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Buckner News Service

ANTIGUA, Guatemala—At the Manchin Girls' Home in Antigua, structure is part of the strategy to give girls a fighting chance to succeed against tremendous odds.

Many have been abandoned. Most have been abused. All are vulnerable by nature of their gender in a society where girls seldom are encouraged to pursue an education or career.

Virtually every waking moment of a resident's day at the orphanage is spent studying, taking vocational classes, doing chores or engaging in other activities designed to inspire creativity and learning. A social worker, psychologist and pediatrician are on site.

This baby
at a
Guatemalan
orphanage
recently
underwent
surgery to
correct her
cleft palate.

Baylor Healthcare System is partnering with Buckner Orphan Care International to establish a community-based health program for Guatemala, which will be run from the home.

"I want to be something in my life," says 15-year-old Selena. "That's why I really put my heart into all my workshops here. Coming out of here at least I can have initiative."

"Whenever I was with my mom, I told her I wanted to study. She would say: 'Why do you want to study? Studying is not worth it,'" Selena recalls. "I told her I wanted to get ahead."

Like many of her peers at the home, Selena is a survivor of family violence. After her father abandoned the family when she was an infant, she became the object of her mother's rage. "She treated me so bad, like I wasn't her daughter," she says tearfully. "She would bite me, grab my hair and choke me around my neck."

Selena eventually went before a judge, denounced her mother and then asked to be sent to an orphanage. "I wanted to keep studying. I don't want to keep suffering that way; I just want to get ahead."

Since she's been at Manchin, Selena says she's growing into her potential

and endeavors to become an administrator of a large corporation. Her motivation to succeed comes largely from the affirmation she's received from staff and volunteers, she notes.

Buckner ministry partner Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas has adopted the orphanage and provided funding to support health care initiatives and to hire a computer and job skills instructor. Mission teams also distribute shoes, lead Vacation Bible School and minister to the girls.

"They help us feel loved and remind us there's a God who loves us, and that even though our parents have treated us badly, he loves us anyway," Selena says.

Martina, 14, also has a renewed sense of self since arriving at Manchin just over a year ago. "I'm doing good now. I'm studying. My mom wants me to come back, but I can't do that. I want a new family."

A Mexico native, Martina has two brothers. Her father died when she was 10.

"When I was a little girl, my mom used to work in a bar going to bed with men," she recalls. "We came here to Guatemala, and she started working in a bar again. She used to hit me very much. She wanted to sell me to men. I ran away to live with my grandmother."

Sarah, 15, tells a tragically similar story. Her abusive mother tried to force her into prostitution as well. Sarah resisted and ran away to live with a woman who owned a neighborhood bar, where police would later pick her up for truancy. She hasn't seen her mother or four siblings in five years.

She says of life at the orphanage: "It's nice. I like to be here."

In addition to offering care and guidance for troubled teenaged girls, Buckner support also helped build a babies' wing adjacent to the girls'

dorms at Manchin. The new structure can accommodate 45 infants and toddlers to 4 years old.

More than 40 children currently are in care, including 26 babies less than 10 months old. Several may be available for adoption.

“We're just beginning to tap into it (Guatemalan adoptions), but we think the numbers will grow very quickly,” says Shyrel Osborne of Buckner Orphan Care International. “Kids can get backlogged in the system and live institutionalized for most of their childhood. We're doing what we can to prevent that from happening.”

The staff in the babies' wing comprises eight government workers and 15 Buckner employees who serve as nannies-their salaries paid with dollars donated by a Buckner supporter.

“We required more from their character than any type of training,” Osborne explains, adding that most were referred by pastors of various churches in Antigua.

Ingrid Garcia, Buckner nanny coordinator, says she has identified someone to train the nannies in proper childcare. Meanwhile, Buckner is taking child-care standards widely followed in the United States and translating them in Spanish so the orphanage staff can have written guidelines to follow.

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