



# cmc tribute

*combined municipal campaign 2008 handbook*



## Paper Houses provides solid support across the border

By Dave Schafer

They come in groups of three, trudging sacks of groceries up slippery goat trails or down muddy roads. They stop at barbed wire fences and call out “Buenos dias” toward the two-room cardboard shacks. They hand the groceries to whomever answers and they introduce themselves, Americans who traveled to the dirt-poor neighborhoods of Acuña, Mexico, not to preach or teach, but to learn about this poverty and these people.

They see hundreds of shoeless children with nothing to do because their families don’t have enough money for uniforms or school supplies. They meet the kindergartner who was born crippled and never received medical care to fix his muscles.

They see women cooking over campfires because it’s too hot and dangerous to cook on the propane stoves in their paper houses. They meet with men working hard at a factory for \$40 a week, men who want to stay in Mexico and improve their lives.

All this poverty just minutes from the United States, across the Rio Grande River.

The Americans buy uniforms

and school supplies in exchange for construction work by the students’ parents, and they get children help at the private hospital. They walk the neighborhoods and help where they can, or they simply visit, even though they may not speak the same language.

They come to help, these volunteers who join the nonprofit Paper Houses Across Borders Inc., a CMC agency, for four days of hard, life-changing work.

They leave having undergone a profound personal change.

“I would argue that the primary benefit of these missions is to the Americans who go down there. Secondary is the nice things we do for the folks down there,” said Houston police Sgt. Bob Decker, who founded Paper Houses in 2002 with help from the Houston Police Officers’ Union. “If you go down with a good attitude, or even a bad attitude, it will change your life. It makes you understand what’s important and what’s not important.”

### Growth of a cause

Decker first discovered these poor neighborhoods known as colonias in 2001 when he got



See PAPER HOUSES on page 4.



lost just across the border from South Padre Island. As he crested a hill off the main road, he saw hundreds of cardboard shacks and their residents.

"I wondered how many times people just zip up the main road and don't even realize that just on the other side of this hill is this abject poverty," said Decker, who speaks very little Spanish. "It was shocking that there was so much poverty right next door to the United States."

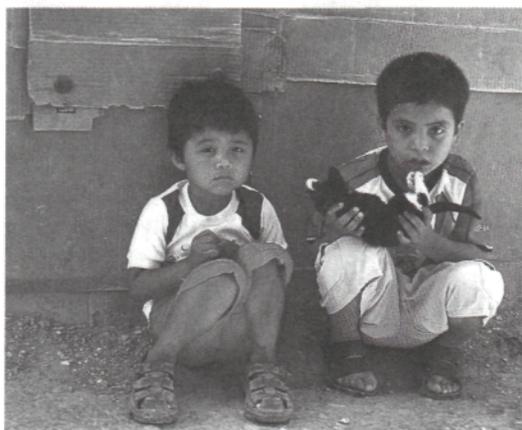
The images haunted him. He began researching and discovered that towns just like this one exist all along the border.

Every other weekend over the next three months, he visited another town, working his way north along the border. In Acuña, a town of about 240,000 just across from Del Rio, he came to an orphanage that had lost its sponsor.

The orphanage, Casa Hogar del Nino, housed 24 children but was bare of everything except some pasta in the refrigerator, Decker recalled.

He did some quick math and determined he could support the orphanage with the money we made working extra jobs every other weekend.

While visiting the orphanage every few weeks, Decker would travel the neighborhood and give beans, rice and water to those who couldn't afford it.



Soon, others from the police department and his church joined him on his trips.

"The idea was to get other people to have the same amount of fun that I'm having with this," he said. "Because I've never had so much doggone fun in my life."

Now, Paper Houses supports four shelters for children and migrants and has built and supports two cafeterias that each feed more than 1,000 school children. That's in addition to the one-on-one help volunteers give.

### **Reluctant recipients**

After visiting Casa Hogar del Nino with Decker, Christine Wiegman was hooked. Two weeks later she returned with her two adopted sons, one whose father is Mexican.

She now coordinates Paper House's six yearly trips to Acuña, which has about 50,000 residents in the paper houses, Decker estimates. Each mission trip brings 20-40 volunteers, who meet at a Motel 6 in Del Rio on Thursday and leave Sunday. Each morning, they go into Acuña with translators.

Decker also takes school or church groups or other interested people on trips another half dozen times a year.

"The people who live in these cardboard houses understand the importance of being a neighbor and taking care of each other," Wiegman said. "That's the type of people they are, and that's what pulls me back."

They are happy and hopeful people with a great deal of self-respect and a strong view of their self-worth, said Dave Diaz, a Paper Houses board member.

They also have a great deal of pride, which is why Paper Houses has to be careful how it helps them. These are people who want to work, not rely on strangers for help.

## Find a charity that fits you

HPD Sgt. Bob Decker realizes Paper Houses' brand of good deeds may not appeal to everyone.

He recommends trying different charities for three days until you find one that fits you.

"Everyone is called for a specific purpose. Some people are drawn to work with AIDS in Africa, some feel a passion to work with the colonias, some want to help Katrina victims," he said. "It's all good. We all have a part in this. Maybe we're all the instruments used to answer each other's prayers, but all of us have to take up whatever it is we were born to do, and I don't think we were born to buy a bigger TV set. It's got to be more than that."

So Paper Houses pays a father to care for his blind, crippled son. They buy push carts so one man can sell ice cream and another Popsicles. They put another man to work doing maintenance at a primary school.

"If you just hand somebody some money, you're taking away from the dignity of work and you're making them dependent on you," Decker said. "The ideal situation would be putting them in a situation where they never have to ask for charity again."

### Eyes opening

Decker used to believe he'd earned everything he had. His parents didn't have anything to leave him, and he never won the lottery.

"But I got down there and learned that these people earn between \$39-\$49 a week, and they work harder than I've ever worked in my life," he

said. "There's people working a hell of a lot harder than I am and they ain't ever going to have these things.

"It made me understand that it wasn't just that I went out there and worked hard. I was a winner of the birth lottery. In the United States, you can do anything. And it's just not like that in other countries.

"So going down there just really kind of opened my eyes to the nonsense I carry around inside of me."

It also opened his eyes to the true meaning of poverty.

"We're the ones who are really in a state of poverty," he said. "We're impoverished because we've lost sight of what's important. Our lives aren't about what really matters anymore."

"We come back with such a thankfulness of what we have – jobs, country, surfaced roads – the things you take for granted," Diaz said. "It's like someone lifted a curtain from your eyes."

### The sensation of selflessness

Paper Houses doesn't have an office and the board members don't get paid. Every dollar sent to the charity goes to help those living in the shelters or the paper houses, Decker said.

"It's about as selfless an act as you can get," he said. "There's absolutely nothing in it for you. It doesn't put more money into the city of Houston, it doesn't do a whole lot to help the police image.

"It seems like the closer you get to where there's nothing in it for you, the better the feeling is. It's just remarkable what it does to you."

Sgt. Decker welcomes all comers to observe the colonias. Visit [www.paperhouses.org](http://www.paperhouses.org) or call 713-864-8741 for more information.