

A Tale of Two Sisters

Third in a series

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They could not be more different than night and day.

Sugar and salt.

Hot and cold.

Sister Mary is quiet, soft-spoken, ever smiling. She still wears the habit of the Daughters of Charity religious order.

Sister Carol is blunt, direct, no nonsense. She has “modernized.” She no longer wears a traditional nun’s habit, but modest clothes that blend in with Bolivian society. She carries a cell phone, but only turns it on between 12 noon and 2 p.m. because she doesn’t want to be overly bothered by it.

Both nuns work with street children in Cochabamba. Both work closely with the 19-year dental mission headed by Chippewa Falls dentist and Rotarian, Dr. David Crane.

Sister Mary recently found herself as head of the Amanecer Foundation after the death of its founder, Sister Stephanie Murray, in February. Sister Mary came to Bolivia 41 years ago as a registered nurse, and has never left. She’s worked in the mountains near La Paz, and in the low lands near Santa Cruz. She’s been in Cochabamba -- the valley area -- for 16 years.

It was heartbreaking, said Sister Mary, seeing children in jails, or picked up on the streets when their families threw them out of their home. The late Sister Stephanie founded Amanecer in 1981, and many soon joined her effort to bring Christ’s message of love to the poorest and least fortunate of this thriving city.

Since that time, Amanecer has grown, said Sister Mary. Just ask Dr. Crane.

“He’s seen the growth here,” Sister Mary said. “We’re here for the children and people that no one wants. We try to live this. We have to remember that God loves them, and we have to, too. And we’ll let you help us do what we do.”

While Sister Mary oversees the entire operation with quiet confidence that she is doing the Lord’s work, Sister Carol focuses her efforts on the tough streets of Cochabamba. She ventures out several nights each week -- handing out food and milk -- to lure children off the mean streets and into the security of one of the 12 Amanecer facilities.

“We serve a lot of kids who no one else will take,” Sister Carol says matter of factly.

The problem starts at home, where the average family has six children. Because Bolivia is a “macho” society, said Sister Carol, men father children, but do not universally support them, “so women must.” Doing whatever work they can find, mothers and children try to scratch out a living. At times, however, families find it difficult to keep their heads above water.

About 70 percent of the population of Cochabamba is very, very poor, with an average household income of around \$50 per month. When money is tight, and families can’t afford to feed the mouths, they often turn children out of the home to fend for themselves.

“They don’t abandon their children because they don’t like them,” said Sister Carol. “They’re desperate.”

Some youngsters come to Amanecer because of a drinking problem in their home, she said. Drinking is a serious problem in 60 percent of the population of Cochabamba, says Sister Carol. The love of chi cha, a homemade beer, is well ingrained in the populace, leading to physical -- and sometimes sexual -- abuse of children, she said.

Yes, mothers occasionally still leave babies in someone’s doorway, said Sister Carol. But today, only 30 percent of the children with Amanecer are orphans. Most know their families, and live in hopes of being reunited with them later.

“They’re all abandoned,” said Sister Carol. “They’re not all orphans. They all receive a lot of love from the (Amanecer) staff. The staff provides them with a sense of family so the kids understand how a family can be.”

Amanecer’s goal is simple: provide food and a safe environment; a basic education so the children can read and write; and finally, for the older children, teach them a vocational skill so they can support themselves when they leave. The skill might be baking, carpentry, metal work or even being a dental assistant.

And then work on the family relationship, so that one day, they might be able to return home and rebuild a broken relationship.

“We try to make sure the kids have good contact with their family. They need to know where they came from. They deserve it. But when (families abandon a child), it takes time to heal.”