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Flowers for Madrid

"La Veguilla" is an extensive greenhouse in Madrid that employs 150 people, most of whom are mentally handicapped. Many consider this nursery one of the best in Spain.

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Each year "Fleuroselect," International Organization for the Ornamental Plants Industry, awards its gold medals to the varieties of flowers considered most original for their color or some other botanical

trait. The most recent ceremony took place in Madrid, hosted by José Alberto Torres. For a quarter of a century now he has overseen the La Vegailla special employment center.

Addressing people coming from all over the world, José Alberto explained the work carried out by the 150 employees, most of whom are mentally handicapped. The flower nursery he runs is considered the best in Madrid and one of the best in Spain. "Tomorrow," he says, "you can visit the premises at La Vegailla and those at Aranjuez. And as happens with most people, you might be tempted to attribute any problems you see to the mentally deficient people who work there. That would be a mistake. If you notice any deficiencies, it's because their supervisors haven't managed to teach these handicapped people as well as they should have. Or," he adds jokingly, "because they didn't

realize they should cover up the problems before you arrived!" His audience greets his words with warm applause.

Five million flowers a year

Like any other business, La Veguilla has its problems from time to time. But what draws visitors' attention is the orderly and extensive greenhouse that produces over five million flower plants each year, and that since 2005 has extended its activities to another large site in Aranjuez, also in Madrid, which employs another 150 people.

While showing the visitors long lines of black plastic containers with petunias, geraniums, begonias, azaleas, daisies, and another thirty or so varieties in various stages of development, José Alberto gives some instructions to the employees he comes across, asks them about a personal problem they are dealing

with or simply makes a joking remark. And he pauses, with a healthy pride, to point out in the greenhouse laboratory the experimental plants they are using to research brighter colors, blue and white fringes, and bigger petals. "It's not really that difficult," he says. "Humidity, heat, an added hormone, and in two weeks these will be ready."

Demanding Work

José Alberto deliberately avoids using euphemisms such as "occupational therapy," and at times disagrees with the excessive government welfare payments these handicapped people receive. Although tranquilizing people's "social conscience," in the end this welfare often only serves to marginalize the handicapped from the rest of society, trying to ensure that they don't cause any problems.

"Their occupation in some cases is reduced to just that: a therapy, a simple instrument to alleviate the burden of an illness. Here they work with all the consequences work brings with it: schedules, fatigue and a fully-earned wage."

The result is pride in their work and satisfied faces when they see trucks coming on a daily basis to take away the results of their labor. "If not for us," one of the employees told José Alberto, "Madrid wouldn't have any gardens."

The real "fertilizer" in these nurseries is the sanctifying value of all this noble human work and its great dignity, something José Alberto learned in Opus Dei. "I set myself the goal that these people, whom God also calls to holiness, would discover in their tasks a way to find God and to serve other people."

Before his arrival, La Veguilla already existed as a school for the mentally handicapped, but it lacked a clear sense of direction. After working for the ministry of education and in a private high school, José Alberto says, "I decided to put all my efforts into this project."

At first came some failed attempts to produce furniture and ceramics. He also had to overcome some misunderstandings on the part of parents and employees. One person even told him: "You're trying to get people to work who don't have to bother about working!" With his practical and down-to-earth character, José Alberto likes to say: "here we don't want charity but quality."

Normality with all the employees

A sense of meaning in life is given to people who because of their personal situation are an easy prey to a

paralyzing compassion or abuse and neglect. "If they start to attribute their failure to their own deficiency, they will never cease being a failure and will always want to be helped," says José Alberto. Their lives can become so passive that they end up "vegetating" like these plants here, he says. Some of them arrive at La Vega so battered by what they have seen and experienced that they don't believe in anything. "But after living alongside others with the same deficiencies for some time, learning how to work and to smile, they begin to believe in what they themselves achieve with their own hands."

For José Alberto, one of the most gratifying moments of the day comes at the end of the evening meal in the residence close by the nursery where those whose homes are far away live during the work-week. "To alleviate my aches and pains they normally bring me an orange juice drink and

there is always some left over. Then the youngsters gather around me and raffle time arrives. Let's see who says the magic words! 'Hay Torres' [José Alberto's last name] says someone, and he gets the drink. However, quite often it happens that, if for some time now a particular individual has not 'carried off' the orange drink, the others stay quiet and encourage him to say the magic words. Even though some of them might seem rough on the outside, they have a heart of gold."

Dealing with them in a normal way makes them feel the same as other people and helps them to forget about their deficiencies, at least for a while. "As soon as you aren't honest with them or try to deceive them you're lost," José Alberto remarks.

Fortunately things have improved a lot in this respect in recent years. People now realize that handicapped

persons are capable of living a normal working life, in spite of their lacks or limitations. These days, doctors, neurologists and pediatricians pool their knowledge to help them. "It's unbelievable," the father of one young boy told me, "to think that my son could be capable of supporting himself on his own... Whenever I needed to send one of my children on an errand, I always sent his younger brother because I was afraid something might happen to this one!" Today his handicapped son not only supports himself with his own work, but also has the benefit of a fixed work contract.

Support from professionals

Biology PhD, Marisé Borja combines her teaching at the university with the biotechnology laboratory at La Vega. There she carries out studies on plant viruses, on parasites and toxins, and on botanical

engineering which are published in international journals. Most of the fieldwork is done by the mentally handicapped workers. "They can do almost everything: transferring the plant samples from one cultivation medium to another in the air flow chamber, moving the receptacles to the cultivation chambers, filling or emptying jars, sterilizing them, disinfecting walls or floors in order to achieve the necessary antiseptic standards," Dr Borja says.

A special education school under the patronage of Our Lady of Lourdes run by Promiva Foundation works in tandem with La Veguilla. This school has many years of experience educating the mentally handicapped. Around fifty personnel, teachers, psychiatrists, psychologists, physiotherapists, speech therapists and doctors work together.

Jorge Muñoz, who heads up the Mental Deficiency Diagnostic Services section of the Foundation, researches among other things a technique for ascertaining which parts of the brain coordinate sense and intellectual activities. Jorge carried out his studies at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in Philadelphia. Here he can apply it to the mentally handicapped in part thanks to the cooperative work environment he finds. "A dry detached analysis of exclusively psychiatric data is not the same as considering the same data in conjunction with specialists in psychology, speech therapy and work activity."

The collaboration between the school, which 200 students between the ages of 6 and 20 attend, and La Vegailla is also seen in the help received from the teaching personnel, especially through

courses in social skills such as conversational capacities, character formation, etc., which have great importance in the social integration of the mentally deficient.

"Our specific task," says Encarnación Celada, a teacher with over 25 years of experience in the school, "is to provide individual treatment through tutoring. This is because there are different types of mental deficiency: people with serious brain damage and those who because of family pressures or faulty social adaptation have ended up with severe damage to their personality. It's a question of trying to reduce their insecurities, their fears of failure, and to give them with all the affection we can."

Gonzalo, the richest fruit

Julian Ruiz, the head of the school, says that it is important to confront problems as soon as possible. "Some

parents think it's best to cover up the problems their children are having. This as is a mistake they end up paying dearly for. There are others who refuse any type of cooperation since they think it serves no purpose. Recently a mother remarked to the school psychiatrist that she didn't think her son was able to understand the meaning of his first communion. He told her: 'I don't know if your son will understand who God is, but I know that God understands your son.' Many parents have returned to the faith because of their children's struggles and efforts: 'Having a child like this is what has given a meaning to our lives,' some of them confess."

José Alberto has a special place in his heart for Gonzalo, one of the first employees at La Veguilla, who a number of years ago married a girl working at the center. Still moved by the memory, he recalls their wedding ceremony, where he acted as a

witness and which seemed crazy to many. A few days afterwards Gonzalo and his wife came to speak with him to ask him a question. They wanted to have a child, they said: "But will he be like us?" José Alberto, with his characteristic realism, told them probably not, since their condition was not congenital. Their son is now twelve and is their great pride and joy, along with their satisfaction at seeing each day the flowers at La Veguilla growing and embellishing the gardens in Madrid.

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