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Jacarandá Community Development Center

The Jacarandá Center, which includes a school and four other social programs, is a project in Guayaquil, the main port of Ecuador. This social initiative was inspired by the life and teachings of St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei.

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The sun is just beginning to rise. The air is cool and Jacinta still has to walk another 45 minutes before reaching the bus stop where she will catch the bus that takes her to school. She has been following this route for almost three years. At the beginning, she did not really feel like going, but now that she is in her third year of secondary school, she is happy to go.

Jacinta is one of 189 students at Jacarandá, a school offering young women a diploma in Business & Accounting, with a special emphasis on the establishment of small businesses. These students come from areas adjacent to Guayaquil - La Aurora, La Sequilla, Palo de Iguana, Tarifa, Samborondón, and Bastión Popular.

Jacarandá School, named after a colorful tropical tree, is one of five projects sponsored by the Jacarandá Community Development Center.

The Beginnings

In the early 1990's, some married couples who had been involved in organizing educational centers for their children conceived the idea of a social-educational project to benefit those most in need. When the Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarría, visited Guayaquil in 1996, they told him of their preliminary plans. He encouraged them to carry out the project, just as St. Josemaría had encouraged thousands of men and women around the world to direct their work to the service of others. “Because you are a Christian you cannot turn your back on any concern or any need of your fellow men,” wrote St. Josemaría (Forge, 453).

The result was Pro-Family, a private foundation established to support projects in developing areas, with the

aim of promoting a culture founded on a Christian outlook on life.

“Bishop Echevarría’s calling and encouragement strengthened our project,” recalls Delia Gómez de Marcos, director of the Jacarandá Community Development Center and a member of the foundation. “A year later, we began a training course for women and girls, which then led to the establishment of the Jacarandá School in January 2000.”

A School and a Health Center

In the first three years at the Jacarandá School, students take courses which provide them with manual training in cosmetic arts and in the design and manufacture of clothing and handicrafts. A second program of the same length focuses on the administrative aspects of a small business. At the end of these two programs, the students receive a technical diploma.

The Jacarandá School's tuition fees are nominal, so most of the operating costs are supplied by donations from individuals. And, thanks to the financing of private businesses, the school now has its own premises, which were opened in 2001.

Additionally, the government provides lunch for the students, which allows them to stay for a tutoring program and English classes in the afternoons.

A Family Health Center has also been set up on the school premises in order to provide for the basic health needs of area families of limited means. The Health Center currently offers treatment in pediatrics, odontology, cardiology, ophthalmology and gynecology, and houses an analysis laboratory and a pharmacy. Plans are underway to provide traumatology and dermatology services in the near

future. Around 600 patients come to the Health Center each month.

A Women's Occupational Center

The third branch of the Community Development Center is the Jacarandá Women's Occupational Center. This Center offers training programs in first aid, cake decorating, embroidery and the design and manufacture of clothing and handicrafts. The Occupational Center also offers additional courses apart from the specialized programs. These include classes on embroidery, balloon design and the crocheting of bags.

The training courses are offered from May to December, and the subjects are taught in monthly sections. Students pay a small tuition fee, and the remainder of the budget of the Occupational Center comes from private donations. Around 100 women from the surrounding areas

have attended at least one of these courses so far.

In addition to acquiring skills, the women receive personal and Christian formation which seeks to help them live with dignity and see the Christian value of their daily occupations. “Professional work,” said St. Josemaría, “is a witness to the worth of the human creature. It provides a chance to develop one's own personality; it creates a bond of union with others; it constitutes a fund of resources; it is a way of helping in the improvement of the society we live in, and of promoting the progress of the whole human race. ... For a Christian, these grand views become even deeper and wider. For work, which Christ took up as something both redeemed and redeeming, becomes a means, a way of holiness, a specific task which sanctifies and can be sanctified” (Forge, 702).

The Daycare Center

The Daycare Center is the fourth social project of the Jacarandá Community Development Center. Fifty children of the area currently attend the center. The staff consists of a general coordinator, four teachers, and six volunteers.

The educational program offered by the Daycare Center includes psycho-pedagogical assistance and it follows a philosophy of early-childhood stimulation. There are also activities organized for the mothers, including classes on the family and on hygiene and health.

Like the other Jacarandá projects, the Daycare Center charges only small fees and relies on private assistance for the remainder of its costs.

The Clothing Factory

A fifth project, the Jacarandá Clothing Factory, was launched in order to attain the goal of truly converting the students into co-managers of their projects.

Equipment and machinery were acquired for the factory with the assistance of the government of Japan.

The women who participate in the courses offered by the Occupational Center and the students of the school also benefit from the use of these machines. They have made school and work uniforms in the factory and they offer all types of uniforms to the general public at market prices.

Some graduates also work in the factory and try in this way to generate resources with which to finance the operation of other projects. This program has been functioning since February of 2001.

In the future, Jacarandá aims to develop projects related to housing and basic housing services.

In all its projects, Jacarandá is inspired by the teachings and the example of St. Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei, who continually preached the importance of living a fully Christian life and the consequent need to have serious concern for society. For this reason, Jacarandá seeks to give integral education to all of the people who participate in its activities, so that – in the words of St. Josemaría – it “gives a complete education - which includes Christian ideals - at the same time respecting personal freedom and earnestly furthering social justice” (Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer, 81). For this reason Jacarandá also offers catechesis, classes about the faith and its implications for daily life, and activities to prepare people for the

reception of the sacraments. These activities seek to enkindle the light of Christian life in the families who live around Guayaquil.

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