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## PRESS RELEASE

### **First Five Families Graduate from Project Chacocente**

*After five years of effort, they receive house, farmland and new life.*

Masaya, Nicaragua – Five years ago, Juan Carlos and Karen lived with their three daughters in the immense garbage dump of Managua, scavenging for food alongside vultures, stray dogs and thousands of other people. On July 26, 2008, their family was one of five to graduate from Project Chacocente, a non-profit organization creating a new model for transforming the lives of the poorest of the poor.

Project Chacocente rescues families from the city dump and works with them for five years to totally transform their lives. They learn how to read and write, to solve problems, to be better parents, to resolve conflict (without a machete!) and to earn a living. Along the way, they look at their own spirituality and the principles they'd like to live by.

At the end of the five years, the families receive ownership of the house that they build and about two acres of land.

“Chacocente was created to do more than just feed people and leave them in the same hellhole that poisons and slowly kills them every day,” says Cheryl Avery, executive director and founder. “For four of the five years, we feed, clothe, educate and maintain the health of every member of the families while they learn new skills for living independently.”

“Nicaragua is the second poorest country in Latin America,” says Avery. “Eighty percent of the people live in poverty (making less than \$2 per day), and a full 50% of the population lives in extreme poverty, meaning they don't know if they'll eat today.”

Given such challenges, the graduation was a joyous event celebrated within a culto (worship service) which was attended by the families, Chacocente Board members, a delegation from The Bridge Christian Church (MO) and other invited guests. Don Walker (treasurer) and Leanne Roncolato of the Board flew in for the event. Pastor Steve Earnshaw (First UMC of Fountain, CO), who brought the first delegation to Chacocente in July 2003 to work on the first house was also present.

“When the first 10 families came to us from the dump, most were illiterate and tended to use violence to parent and to resolve conflict,” she says. “They suffered from a host of illnesses stemming from malnutrition, lead in their blood and respiratory disease. It seems that all they did was gossip, and we spent much of the first year just teaching people how to get along.”

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The families sign a contract that clearly spells out what they must do to earn the house and land. Becoming literate is mandatory, as is learning to farm and to build with cinder blocks. They also have to attend weekly classes in psychology, principles and business. In exchange, we provide their food, health needs and legal assistance.

“One of the hardest things to teach the adults is how to earn a living,” Avery says. “Nicaragua has a 70% unemployment rate, and seems to be pummeled by a hurricane or earthquake every other year or so. So we began by teaching the people to farm and to work in construction, one of the few markets still open in Nicaragua. But since a draught can wipe out a farmer’s crops before the draught even makes the news, we also taught the women how to make crafts (like hammocks, bags and jewelry) for the tourist market.

“The government is working hard to develop the tourist industry,” says Avery, “so it seems like a safe place for us to put our efforts.

“Finally, we are helping each family to open a small business before they go out on their own. Among the first five families to graduate, one couple will run their own *pulperia* (a small store), another will sell chicken and beef, and a third will open a beauty salon.”

Key to making this life transformation is education, both traditional and vocational. “All of the adults attempt to graduate from sixth grade, and many go on to high school. Within the eight families currently living at Chacocente, six adults and older teens are attending college and two are studying a vocation (electrician and cosmetology).”

The project originally relied on the Nicaraguan public schools to educate the children, but it soon became clear that the project couldn’t be successful unless it opened its own school. “There are hundreds of thousands of children not in school in Nicaragua, and those who go attend classes for about 3 hours per day,” explains Avery. “Our kids attend classes 6 hours a day, and take eight classes not taught in the public schools.” Those classes are English, Computer Skills, Christian Ed, Reading, Music, Art, Drama and Dance.

“The kids are amazing!” says Avery. “It took us more than a year to teach the children how to sit still long enough for a story, let alone an entire class. But now 99% of the kids *love* school. We keep our class size small [the minimum student-teacher ratio in the public schools is 40:1], and we use interactive teaching methods. The teachers’ primary goal is to instill in their students a love of learning.”

Of the original 10 families, five graduated in July. “I would have liked a greater success rate,” says Avery, “but when you consider that those five families have a total of 25 children and teens, you realize that our influence will be more visible in the second generation.

“Really, no one in Latin America is doing what Chacocente does,” adds Avery. “We’re not just feeding people or offering clinics; we are transforming the lives of these families so that they begin to participate in society and become part of the solution to poverty.”

If you would like to learn more about Project Chacocente, you can read their website, located at [www.OutoftheDump.org](http://www.OutoftheDump.org) or contact Avery at [chacocente@yahoo.com](mailto:chacocente@yahoo.com).