

# Casa Bethesda—Answering God's call

June 18, 2019

Thirty-three years ago, Paulino Esquivel received a call he was reluctant to answer.

He responded as most do when faced with a similar circumstance, saying, “Please God, send someone else.” Or in his case, “Por favor, Dios, mande alguien más.”

During a recent mission trip, members of First Baptist Church in Charlotte working with [Operation Christian Love](#), a ministry founded by Frio River Baptist Association, visited with Esquivel in Piedras Negras. He sat at the head of the table and thanked the group for coming.

## From the beginning

Esquivel took a deep breath and told them he was going to share his testimony—from the beginning. His guests could see the pain in his eyes as he struggled with his words.

Esquivel was 24 when he began helping families in his neighborhood. Parents either worked or were in prison. Children needed a place to go while their guardian was at work. Wanting to help and spread God's love to kids, he and his wife Gilberta opened their doors to these children.

During the initial five years, the Esquivels received no governmental aid or church support. They used their own money to feed and care for visiting children, with some support from those who served alongside them.

Paulino Esquivel intended to keep children safe and off the streets where

crime was rampant. Even 5-year-old children were being used as go-betweens for drug sales. Taking them in gave them the chance to play without fear and to hear the gospel.

## Special needs



Paulino Esquivel felt God calling him to minister to children and youth in Piedras Negras. In time, that calling focused particularly on children and youth with physical, mental or developmental disabilities. (Photo courtesy of Jeff S. Bray)

As word spread about what Casa Bethesda was doing, parents with disabled children started to show up. Not having the ability to care for children with special needs, Esquivel politely declined. But he felt he must do something. He searched for someone to help through other churches and ministries, but no one would help. Yet, the parents continued to come.

Esquivel prayed for five months. However, his prayer was not for the ability. He prayed, “Por favor, Dios, mande alguien más.”

But those he contacted gave him the same excuses he was using. There’s not enough room. I don’t know how to care for them. There are no resources. Some just flat out acknowledged they did not want to do it. They felt it wasn’t their problem, and the answer was always “no.”

## Life-changing visit

Then one day, Esquivel received a visitor who would bring a dramatic change to his life.

In 1995, an hour south of Piedras Negras, a woman cared for a 5-year-old with cerebral palsy. One night, she knocked at Paulino’s long white gate.



Paulino Esquivel, who leads Casa Bethesda in Piedras Negras, visits with Diana and Alex Aburto with Vines and Branches Ministry. (Photo courtesy of Jeff Bray)

“I am bringing you my grandson,” she told him. “I don’t know what to do. I

have no experience with his condition. His mother is an addict and living a bad life.”

She went on to explain that she was old, sick and no longer able to care for his needs.

Esquivel’s first reaction was to respond as he had, but this time was different. He asked her, “How did you find out about me?”

Her answer changed his life forever.

“I was at home, and a man knocked on my door,” she said. “He told me to find Paulino Esquivel in Piedras Negras. He said you would help me.”

At that moment, Esquivel knew he could no longer resist. He took the child in—the first permanent resident of many.

## **God ‘placed me in the middle of his work’**

For the next three years, Esquivel struggled with his calling.

“I did not say ‘yes’ to the Lord. He just placed me in the middle of his work,” he said.

Being in unfamiliar territory, he prayed, trying to negotiate with God.



Volunteers lead residents of Casa Bethesda in a time of praise and worship. (Photo courtesy of Jeff S. Bray)

“I told God two things. First, I wasn’t going to tell people what I do. It was up to God to send people,” he said. “Second, I told God I wasn’t going to look for resources. He would have to provide them.”

God delivered.

Three years and several children later, a pastor from a church in Atlanta contacted Esquivel, asking how his congregation could assist Casa Bethesda.

“How did you hear about us?” Esquivel asked.

After serving in California, the pastor and his team had been working on another project in Del Rio. Since it was nearing completion, they were praying for another ministry to serve. One night a man knocked on the pastor’s door.

“Go to Piedras Negras. Paulino Esquivel needs you,” the visitor said.

That pastor was the first of many whose churches now assist Casa Bethesda.

## **Current opportunities, current challenges**

Twenty-four years later, Casa Bethesda cares for 28 people. All of them, 15 men and 13 women, have special needs. Their conditions vary: mental illnesses, down syndrome, cerebral palsy, deafness and epilepsy. Eleven are wheelchair bound, and nine are completely disabled, requiring assistance with even simple tasks.

Many residents have been there most of their lives. Eight are orphaned, 20 were abandoned, and two kids were taken in after their parents signed paperwork renouncing all claim to them. One father dropped off his son to find work. The man never returned.

Casa Bethesda is the only home in the Piedras Negras area that cares for children with special needs. One doctor visits monthly, giving minimal care to residents.

Esquivel next spoke about issues Casa Bethesda faces now. The first is his health. Esquivel has an unknown condition affecting his white blood count. Due to his health, he and his wife “retired” about a year ago, but they still are active in the ministry. He is training two men, Omar and Pablo, who will one day take over.

He also expressed concern about an incident that occurred at Casa Bethesda and what it could mean for the home’s future. Esquivel said it involved a male resident and a female resident, and it was reported to the proper authorities. However, some asserted it involved a staff member abusing a resident, and he fears government authorities may close the

home.

## **‘You cannot deny your calling’**

For 33 years, Esquivel has helped children. For 24 of those years, he has been involved with the well-being of those with special needs. Only two of the 28 residents have parents whose location is known.

After he finished talking, Esquivel took his guests on a tour. They visited with residents. Three women were working hard to get lunch ready. At the same time, they were taking those in wheelchairs to an outside pavilion to sing praise and worship songs.

Esquivel greeted each child—shaking hands, giving hugs, receiving kisses and acknowledging each of his kids.

“When you are a pastor, you expect to be over a church, not a home. But you cannot deny your calling. God convicts, knowing that we will always follow him,” Esquivel said. “Even though sickness comes, his work will continue.

“Whatever comes my way, I will be here, serving him.”

*Jeff S. Bray is a [freelance writer](#) and a member of First Baptist Church in Charlotte, Texas.*