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Evening sports camps offered KidsHeart volunteers the opportunity to teach sports to local children, but the camps also provided the chance for the visitors to bond with children. (Scott Collins/Buckner Photo)

## 24 churches join in Progreso mission

**By Scott Collins & Lance Wallace**

*Buckner Benevolences & Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*

PROGRESO-Julian Vigil raised the hammer over his head, and with a violent swing, struck the ceiling of Jorge and Ramona Lopez's bedroom.

As he pulled the hammer down, Vigil brought with it a cloud of dust, drywall and rat feces.



Shaeron Moorehead, a member of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, holds a little boy during story time at a Vacation Bible School at Iglesia Bautista Southside in Mercedes.

Vigil's swing launched a three-day project to gut and rebuild the interior of the Lopez's home.

Vigil, a member of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, was part of a joint mission project sponsored by Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Texas, Buckner Children & Family Services and the Global Missions office of the national CBF organization.

More than 200 volunteers from 24 Baptist churches across Texas worked in the lower Rio Grande River Valley this summer, rebuilding homes, sponsoring Vacation Bible Schools, ministering to women and running sports camps.

The project in the Valley is part of KidsHeart, a larger international partnership between the Fellowship and Buckner.

Through the partnership, the Fellowship provides funding and volunteers to assist the ministries of Buckner in colonias in Hildago County. The project is part of Partners in Hope, the Fellowship's rural poverty initiative. A colonia is a small, rural community with substandard housing that lacks services such as electricity, water and sewer.

Throughout the three-day project this summer, teams worked on five homes in the Progreso colonia. Workers tore out and replaced old walls. They also roofed houses, painted, replaced carpet, installed new kitchen appliances and nailed new siding on the homes.

With daytime high temperatures exceeding 100 degrees, volunteers sweated through demolition and reconstruction, surrounded by the poverty they had come to address.

Behind the Lopezes' "new" house stood the burned-out hull of their old house, a 10-foot by 20-foot structure that would serve as a backyard shed in most American suburban neighborhoods.

Less than 10 minutes after arriving, the sounds of hammers hitting drywall and crowbars pulling creaking nails from weathered walls filled the air. A thick fog of dust caused volunteers to don face masks.

Josh Houston, also a Wilshire member, joined Vigil working on the Lopez house. Houston was brought to the Valley because of a "calling, a deep conviction," he said. "Something needs to be done, and somebody's got to do it."



Mission activities included an evening sports camp for children.

Organized by the missions committee of CBF Texas, the first-ever KidsHeart workweek included five home rehabilitation projects, five VBS sites and three sports camps. Buckner has been working in the colonias of the Rio Grande Valley for more than two decades, and churches come down to work year round.

“That's the beauty of this partnership,” said Tom Ogburn, CBF's liaison to Buckner for the KidsHeart partnership and assistant coordinator for partnership missions. “Buckner has been working here for 25 years, so they know the people, they know the needs. CBF has made a 25-year commitment to be here and improve the conditions. We have access to resources to plug in to the existing work as well as the commitment to be here long term.”

Church groups comprised of children, youth, adults and seniors traveled up

to 15 hours one way to participate in the pilot project that resulted in changed lives, among both the church workers and Valley residents alike.

“When we met in January in Dallas to begin planning for this event, we asked ourselves, 'How can we capture the hearts and imaginations of Texas Baptists?'" said David Wright of Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Houston and chair of the Texas CBF missions committee. “We all knew the answer-missions and ministry. That's how this was born.”

The committee, with guidance from Jorge Zapata and Tommy Speed of Buckner and Ogburn of CBF, decided to plan an event that would include small and large congregations alike, where churches didn't have to make logistical arrangements but could plug into a pre-planned project.

Zapata, director of Border Ministries for Buckner Children & Family Services, identified the construction sites among the most pressing needs in the colonias throughout the Valley. Under Ogburn's supervision and with \$5,000 to \$10,000 of seed money from the Fellowship, the construction projects made dramatic gains in the span of three days.

“We've done a lot,” said homeowner Jorge Lopez through an interpreter. “I wasn't expecting this much help. I thought we might get the bedroom and bathroom finished, but they have done the whole house. We want to thank Jorge Zapata and Buckner for bringing the people here. It's because of Buckner that these people are here to help.”



After they installed new walls and carpet in the Lopez home, volunteers added trim around all the baseboards, doors and windows. (Russ Dilday/Buckner Photo)

First Baptist Church of College Station was the first to sign up for the project and sent a team of 30 to assist, including many who were experienced in overseas construction projects with Texas Baptist Men.

“The church has a lot of resources, and they use them,” Pastor Rodney McGlothlin explained. “We hope to keep this relationship going. Texas A&M built many of the community centers down here, and we have a lot of church members from the A&M community, so it's a natural tie for us.”

Steve Dominy, pastor of First Baptist Church in Gatesville, said his church sent five people on the trip because his goal is to “see our church become more involved, more hands-on doing missions work rather than just giving to the mission offerings and feeling like we've done our part for the kingdom.”

Dominy also worked on the Lopez house, tearing out the walls and ceiling in the family's kitchen. By Friday, Dominy and the kitchen crew had hung new drywall, taped the seams and begun the painting process.

"This is not just us coming to do some work and feeling good about ourselves," Dominy said. "But we can give some benefit to the community."

The message Dominy takes back to the church in Gatesville is that work in the Valley provides an "opportunity to reach an increasing Hispanic population in our state, and there is an opportunity to influence them for the gospel and to help them further that influence as they grow throughout the state," he said.

"The benefit for our church is that they can see that they are capable of more than they ever dreamed and they can also see ways that God can use them. They take that home, and we can begin to put that to work in Gatesville."

Across Farm Road 1015 on the other side of Progreso colonia, Heather Duke stood on top of the Montezuma family's house. Covered in roofing tar, the soon-to-be high school senior from First Baptist Church in College Station nudged her sunglasses back into place using her wrist.

"I'm doing this because I love Jesus," Duke said, squinting in the morning sun. "I love the Lord, and I know I'm helping other people, and I know that they can see God through me doing this. The Lord shows his love through us."



Volunteers remove the old the walls from Jorge Lopez's house before completely rebuilding the inside of the home.

The mission project represented Duke's first time to roof a house, but she believes the experience is good for her and those she helps.

"I know that not only are we being blessed, but the people around us are being blessed," she said. "The people inside this home are being blessed."

Each day while teams of 12 to 30 worked on homes, the other groups operated Vacation Bible Schools at four churches and one community center. At Iglesia Bautista Southside in Mercedes, there weren't any children to attend on the first day, so members of Wilshire Baptist Church and First Baptist in Gatesville canvassed the neighborhood and brought 10 to 15 children.

"Every year, groups come and do Bible schools and construction work," said Ruben Huerta, Southside member for 11 years. "We never tell them 'no.' As long as they are doing the Lord's work, we keep the doors open to them to come."

After several transportation setbacks caused Cindy Cole of First Baptist Church in Hereford to call off the trip, a sleepless night and a lingering



sense of calling to participate in KidsHeart caused her to un-cancel the trip.

Located in the Texas Panhandle, First Baptist of Hereford split its participants among several vehicles, and they drove 15 hours on Monday. After a day of training, Hereford teamed up with First Baptist Church of Copperas Cove to lead VBS at Mision Bautista Calvario in Weslaco. Three children attended.

"We were so discouraged," Cole said. "We thought, 'We came all this way and overcame all of the problems with our van and trailer to only get to minister to three kids?'"

On Tuesday night, their group prayed for greater attendance. The next day, with the help of a local college student who served as an interpreter during door-to-door canvassing, more than 40 children poured out of the neighborhood to participate.

"The Lord answered our prayer," Cole said.

"Everybody just lit up when we saw all the people coming down the street," said James Cotten, youth minister at First Baptist in Copperas Cove. "The rest of the week was great. The kids were very receptive, and they didn't want to leave when it was over."



After arriving at one family's home in Progreso, volunteer builders from First Baptist Church of College Station determined they needed to install all new windows and siding on the house. Volunteers install a new front window.

Karen Gilbert, missions minister at Wilshire and organizer of the Bible school for the week, said the goal of the KidsHeart project is simple: "We are hoping to tell the gospel story in three days and give them something to plant seeds with as far as who Jesus is. Hopefully we've said to the community that we love them because Jesus love us. And we know that Jesus loves them too."

Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth sent 17 people to the effort. In addition to their work in morning VBS and evening sports camp, they took several opportunities to perform as a youth choir.

"With the VBS, our kids enjoyed interacting with the children," said Mike Farnell, minister of music at Gambrell Street. "One of our girls was able to share the plan of salvation in a meaningful way with one of the girls at VBS."

While children attended VBS, Buckner trustee Esther Fraire led meetings for women. With 15 to 20 women at some of the sessions, Fraire determined to continue the ministry after the week in a more systematic way.

The daily schedule called for afternoon breaks when temperatures reached 104. By 6 p.m., the teams were back at it, hosting sports camps at community centers in San Juan and Progreso and a school in San Carlos.

“Using a ball breaks down all the walls,” said KidsHeart sports camp organizer Karen Murphy, minister of children and recreation at First Baptist Church in Harlingen. “The children listen to you give instructions, and you gain their trust. Then, they listen to you when you tell them about Jesus.”

The sports camps provided instruction and experience with baseball and softball, basketball and soccer. First Baptist of College Station brought soccer uniforms donated to the church by a local league. They distributed them on the first night at San Carlos, and on the second night, the children returned dressed in their uniforms.

The sports camp devotions featured simple object lessons using jellybeans, peanuts and the sports themselves to drive home the gospel message.

“Even if they didn't understand all the devotion, they understand love,” said Liz Rogers of First Baptist in College Station, after delivering a devotion at San Carlos. “Relating to them on a personal level opened doors. That's what it's all about.”

As he taught young boys to dribble a basketball, Nathan Cole, a member of First Baptist in Hereford, said the most important part of the sports camp was the devotion time.

“That's the main part of it,” he said. “Get them hooked with the fun stuff, and then tell them what it's all about. It's about Jesus dying for our sins and accepting him as their Savior and serving him every day.”

That message is the reason for the entire project, Zapata stressed.

“We work with people who don't know Christ,” he said. “They can come and have a relationship with us, and we can share Christ with them. That is what the body of Christ is doing, and I'm excited that we are doing it here in the Valley.”

“We're excited because we're seeing people being transformed by the power of God and by the love of these people who came from all over Texas,” Zapata said. “Even though there are a lot of churches, we have become one body this week.”

The churches that participated were Ash Creek Baptist Church, Azle; Clear Lake Baptist Church, Houston; Community Baptist Church, Harlingen; Crossroads Baptist Church, Rotan; Elkins Lake Baptist Church, Huntsville; First Baptist Church, Arlington; First Baptist Church, College Station; First Baptist Church, Copperas Cove; First Baptist Church, Donna; First Baptist Church, Gatesville; First Baptist Church, Harlingen; First Baptist Church, Hereford; First Baptist Church, Lewisville; First Baptist Church, Richmond; First Baptist Church, Tyler; Gambrell Street Baptist Church, Fort Worth; Iglesia Bautista Getsemani, Elsa; Iglesia Bautista Southside, Mercedes; Keys Valley Baptist Church, Belton; Mision Bautista Calvario, Weslaco; Primeria Iglesia Bautista, Santa Maria; The Springs Baptist Church, San Antonio; Willow Meadows Baptist Church, Houston; and Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas.

Other churches, such as First Baptist Church of Abilene, First Baptist Church of Sanger and Iglesia Bautista of Alice, sent donations for the work. Each work team also brought school supplies for the children at community centers in the Valley to assembly into packages to send overseas through World Vision's school kits project.

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