

# Labor of love by Christian volunteers changes lives in colonias

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Families living in primitive conditions in colonias along the Texas/Mexico border have seen their lives transformed through the efforts of Christian volunteers with [Buckner International](#) who build homes and spread hope.

In 2008, Rafaela Beltran walked into a small church asking for help making an electricity payment.



Rafaela Beltran teaches her daughters to cook in her new home.

“I asked for help through Ricardo’s church,” Beltran said. “A friend told me about him and how he helps people.”

Ricardo Brambila, pastor of First Baptist Church in San Isidro and Buckner colonia program manager, visited Beltran’s home and found it unlivable.

“She built it herself with her five children, and they all lived there,” Brambila said. “It was freezing in the winter and scorching in the summer.”

Eighteen years ago, Beltran crossed the Rio Grande with her husband, young children and twins on the way. The babies did not survive the journey. And after her husband hit one of his children in a drunken rage, she kicked him out. They had just moved into their newly constructed dirt-floor shelter.

But Beltran said her life changed for the better after she received help from Buckner. She began attending First Baptist Church in San Isidro. "I know that God put Buckner in our path for a purpose. Through all of this, I learned that God answers prayer," she said.

And he did. In July 2009, a team of volunteers from Valley Ranch Baptist Church in Coppel built the family a three-bedroom, one-bath home.

"More than anything these people gave me, they gave me love and affection," Beltran said.

"When I moved into my new house, I told my daughter that I was resolved to walk through that door as a new person. ... God has me in his hands. Now, I am teaching my children to love him and how to follow him."



Rolando Rosales stands in front of his new home with some of his children. He recently put in a walkway that leads to the front door of his home

Buckner Colonia Program Director Jorge Zapata said many of the people Buckner serves tell him: “‘Before Buckner came, I thought God had forgotten about us.’ A lot of our short-term mission groups love to come, because together, we are bringing Christ into this community.”

Rolando Rosales’ wife had one dying wish—a home for her family.

“When Buckner first knocked on our door, my wife was in bed and couldn’t get up anymore,” he said. “I was feeding her when they knocked on the door.”

The family was living in a rented house with a caved-in roof, he said, adding that in the last couple of years of his wife’s life, he was responsible for her care and was unable to spend enough time earning a living.

“It was leaking everywhere and had a strong smell of mold. But Buckner got us a brand-new home in May of 2010.”

Sadly, Martha Rosales never got to see her new house. She was living in a rented home Buckner provided for them when she died.

“I know that my wife would be happy,” Rosales said. “I know that she is happy because she sees how we are living now.”

Martha Rosales, who died of cancer in 2008, had her dream fulfilled by volunteers from First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., and Calvary Baptist Church in McAllen, who helped build the home.

“I bought the lot, and they built my house,” Rosales said. “The kids are very happy, the boys have their own room, and the girls have their own room. Buckner has also supported us with clothes, shoes and school supplies.

“I took care of my wife for three years. It was hard to make much money while doing that. Buckner helped with the funeral cost.”

Rosales works hard, pressure-cleaning dry roofs and doing landscaping to pay off the lot for the home, always making payments one month in advance.

“I do miss my wife a lot. Sometimes I just think of her. I remember when she was with me she was always washing clothes, cleaning, cooking. I never know what to cook, but she always knew what to do.

“My kids are what keep me going. I’ve been happy here. Very happy,” he said.

The Rosales and Beltran families are just two of hundreds of testimonies that Buckner hears from its work in the colonias. But the program had humble beginnings.

Buckner’s initial work along the border began by providing humanitarian aid and social casework in one of the poorest communities in the Brownsville area—Cameron Park.

In 2001, Buckner signed a collaboration agreement with the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) to provide expanded ministries to at-risk children and families in the Valley.

“Jorge Zapata has been a driving force in helping to expand our collaboration to include various Baptist and ecumenical organizations, local schools and government agencies,” said Rick McClatchy, coordinator for the CBF in Texas.

In 2009, Buckner Border Ministries served 48,623 individuals and sent 2,755 volunteers to repair houses and serve in various capacities. Volunteers and staff also recorded 1,161 decisions to follow Christ.

In total, more than 262,405 lives have been affected along the Texas/Mexico border through Buckner ministries.

Buckner currently is developing a Community Transformation Center to be located in a colonia where more than 10,000 individuals live in extreme poverty. The families served through the center will receive holistic support through counseling, stress management classes and emotional and physical assistance until they reach independence. Individual caseworkers will work with families to develop life plans.