

## Nonprofit organization celebrates its Miracles in Action

By ELIZABETH KELLAR

Thursday, March 12, 2009

If you could leave a legacy, what would it be?

Supporters of the Naples-based Miracles in Action know their legacy is often a school — since 2005, the group has built 22 in Guatemala — or a water project, a gift of immeasurable worth in a country where less than half the population has access to potable water.

On Thursday afternoon, Penny Rambacher, who founded the 4-year-old Guatemalan humanitarian organization in memory of her mother, Noreen, shared some of the nonprofit's other legacies.

Rambacher was joined at the Norris Community Center in downtown Naples by Sue Patterson, founder and director of WINGS, a nonprofit organization that works in Guatemala and focuses on family planning and reproductive health. In 2003, Patterson's efforts were recognized with the Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service, which is given by the National Peace Corps Association.

Patterson spoke about Guatemala's alarming poverty. It's a country where an estimated 74 percent of people survive on less than two dollars a day, she said, and an additional 16 to 21 percent exist on less than one dollar a day.

Unfortunately, this poverty strikes women and children harder than men, Patterson explained: 50 percent of the country's women have a child by age 19, and 20 percent of women have two or more by age 18. Chronic malnutrition occurs in 50 percent of children under 5 years old.

"The women, especially the indigenous women, are really the ones who suffer the most," Patterson said.

The numbers take more than a human toll, she explained; in the United States, it's also economic, as Guatemalans legally and illegally head north seeking a better situation. Approximately 1.5 million Guatemalans are living in the United States, Patterson said, and they send about \$10 million daily home to Guatemala.

For anyone asking, "What can be done," Rambacher is waiting with an answer.

The organization offers a hand up, not a hand out, she said, such as by offering vocational workshops and assisting women to acquire used sewing machines at a low cost, machines they can then use to create handicrafts for sale in the United States. The organization also sponsors water systems and builds schools in Guatemala — “sustainable projects,” she said. Girls are asked to make a promise to stay in school until the sixth grade, Rambacher said.

“My mom always said the most important thing was not to ignore the girls,” Rambacher said. “She always said, if you teach a girl, you teach a family.”

The water projects not only save but change lives, Rambacher explained. Often, women must walk several hours every day to fetch water for their families. There’s no guarantee it’s safe or clean, either.

Rambacher brought two of the plastic pitchers used by Guatemalan women to the event and gave audience members a chance to put them on their heads, Guatemalan-style. To make it authentic, she added four gallons of water — 34 pounds — and offered attendees a chance to carry a 20-pound bookbag to simulate a baby, as the women must.

“I’ve always wondered how they do this,” said Ann Pappenheimer, a Naples resident, as she placed the jug on her head. “I still wonder how they did this.”

Add another, different liquid, though, and attendee Tony Ferrari was ready to go.

“Fill it with wine and I’ll take it home,” said the Naples resident as he gingerly balanced the pitcher on his crown.

For more information, visit the organization’s Web site at [www.miraclesinaction.org](http://www.miraclesinaction.org)

- - -

E-mail Elizabeth Kellar at [ewendt@comcast.net](mailto:ewendt@comcast.net)



© 2009 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online