

# **Rio Grande Valley families marry in mass wedding ceremony**

March 11, 2016

PENITAS—The seats in the church filled with wedding guests. It was a community moment—a much-anticipated moment.

Guests chattered in hushed tones until a half-dozen women, all decked in white, took the scene with the graceful command common only to brides.

In the presence of family and friends, six couples from the Pueblo de Palma community of Penitas shared a wedding ceremony to make their commitments in marriage public March 4.

Buckner International President Albert Reyes officiated the ceremony, along with Ricardo Brambila, director of the Buckner Family Hope Center in Penitas, and the pastoral staff of Centro Cristiano Familiar Paraiso de Palma.

Later, another five couples from the community were married in a civil ceremony.

## **Taking vows before God and witnesses**

Although some of the 11 couples had lived together quite a few years, none had exchanged vows in any public setting.

“We loved each other for so long, and now we’re married,” said Vanessa Galeno, after she wed Antonio—the father of their son, Antonio Jesus. “I’m so happy God is part of that now.”

The couples exchanging vows share histories within the Pueblo de Palma community. Each family has participated in programs at the Family Hope Center, and the ceremony was part of an effort to strengthen families in the community.

### **Reminders of permanence and commitment**

Reyes led the couples through a series of symbols to remind everyone in attendance about the permanence and importance of life together in marriage.

He told the couples when the marriage commitment they made carries “a responsibility to work this out when things get challenging.”

“Every marriage has problems, but from the work of Christ, it can be a place for healing,” he said.

### **Long-delayed marriage**

Tony Gonzalez and Norma Aleman fell in love 19 years ago, in the plaza in Ciudad Miguel Aleman in Tamaulipas, Mexico.



Norma Aleman carefully applies makeup before her wedding. (Photo/Aimee Freston) “I love him,” she said the afternoon before the wedding. They were at her sister’s home, getting ready for big night. “There was a time when we were separated for two years. We didn’t have to get back together, but I love him.”

The room stilled and grew quiet as she remembered that time in their relationship.

“I was drinking and not good to her,” he explained.

“Getting back together felt like we were doing this again for the first time,” she said. She smiled and picked up one of the handmade table settings for their family’s reception after the wedding. They were stacked and occupying the kitchen counters behind her.

“We’ve been collecting that stuff for a year,” he said. “We’ve been together a long time. It’s time to get married.”

### **Time to make changes**

For the couple, that meant making some changes.



Tony Gonzalez and Norma Aleman fell in love 19 years ago. They finally made a public commitment to each other in a recent ceremony. (Photo/Aimee Freston) “I needed to change my life with my kids,” he said. “I never spent time with them and figured I was wrong. I started going (to Buckner’s Family Hope Center), and it helped change that.”

About a year ago, one of the neighbors encouraged Norma Aleman to visit the Family Hope Center. Their family was new to the neighborhood.

“I went, and I’ve been going ever since,” she said.

About that time, Tony Gonzalez explained he wanted to see something different happen in their home. In the course of reconciliation, he surprised her.

“For so many years I’d been telling him stop drinking and quit smoking, he hadn’t done it. He used to be cold. When he started changing, I was concerned,” she confessed. “I wondered, ‘Did he have another woman?’”

He did not. He began working with the Hope Center and other men in the community through a fatherhood mentoring course.

“We’re going to church now,” he said. “Everything’s changing. Our life is changing a lot.”