y tienen su primer contacto con sus profesores los cuales los reciben con mucho regocijo y ansiosos de trabajar con el grupo de alumnos que se les ha asignado para el presente año. También tenemos nuestras actividades religiosas como nuestras misas. La celebración de la Semana Santa la hacemos una semana antes porque los alumnos no asisten al Colegio en Semana Santa. Los estudiantes que integran la Banda Musical ya iniciaron sus ensayos porque próximamente tendremos la celebración de nuestros XVII Juegos Intramuros de COAR”.

El área vocacional

Cada niño interno de COAR podía elegir tres talleres vocacionales, complaciéndole uno de esos tres, y todos fueron integrados en el Comité de

Ecología rotándose diariamente en el ornato de la comunidad. A principios de 1997 en carpintería se trabajó en dos turnos, mañana y tarde. Allí los niños aprendieron a conocer las herramientas y a elaborar sillas. En serigrafía los niños más grandes estaban aprendiendo el sistema de recorte, revelado de fotos y estampado. En mecánica aprendían a usar la sierra de cortar hierro y elaboraron macetas para plantas. Había también talleres de sastrería, costurería y artesanías. En panadería aprendieron a preparar masa para el pan francés, y en tortillería las niñas ayudaban a elaborar tortillas junto a su instructora.

Escasez de agua

Siempre había escasez de agua en COAR. En el invierno, se captaba el agua en barriles y tanques; en el verano los niños iban a traer agua al río. ANDA proporcionó una cantidad mínima de agua, pero la deforestación hacía que el agua se fuera escaseando cada año más. Con mucha alegría, en abril de 1997 fue descubierta una buena fuente de agua a los setenta y cinco metros de profundidad. Se construyó un tanque grande en una de las cuevas de COAR, y se instaló una bomba. Se puso cañería para llevar el agua a las casas, a la escuela, a la Clínica y a la granja.

Cierre de la granja

Debido a la falta de fondos para su continuación, se tomó la decisión a finales de 1997 de cerrar y terminar la Unidad Agrícola de COAR. La granja producía maíz, frijoles, huevos, frutas, leche y pollos para el consumo de los niños; pero no se logró obtener suficiente dinero de ingreso con las ventas del excedente con la ganancia que se deseaba para el mantenimiento de toda la Villa Infantil. Esta medida fue difícil de tomar; sin embargo, fue necesaria por razones económicas, pues COAR tenía una situación crítica en cuanto a los fondos necesarios para satisfacer sus necesidades. Los miembros de la Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero tomaron otras iniciativas para generar ingresos, concientes de la necesidad de prestar atención a la niñez huérfana desamparada y en extrema pobreza. Cada Unidad – Educativa, Administrativa, Médica, Residencial, Vocacional y Productiva – desarrolló actividades con el objetivo de lograr el autofinanciamiento de la Institución, disminuyendo al mismo tiempo el déficit del presupuesto para el año.

Bachillerato General

El Bachillerato en Comercio y Administración existía desde 1995. De acuerdo a la Reforma Educativa, en 1997 se realizó también la primera promoción de Bachilleres Generales. Con la ayuda de la Asociación de Padres de Familia, se empezó la construcción de unos kioscos con asientos

y mesas para que los jóvenes pudieran descansar y tomar sus alimentos. Se creó también una pequeña librería para beneficiar a los estudiantes, vendiéndoles útiles escolares a precios más bajos que en otras tiendas. En enero de 1998, se inició el año escolar con treinta y cinco niños en parvularia, doscientos cuarenta y ocho niños en primer ciclo (de primero a tercer grado), doscientos dieciocho niños en segundo ciclo (de cuarto a sexto grado), ciento setenta y tres jóvenes en tercer ciclo (de séptimo a noveno grado), y setenta y tres jóvenes en Bachillerato General, haciendo un total de setecientos cuarenta y siete alumnos.

Tormenta Tropical Mitch

La Misión COAR para la Paz organizó el envío de equipos médicos y otros materiales desde los Estados Unidos a COAR Villa Infantil, para distribuirlos a las víctimas de la Tormenta Tropical Mitch que azotó El Salvador y los países vecinos a finales de octubre de 1998.

En enero de 1999, se finalizó el mejoramiento del sistema eléctrico para la Unidad Educativa, la Clínica y la Unidad Residencial para poder tener un servicio más confiable de electricidad, en vez de las fallas esporádicas que a menudo interrumpían el servicio.

Nuevo edificio para el kinder

También en 1999 se realizó el proyecto para la construcción de dos aulas en la sección de kinder, incluyendo servicios sanitarios, mobiliario y juegos infantiles. De esta manera, los estudiantes de parvularia pudieron estar en la misma área educativa que los demás alumnos, después de estar colocados en otra área aparte por varios años debido a la falta de espacio desde que se empezó el bachillerato en 1995.

El Padre Adonay Chicas, párroco de Zaragoza y guía espiritual de los niños de COAR, hizo la bendición del nuevo edificio. El Colegio COAR en el principio fue escuela parroquial adjunto a la iglesia Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza. Actualmente el Colegio tiene por nombre Centro Escolar Católico Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

Con la ayuda de la Congregación de los Marianistas, también se estableció un Centro de Cómputo en el Colegio.

La Hermana Ermitania Hernández fue nombrada Directora de COAR el primero de julio de 1999, quedando en ese puesto hasta el año 2000. Ella opinó: “Lo que COAR puede dar es una formación integral a niños y niñas con problemas de hogares desintegrados, y también puede llevar una educación a los padres de familia para que acepten su responsabilidad para el cuidado de sus hijos e hijas, recibiendo nuevamente en la familia al ser posible”.

Nuevo laboratorio clínico

La Hermana Emirian Alicia García llegó a COAR en 1998, siendo Directora de la Clínica Santa Teresita hasta el año 2001. Un promedio de setenta pacientes acudían a la Clínica diariamente en el año 2000. Para servirles mejor y para cumplir con los nuevos reglamentos del gobierno para legalizar el laboratorio, se logró ampliar el espacio, así creando dos cuartos especiales para el laboratorio, cubículos para exámenes físicos, nuevos baños, y bodega para medicinas. Se hizo un programa computarizado con red para facilitar el funcionamiento de la Clínica. “COAR ha podido evitar los retrasos mentales causados por la desnutrición en los niños”, dijo la Hermana Emirian. “Se les ha ayudado psicológicamente también. Ellos sufrieron a causa de la guerra y la desintegración familiar. De hecho, se les ha rescatado de la calle. Si no fuera por COAR, algunos habrían terminado igual: en la calle. Me gustó mucho el trabajo en la Clínica, estar con la gente, visitar a las personas en sus casas, viendo si necesitaban ayuda médica. Este trabajo es parte de nuestro carisma como Congregación: estamos para ayudar a los y las que sufren”.

La Unidad Médica continuó con su programa para promotores de salud. Cada mes los promotores recibían capacitación por los médicos, medicinas, vitaminas e indicaciones sobre el uso de los medicamentos, para poder ayudar a la gente necesitada. En el año 2001, la Hermana María Méndez llegó a COAR para tomar la dirección de la Unidad Médica.

Transición

En el año 2000, diez señoritas terminaron su tiempo en COAR y fueron al Hogar de la Divina Providencia en Santa Tecla dirigido por las Carmelitas Misioneras de Santa Teresa. Veintinueve jóvenes varones fueron al Hogar Juvenil Divino Salvador (DISAL) en Sonzacate. Estos programas de transición les permitieron tener alojamiento y cuidado mientras buscaban empleo o seguían con sus estudios.

Primer niño de COAR condecorado

José Isidro Rodríguez, el primer niño a ser aceptado en COAR por el Padre Ken en 1980, fue condecorado en la sede de las Naciones Unidas en Nueva York por la Fundación Camino a la Paz en el año 2000. Fue nombrado “Servitor Pacis” (Servidor de la Paz) por el Arzobispo Renato Martino por sus esfuerzos para construir una comunidad de justicia y paz en El Salvador. José Isidro vivió en COAR de la edad de once años hasta los dieciocho años. Trabajó en el área social de COAR en 1995. Fue alcalde de Zaragoza de 1997 a 2003. Hablando de COAR, él dijo: “COAR ha sido una experiencia importante en mi vida. Fue el espacio en que pude rehacer mi vida, buscar

otros horizontes, y encontrar un camino por donde seguir. Nos enseñó a cómo enfrentar la vida a partir de nuestra experiencia y la de nuestros padres. COAR vino a reafirmar mi fe y mis valores, en ver que había muchas personas que se preocuparon por nosotros. Aprendimos a tener un espíritu de servicio”.

Bachillerato Técnico

En el año 2000 se vio la necesidad de extender el curso de Bachillerato General para incluir el Bachillerato Técnico en Contaduría y el Bachillerato Técnico en Secretariado, con la meta de preparar a los jóvenes a conseguir empleo al terminar sus estudios, así dándoles más oportunidades en la vida. Fue necesario construir dos aulas nuevas y un laboratorio. Los familiares de los estudiantes colaboraron con el proyecto, contribuyendo con materiales y mano de obra.

Con el afán de prevenir los derrumbes causados por la creciente deforestación, los niños sembraron árboles y recibieron capacitación sobre la conservación de suelos.

Aunque se había cerrado la Unidad Agrícola en 1997, durante el año 2000 todavía quedaron algunos programas agrícolas como por ejemplo la granja, en que dos mil novecientas veinte gallinas producían dos mil cuatrocientos quince huevos cada día. Había una vaca y tres chivos. Se cosecharon frijol, maíz, pepino y sandía. Los árboles frutales produjeron naranjas, limones y otros cítricos. A finales del año siguiente, se decidió quitar las gallinas y otros animales por el alto gasto de su mantenimiento, la dificultad en vender los huevos, la falta de espacio y por razones higiénicas.

Los terremotos de 2001

A finales del año 2000 la Hermana Mary Patricia Driscoll regresó a COAR como Directora. El trece de enero de 2001 ocurrió el primer sismo (grado 7.6) de una larga serie de terremotos y réplicas en El Salvador. Cuatro aulas y cinco casas de COAR sufrieron daños estructurales. Los niños todavía estaban con sus familiares porque el año escolar no había comenzado. Las Hermanas Patricia y Emirian fueron a visitar a la gente de Zaragoza en sus casas. Hubo muchos damnificados por el tipo de construcción de las casas en que vivían siendo éstas de adobe, razón por la que no resistieron al movimiento terráqueo. No había agua. Mucha gente dormía en la calle por miedo a los temblores. Hubo un clima de desesperación.

Las hermanas y personal de COAR prepararon comida y fueron a dejarla a la gente afectada en las comunidades. Solicitaron medicamentos y los distribuyeron. El Padre Adonay Chicas y las hermanas se incorporaron al plan de emergencia de la Arquidiócesis, preparando paquetes con frijoles, arroz, azúcar, sal, aceite, harina para tortillas, cobijas y jabón. Llevaron los

paquetes a los centros que se habían organizado para la gente desplazada. Las hermanas fueron también con el Padre Adonay a Cojutepeque, y el Doctor Montalvo llevó enseres a Jayaque y Comasagua para ayudar a la gente. La Misión COAR para la Paz de Cleveland, Ohio, organizó la recaudación de fondos que las hermanas utilizaron para varias formas de ayuda a las víctimas.

El segundo terremoto fuerte ocurrió el trece de febrero. Fue más difícil en COAR esa vez, porque los niños habían regresado de sus vacaciones. Lloraban desconsolados; las hermanas y orientadoras tuvieron que calmar sus temores. Los niños recibieron ayuda psicológica para sus traumas. Mucha gente enferma llegó a la Clínica, la mayoría con problemas respiratorios y diarrea.

La llegada de varias hermanas de la Congregación del Verbo Encarnado en enero del 2001 fue sumamente grata y oportuna. Las hermanas Otilia Guerra, Marta Irene Agüero, Ana Julia Granados y Benigna Mejía empezaron a colaborar en el Colegio y la Unidad Residencial. Posteriormente, las Hermanas Elfa Esperanza López, Silvia Morán, Ruth Noemí Tigüila y Magdalena Rodríguez se incorporaron a la obra. Tres de ellas colaboraron en el Colegio, dos como maestras y la Hermana Magdalena como coordinadora de la pastoral. La Hermana Ruth inició su servicio como coordinadora del programa de niños y jóvenes becados del C.F.C.A. (Fondo Cristiano para Niños y Ancianos).

Fallecimiento del Padre Kenneth Myers

El fundador de COAR, Padre Kenneth Myers, murió a la edad de sesenta años de un infarto el dos de marzo de 2002 mientras dormía en su cuarto en el Seminario San Carlos Borromeo en la ciudad de Santa Tecla. Originario de Norwalk, Ohio, el Padre Ken empezó sus labores misioneras en El Salvador en el año 1974. Fundó COAR en 1980 para responder a las necesidades de niños refugiados de la guerra que habían perdido a sus padres por la violencia que reinaba en el país. También fue fundador de los Misioneros de la Caridad Pastoral, una sociedad de sacerdotes salvadoreños misioneros con sede en el Seminario San Carlos Borromeo.

El Padre Ken fue un hombre de pocas palabras, pero tuvo la valentía de responder a la violencia con compasión y medidas prácticas. Hace mucha falta su presencia entre la gente, especialmente los niños, de su querido El Salvador.

Niños con salud precaria

A principios del año 2002, se decidió aceptar a niños pequeños menores de seis años, desnutridos y delicados de salud. Cuarenta niños pequeños ingresaron a COAR, siendo cuidados en las casas por las orientadoras y el

personal de la Clínica.

La Hermana María Méndez, Directora de la Clínica, dijo: “Es importante reconocer la dignidad de la persona. Cada persona tiene derecho a salud, vestuario, y educación. COAR proporciona esto a los niños, para que la persona crezca en una sociedad más humana. En la Clínica, enseñamos a la gente cómo preparar comida más nutritiva, y promovemos la soya. Me gusta ayudar a los enfermos y servirles”.

Cafetería

El quince de abril del año 2004 se abrió la cafetería para que los alumnos y empleados de COAR pudieran obtener comida nutritiva a un precio cómodo, así abriendo una nueva fuente de trabajo en Zaragoza.

Madre Stan

La gran amiga de los niños de COAR, Madre Stanislaus Mackey, falleció en Houston el diecisiete de marzo de 2004, fiesta de San Patricio, a la edad de ochenta y ocho años. Ella fundó la Clínica Santa Teresita, trabajando en COAR desde el tres de enero de 1983 hasta el veintiuno de junio de 1989, día en que fue herida por arma de fuego en Zaragoza. Poco después de llegar a El Salvador, ella dijo en una entrevista: “Lo que más me conmueve es la sed de amor de los niños. Les hacen falta sus padres. No podemos sustituir a sus padres, pero podemos ayudarlos a aguantar su pérdida. Yo siento que Dios está siempre conmigo. Creo que debo arriesgar la vida por algo tan importante como son las vidas de estos niños. Yo los quiero mucho. Sembramos nuestro destino aquí. No vamos a pasar otra vez por este camino. Estoy segura de que todas las hermanas nos sentimos privilegiadas porque el Señor nos ha llamado aquí”.

Juegos Internacionales Infantiles

Un equipo de veinticuatro atletas, todos estudiantes en el Colegio COAR, representaron a El Salvador en los Juegos Internacionales Infantiles que se llevaron a cabo en Cleveland, Ohio, del veintiocho de julio al dos de agosto de 2004. Más de dos mil quinientos atletas de cincuenta y seis países participaron en los juegos. Los niños de COAR fueron recibidos calurosamente en Cleveland. Se comportaron muy bien en las competencias y crearon nuevas amistades con los niños de otros países.

Recuerdos de un niño de COAR

Francisco Heriberto Chicas vivió en COAR desde 1985 hasta 1993. Perdió a su madre, a su hermana menor y a su hermano mayor en la guerra. “Mi experiencia en COAR fue muy bonita con mis compañeros, las hermanas,

las orientadoras y encargados de los talleres”, dijo. “Fue un ambiente acogedor. Me dieron terapia psicológica para enfrentar mis traumas. Al principio costó acostumbrarme, pero Dios me dio la luz para aceptar lo que me enseñaron. Para tener éxito en la vida, uno tiene que dejarse guiar. Ahora COAR es como un oasis en la sociedad salvadoreña tan golpeada y sufrida. Aquí uno puede sentirse tranquilo, encontrar agua que es la palabra de Dios, y respirar libremente. COAR da herramientas a los niños y jóvenes para enfrentar la vida y saber subsistir cuando ya no estarán aquí”.

Francisco regresó a COAR en el año 2002. Como empleado ha trabajado con el coro, en el centro escolar impartiendo la asignatura de inglés, y en la administración como chofer. El veintiséis de diciembre del año 2004, Francisco y su esposa Maribel celebraron su matrimonio en la iglesia de Nuestra Señor del Pilar, Zaragoza, presidido por el Padre Adonay Chicas. Toda la comunidad de COAR participó en la celebración.

Celebraciones para el XXV Aniversario de COAR

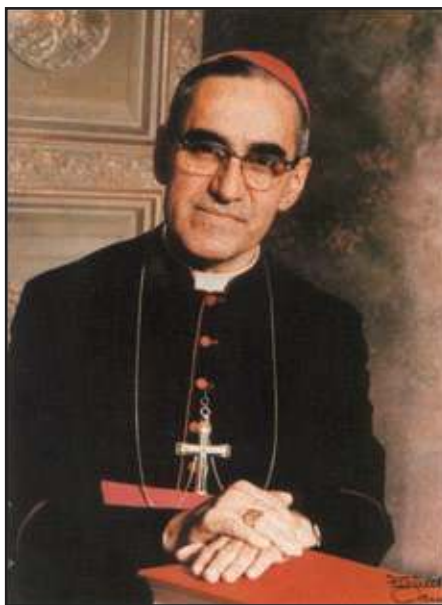
Se inauguraron el año escolar, los veinticinco años de COAR, y el nombramiento de la calle a COAR el día veintiuno de enero de 2005. La calle fue nombrada “Calle Padre Kenneth Carl Myers Brown” en honor al Padre Ken, que fundó COAR en la Parroquia de Zaragoza en 1980.

El 17 de marzo del año 2005, fiesta de San Patricio y primer aniversario del fallecimiento de la Madre Stan, se inauguraron las calles internas de COAR, las cuales fueron nombradas “Calle Madre Stan” y “Calle Madre Audrey” respectivamente, en honor a la entrega y el servicio incondicional de estas hermanas a los niños y niñas de COAR.

La Lic. María Ana Portillo de Rugamas, Directora actual del Colegio COAR, dijo en esta ocasión: “Admiro la visión con que crearon esta obra en tiempos difíciles. COAR contribuye mucho a la sociedad salvadoreña, educando a ochocientos niños al año y así beneficiando los hogares; y formando los ciudadanos del futuro, obreros dignos y honrados y mujeres con calidad de decisión en la sociedad. Nuestro reto es seguir conservando esta herencia”.

*"I must be ready to give my life for God,
no matter what kind of death awaits me.
Unknown circumstances will be faced
with the grace of God.
He was present to the martyrs,
and if it should be necessary I will feel Him very close to me
as I render Him my last breath.
But more valuable than the moment of dying
is giving Him my whole life
and living for Him."*

-- Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, retreat notes, February 25, 1980



Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero
1917 - 1980

"Mi disposición debe ser dar mi vida por Dios, cualquiera sea el fin de mi vida. Las circunstancias desconocidas se vivirán con la gracia de Dios. Él asistió a los mártires y si es necesario lo sentiré muy cerca al entregarle mi último suspiro. Pero más valioso que el momento de morir es entregarle toda la vida y vivir para Él".

-- Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, cuaderno de ejercicio espirituales,
25 de febrero de 1980

Book Publishing Team / *Consejo Editorial*



Author/Translator – Thérèse Osborne, a lay missionary in El Salvador for many years, has been a close friend of COAR since its founding in 1980. At the request of the Board of Trustees of COAR Peace Mission, Thérèse researched and wrote this history in both Spanish and English as a labor of love. The Spanish version was first published in 2005 in El Salvador on the occasion of COAR's 25th anniversary. The present edition includes the story of COAR retold in English, as well as the original story told in Spanish.

Autora/Traductora – *Thérèse Osborne, misionera laica, es amiga de COAR desde hace muchos años. Ella escribió esta historia primero en español (publicada en El Salvador el 15 de agosto de 2005, día del XXV aniversario de COAR) y después en inglés, como un trabajo de amor.*

Project Leadership – Father Robert Sanson (Padre Roberto) is Pastor of St. Joseph



Church in Strongsville, Ohio. He serves on the Board of Trustees of COAR Peace Mission, and was a schoolmate and close friend of Father Ken Myers who founded COAR. He is shown here at the home of Archbishop Oscar Romero at the Divina Providencia Hospital in San Salvador.

Liderazgo del proyecto – *Padre Roberto Sanson es párroco de la Parroquia Saint Joseph, Strongsville, Ohio. Él es tesorero del Consejo directivo de COAR Peace Mission (Misión COAR para la Paz), y fue compañero y buen amigo del Padre*

Ken Myers, el fundador de COAR. Aquí se ve frente a la habitación de Monseñor Romero en las instalaciones del Hospital de la Divina Providencia, San Salvador.



Editorial Assistant – Tonya Barba (third from left) from Strongsville, Ohio, is a high school Spanish teacher who has served and stayed at COAR to teach English to the students during her summer holidays.

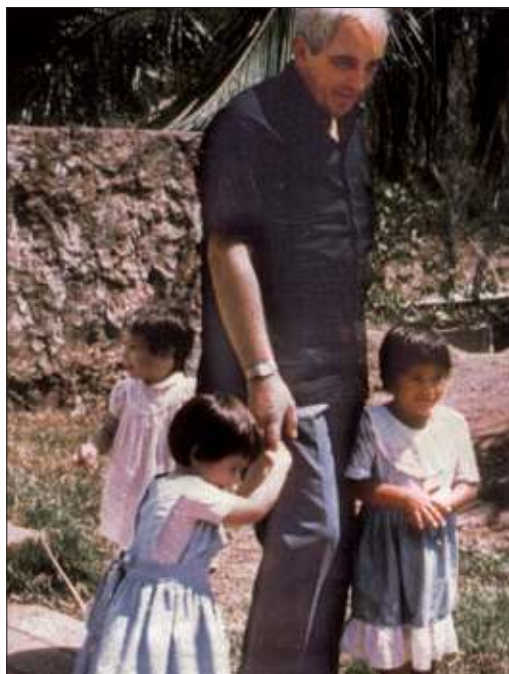
Redacción - *Tonya Barba (centro) de Strongsville, Ohio, es profesora de español de bachillerato. Ella se ha quedado en COAR durante sus vacaciones para enseñar inglés a los*

alumnos y alumnas.



Layout/Printing Production – Norbert Hobrath from Strongsville, Ohio, went to El Salvador in 2008 on a mission trip with his 17-year-old son Noah from Walsh Jesuit High School in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, to help out at COAR. It was an experience that changed their lives.

Diseño/Impresión – *Norbert Hobrath de Strongsville, Ohio, hizo un viaje misionero a El Salvador en 2008 con Noah, su hijo de 17 años de edad, alumno del colegio Walsh Jesuit High School. Fue una experiencia que les cambió la vida.*



Father Ken Myers, founder of COAR, with some of the children
Padre Ken Myers, fundador de COAR, con niñas

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COAR Children's Village

Zaragoza
Departamento de La Libertad
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All proceeds from the sale of this book go to support COAR.
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