

Mexico Child Link

CHARITY REFERENCE NUMBER XRI8919

SEPTEMBER 2001

During the 8 months since the last newsletter, Mexico Child Link and its partner organisation Fundación Trébol, have worked to strengthen existing programmes and have initiated new services for children and adults with learning disability in Puebla State, Mexico.

Our main achievement has been to set up three new programmes supported by a second grant from the Community Fund (National Lottery Charities Board). These include a programme to support young adults with learning disability in a more independent setting, the expansion of a carpentry workshop, and the establishment of a free advice and information centre regarding learning disability. Staff have been appointed to five new posts.

December Eruption

The farm and residential project are situated approximately 15 miles from the crater of the volcano Popocatepetl. After a week of rumbling and gas emissions, the 17,500 foot volcano erupted on the evening of 18th December, projecting incandescent material down its flanks and covering the streets of Atlixco with a dusting of black sand. 42,000 people were evacuated from villages in the foothills of the volcano. Project staff evacuated the children as a precautionary measure, arriving in their pick-up truck at the home of the Mexico Child Link employees in Atlixco, 45 minutes after the start of the volcanic activity. They followed a much practised evacuation procedure; the older children having specific tasks, such as loading up the vehicle with blankets, food and water. Despite the scare, most of the children wanted to return home as soon as possible. They found it difficult to cope with the change in their regular routine, and were worried about the animals left behind on the farm. Marisol was particularly worried about Mancha the cat. Popocatepetl is one of the most closely monitored volcanoes in the world and the Mexican authorities have



Juan Gabriel & Marisol keep out the volcanic dust

been running public education programmes about learning to live with the volcano since its renewed activity in 1994.

News from the children and young people in Tenextepec

Alma and Marisol graduated from the special school which they have attended for the past 5 years. This was celebrated in true Mexican style, with music, formal dancing and the handing over of leaving certificates at school, followed by a fiesta at the project. Marisol had

been very anxious about leaving school and her future job prospects. She enrolled in a part-time sewing course during July. Alma hopes to continue her education at a local secondary school where Rodolfo enrolled last year. Oscar graduated from pre-school and starts primary school this September.

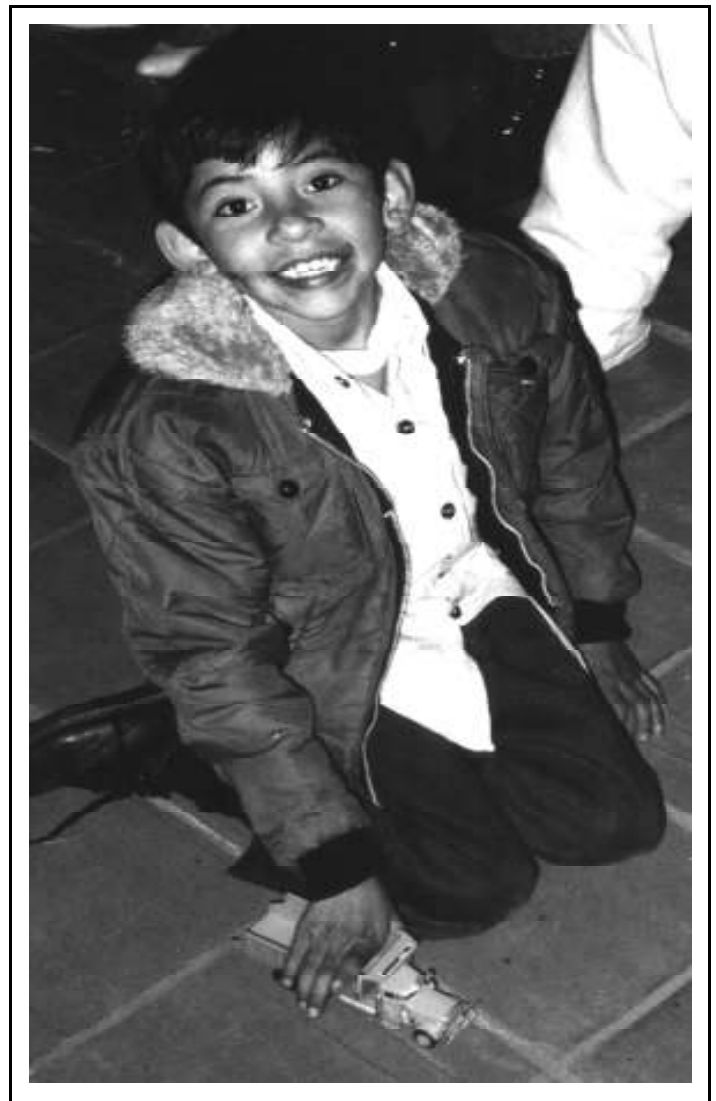
Marisol, Rodolfo and Esteban each receive a training scholarship of £40 monthly from Quiera, the Mexican Banker's Association. The grants are used to further their education and training. Esteban bought a bicycle to get to his job on a neighbouring farm. Marisol bought cloth and sewing materials for the sewing skills programme and Rodolfo bought his PE uniform and other school materials. The older children have all been found work placements during the summer holidays. This gives them an opportunity to gain work experience and to discover what different jobs involve. It is hoped that this will give them a clearer idea of the type of employment they would prefer as adults. Alma is acting as helper to the nurse in a rural health centre in the nearby village of La Trinidad, Argelio is working at a local dairy farm, Rodolfo is working in a carpentry workshop and Marisol in a hairdresser's in Atlixco. Paty is working as a domestic help with a neighbour in Tenex-tepec. Esteban continues to work as a farm labourer on a local farm, where he has now been in employment for three years.

Project Evaluation

A formal evaluation of the residential project took place in February. The evaluation highlighted the importance of creating an opportunity for play and leisure activities for the development of the children and young people. It was also noted that they have difficulties managing their free time. Learning to deal with free time is important in preparation for living in a more independent setting. An hour of free time has been set aside every day and Sundays are more relaxed and flexible. It is important to see this in the context of Mexico, where many children have little chance to play because they are out working from an early age.

Staff changes

There have been a number of staff changes in the project. Angélica, the Project Director left in March, to take up a post in another organization. She had been working in the project for 5 years and it was feared that her departure would have an adverse effect on the children. A great deal of planning took place to facilitate the transition and to ensure minimal emotional disruption to the children. Cristina Ramos acted as Interim Director for 4 months. Cristina was ideal to fill this post, given that she had previously worked in the residential project in a number of different posts and had kept in close contact. She is well liked and respected by both children and staff. A new Project Director, Martha Salvador, started work in July. Martha has also worked in a number of posts in the residential project in the past and has a very clear vision of preparing the children for a more



Creating a space for play and recreation is an important part of the children's development

independent life as adults. Laura Castillo was appointed as House Helper in February and is proving to be a valued member of the staff team. She has a daughter with learning disability and lives in Tenex-tepec. Queta Palestino, who has worked with Fundación Trébol since it was founded in 1993, was appointed as General Director in June. Queta has a wealth of knowledge about learning disability and visited N. Ireland last September with Erika Godinez, President of the management committee. Ana Luisa Sandoval was appointed as Special Education Worker in April.

New programmes supported by the Community Fund (National Lottery Charities Board)

(1) Programme to support young adults with learning disability in a more independent setting.

The residential project prepares children and young people for a more independent life outside the project. It is not contemplated that they will remain there as adults. When a young person leaves the project to live more independently, a place becomes available for another

younger child with learning disability. The future living arrangements of each young person will depend on their individual needs and preferences. A young person may be well capable of living alone, with a member of staff giving a little help with specific tasks such as budgeting, shopping or medication. On the other hand, another young person may need help or supervision most of the time. The move to more independent living has important implications for the young person's life and requires careful planning. Programmes used by N.I. organisations in planning for more independent living, were translated and adapted for use in a Mexican setting. An individualized booklet which puts the young person at the centre of the planning process, was introduced and staff have started to use it with a number of the young people. A detailed Supported Living Assessment was also introduced. This helps both the young person and staff to identify accurately the support or help the young person will need, to live in a more independent setting. It also helps to guide the young person and the organization in making plans. These plans show (i) the kind of support the young person will need, (ii) when they will need it and (iii) who will deliver the support. The purpose of this process is to ensure that the plan for more independent living stems from the wishes, desires and needs of the individual young person. It also takes into account what needs to be done to ensure that the young person is safe in a more independent setting. In this way, it is hoped to avoid making arrangements which may be well intentioned but do not have the young person as the centre of the planning process.

The expansion of the Carpentry Workshop

A carpentry workshop for the children in the residential project has been in operation for two years on an informal basis, supervised by a carpenter in a voluntary capacity, for two hours on Friday afternoons. The new grant from the Community Fund provides for the expansion of the workshop, to include children from the local community and also to employ a part-time Carpentry Skills Trainer. Patricia Pincle has been appointed to this post. Patricia is a trained carpenter and has 5 years experience of running a carpentry workshop for children with learning disabilities, in the local special school. The workshop takes place five afternoons a week and a different group of children and young people attend each day. There are currently 20 children and young people participating, 8 of whom live in the residential project. The remaining 12 come from the small village of San Juan de los laureles, half a mile from the project. Children with a disability or special educational needs have been given priority. 14 of the children and young people currently in the workshop, have a learning disability and 6 have special educational needs. Project staff liaised with the principal of the local school to determine which children were most in need of the training in the workshop. The workshop will provide a good opportunity for mixed



Patricia Pincle



Martha Salvador

ability children to work together. Each group has been organised into a production team, making use of the different abilities within the group. In this way, each member contributes to the finished product. To date, they have produced benches, photo-frames, and cassette holders. They have also made picture frames for sale in shops in Atlixco. The money from the sale of these products was used to buy materials for use in the workshop.

Advice & information Centre

The Advice & Information Centre is located in the city of Puebla. It works closely with CONFE, the main organization in Mexico working with people with learning disabilities. Its main aim is to provide information for families, and to direct them to the most appropriate disability services. It is the only centre of this kind in Puebla State. The Centre will also be open for use by professionals and students. Eugenia Hernández started work as Advice Centre Worker in May. She has been visiting the organisations which provide services to people with learning disability, to find out first hand the type and quality of the services available. The Centre is also compiling reference material which will be easily accessible to families. This will include a video library on themes related to learning disability. The Centre will have access to the resources of the Information Centre at CONFE's headquarters in Mexico City.

News from Belfast

The Mexico Child Link Trust welcomed two new trustees in April, John Donaghy and Roy Mc Conkey. John works as a Project Manager in S.& E. Belfast Community Trust and he has also worked in community projects in Chile. It is hoped that John's experience of work in N. Ireland and in Latin America will help to broaden the vision of the Trust group. Prof. Roy Mc Conkey, Chair, School of Learning Disabilities at the University of Ulster, is a highly respected figure in the field of Learning Disability, having published extensively in the subject area. Roy has also worked in a number of developing countries. It is hoped that his wide



Alma, Karina and Esteban enjoy a day at the fair in Puebla

and varied experience and his approach to putting research into practice, will help to ensure that Mexico Child Link continues to promote good practice in its work with project partners Fundación Trébol.

With the aim of keeping in contact with some of the organisations visited with our Mexican partners last September, visits were made to Kilcreggan Homes and Edgumbe Training & Resource Centre. A slide show and talk was also given at the Centre for Developmental Disabilities, University College Dublin. The Centre has very kindly offered to pay for training materials in Spanish, for staff at the residential project. Dr. Patricia Noonan Walsh, the Director of the Centre, recently made her second visit to the residential project in Mexico.

Thanks

Thanks are due to the following organisations and individuals who have given their support:

The Community Fund (formerly the National Lottery Charities Board), London Freeman's School, June Getty, The Paget Trust, Wallace High School, May Blair, Edgumbe T.R.C., Parkview Special School, Corranny Primary School, Centre for Developmental Disabilities U.C.D., College Freight N. I. Ltd., Mount Lourdes Grammar School, Nuffield College Oxford, St. Tierney's Primary School, and NICVA.

In addition, thanks are due to all our regular donors who support Mexico Child Link through Banker's Order and the

Give As You Earn scheme and the many people who supported us through individual donations, which varied from £5 to £500.

The Mexico Child Link Trust is a small registered charity based in Belfast. It is governed by a group of eight trustees, professional people with an interest in development work and the plight of abandoned children with learning disabilities (mental handicap). It supports direct action projects which make a visible and direct improvement in the quality of children's lives.

Mexico Child Link works in partnership with a Mexican organization, Fundación Trébol de Puebla A.C., which we have helped to fund and develop.

80 Locksley Park

Belfast BT10 OAS

Tel./Fax 028 90 622239

MexicoChildLink@compuserve.com