

Student missionaries make impact on Rio Grande Valley families

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MISSION—Ruben Reyes, his wife and their four children live in a small, leaky 33-year-old trailer on the edge of town. Unable to afford costly repairs or to purchase a new house, Reyes prayed for a way to find a home that will keep his family safe and dry.

Reyes' prayers were answered when a group of 11 college students helped finish a new three-bedroom home for his family. The students armed themselves with paintbrushes and bright blue paint and set to work to finish the house Buckner International built for the Reyes family.

Irving Tapia (left) and Suhaily Maldonado, both students at University of Texas Pan American, worked on a mission project in the Rio Grande Valley.

Nearly three weeks earlier, the students from the Baptist Student Ministries at the University of Texas-Pan American packed their bags and headed 19 miles from their school. They had one mission—sharing the hope of Christ in the Rio Grande Valley.

“A year ago, we started to think about the best way to mobilize students and have a way to grow them in their faith and share community,” said Robert Rueda, director of the BSM at UT-Pan American. “We wanted to

give them a local taste of missions and a global picture at the same time.”

The group led Vacation Bible Schools and youth rallies at Baptist churches in the area, served at a women’s shelter, repaired houses for families in need and shared the love of Christ with anyone they met.

The Valley summer project started June 1 and ended July 1 after a 12-day mission trip to Valencia, Venezuela. The mission encounter was a combined effort of the BSM at UT-Pan American, the Baptist General Convention of Texas and its [Go Now Missions](#) program, and Rio Grande Valley Baptist Association.

Texas Baptists support Go Now Missions through the BGCT Cooperative Program and gifts to the [Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions](#). Students also raise some of their own support.

The 2008 Mary Hill Davis Offering allocations include \$15,000 to enable college students to serve as summer or semester missionaries by assisting with their travel expenses, as well as ministry costs as they share the gospel around the world.

Since the UT-Pan American students are bilingual and from South Texas, they were able to share their faith in culturally sensitive ways, leaders noted.

“At one church the group was working at, the pastor and all the hermanas (sisters) of the church were blown away to see that all the students spoke Spanish,” Rueda said. “They were even more amazed to learn that they are all from the Valley. They had never seen that before.”

The BGCT is in the early stages of [Texas Hope 2010](#), an evangelistic effort to give all Texans the opportunity to respond to the gospel in their own language and context by Easter 2010.

The student group rotated leadership positions, so each team member was stretched in his or her abilities and challenged to serve in different ways.

“This is a beautiful picture of missions in our backyard that leads to missions to the nations,” said Brenda Sanders, director of Go Now Missions.

In order to be prepared for ministry, the group went through a day of training, learning how to lead Vacation Bible School—a first for many on the team.

“We started off our first week with a Vacation Bible School in Hidalgo,” said Belinda Arredonda, a senior music education major. “I was teaching some of the older kids, and it was kind of challenging because I don’t really work with kids. I had to get out of my comfort zone and actually come down and share the love of Christ with them.”

Even though the group experienced frustration when they thought the children weren’t paying attention to the lessons at times, they continued to love and share the hope of Christ with them.

“It’s a little frustrating because you weren’t sure they were listening or paying attention,” Arredonda said. “But then at the end, they were just giving me the entire summary of the story and giving me things I didn’t even know I had mentioned in the story. It’s been such a blessing.”

The group included missions veterans, as well as others having their first missions experience. But the goal of the summer project was for all students involved to grow in Christ and in Christian community so they can share the hope they have with those who do not know Christ.

“Once you come to know God, service just comes naturally,” said Arnulfo Garza, a junior communications major. “Once you begin to know everything God has done in you, it produces in you a wanting to serve. I hope (my

team) gets a sense of what missions is. This is something you do every day. It is part of your daily routine, your daily life. You are just telling people about the hope that we have.”

For first-person accounts of the students’ experiences, visit the team’s blog at www.bsmglobalimpact.com.