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Solidarity School Teaches Hispanic Children in Roswell Road Area

**By Priscilla Greear, Staff Writer
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ATLANTA-Pilar Fierro, a single mother who works cleaning houses in her heavily Hispanic neighborhood off Roswell Road, is "contenta" to give her youngest daughter Guadalupe a Catholic education-at a tuition of \$8 a day.

A Mexican immigrant, Fierro rents an apartment in the neighborhood and walks her daughter down the street each morning to the Solidarity School. The school is located next to La Canasta supermarket in a shopping center on Northwood Drive, just inside the I-285 perimeter off Roswell Road.

Also in the Hispanic shopping center are two second-floor suites and an extensive basement worship center for the Hispanic outreach of Holy Spirit Church, about three miles away. The ministry serves the community, in partnership with the school, to create "Solidarity Mission Village."

Up the street each morning, dozens of men wait at the corner to get construction or other day-labor jobs.

Fierro is grateful for this opportunity for Guadalupe, who's begun reading the Bible before she goes to bed. She says she could never afford Catholic education for her older two daughters. To show her gratitude, she occasionally volunteers to clean Guadalupe's classroom. She is pleased that the teachers at Solidarity School are bilingual.

"I'm happy that she is in that school because it teaches more about who God and the Virgin are. And it also teaches about our roots and about where we come from. I like that she is receiving a religious education- they teach everything in Solidarity School," she said. Having bilingual teachers "is important because many parents like me don't know the language and aren't able to communicate."

On a sunny morning Sept. 7, 4- and 5-year-olds, dressed neatly in red polo shirts with the school dove logo, and khaki pants, skirts or shorts, sit at tables with primary color blocks and listen to their teacher, Aline Reich, who is from Mexico.

The cheerful classroom with deep teal carpet and pale blue walls is decorated with bilingual prayers and posters. Reich instructs children in Spanish and English on how to paste shapes to paper.

"Look," she translates, "es mirar."

"What figure is this? Square? Triángulo? It's a rectangle," she said, before one boy begins crying in Spanish,

"He hit me."

"We paste little pieces of paper here," she explains. "Pegamos papelitos aqui . . . Do not fold it-no lo dobles. Cuídalo mucho por que es su trabajo. Be careful because it's your work." The tears dry quickly as children happily begin cutting and pasting.

Solidarity School is an independent Catholic school approved by Archbishop John F. Donoghue. It is managed by Independent School Counsel, a consulting firm for non-public schools throughout the Southeast, and funded through the Hanna Family Foundation.

Specifically designed to serve some of an estimated 2,000 Hispanic families, most from Mexico, who live in the immediate area of Northwood Drive, it opened in the fall of 2000 in a trailer in the parking lot. There was one class of 25 children with two teachers. The first year of operation was paid for entirely by the foundation. The school relies on private and corporation donations.

"The whole issue of Hispanic education is a major one. They have a very practical problem, the language issue," said ISC managing director Gareth Genner. "Neither secular nor Catholic educational systems are really quite up to deal with that. It's going to be a major challenge in Georgia."

The school has a 20-year lease with the option to purchase its space in the 55,000-square-foot shopping center. After an approximately \$400,000 renovation project, the school moved from the trailer into a space which consists of three classrooms, a reception area, workroom, space for physical education and storage.

Genner calls the pilot project a "highly competitive educational model but at low cost." Each grade has minimal staff. It is intended to be centrally operated by ISC, with Andrée Dávila serving as lead teacher, Genner said.

Solidarity School is intended to really be the first model for a concept for small, inner-city schools," he said. "This is a combination of Catholic, good educational practice and urban planning. In urban planning terms, we believe there's a need for small schools close enough for families they serve to (enable them) to actually walk to school, close enough so school and associated church becomes central for the lives of these families."

He said the cost of the Solidarity School, \$4,200 per year per child, is around 50 percent of the cost of educating children in public school.

This year Solidarity School has 55 students ages 4 to 7, three teachers, Reich, Dávila and Cecilia Trueba, and a volunteer teacher's aide. The school is managed by ISC staff members...

The concept is for the school to grow to an intentionally small capacity of 150 students in kindergarten through fifth grade with seven teachers. The plan is to add a grade each year and possibly a pre-kindergarten next year. Basement space will be renovated to provide three more classrooms, a kitchen and cafeteria, as students now eat donated food in their classrooms. Right now students visit a nearby local park. ISC hopes to construct a playground area in the parking lot this winter with proceeds from a fall fund-raiser.

All of the parents have financial needs. Working primarily as cooks, in construction or at fast food restaurants, they are asked to pay at least \$1 a day for the school, where children also receive lunch and a

morning and evening snack. The average family gives \$5, but no parent is turned away because of lack of funds. Those who can't pay are encouraged to volunteer their time, with one father volunteering as a janitor.

Genner recalled when the school first opened some Mexican mothers spoke disparagingly about the "\$1 school," but within six months after seeing students' progress "were approaching us saying, 'Would you help me get my child in that school?'"

Genner and Frank Hanna III, who has supported Catholic education over the last 10 years, began working together in early 1998 to find a way to offer Catholic education to those unable to afford it. Both are Holy Spirit parishioners.

"This is something I've been involved in a number of years," Hanna said. "How do you solve this issue of increasing cost for education when you need to be addressing the needs of those less fortunate?"

ISC then came up with the concept. As there were Hispanics living within Holy Spirit parish boundaries who weren't being served, Hanna said that was a good place to start.

"Education is not a one-size-fits-all for every community. We started talking about what we could do in this community," Hanna said. "We wanted it to be a school to create an atmosphere for the entire community. This school we felt could be the center of the entire community which is what it's become there with Solidarity Mission Village. One of our obligations is to look within our own neighborhoods when exercising charity, within any family, neighborhood, parish . . ."

Hanna sees joy in these children, which he believes can affect the community.

"You get a wonderful benefit when the community sees: Somebody cares about us and our children have hope. When they see their children have hope, they have hope for themselves," he said.

He is pleased with the volunteers who've come forward from Holy Spirit Church, from Catholic and non-Catholic schools, and other community groups.

"The more people who hear what's happening, the more people tend to be excited about it and say, 'How can we be involved in some manner?'" he said. "I'm enthused about it. It's challenging every day, but I think the school is providing good results with the children and it's been very well-received by the community and others interested in it, and we'll pray that continues."

A founding board member, Hanna chose the school's name from the emphasis placed by Pope John Paul II on Christian solidarity. The foundation continues to support the tuition of many children through the school sponsorship program.

"As a businessman I know of no other investment that has a higher return than Catholic education. That's why I spend so much investment in that area," Hanna said.

Genner said that the school, which advertised for students largely through the mission, was able to open with three classes this year instead of two as originally planned. This came after an anonymous donor, in addition to Hanna, agreed to sponsor 23 children. The school needs 10 to 15 corporate or family sponsors to pay for

one child's education for one or more years, in addition to general donations, he said. Sponsors can be kept up to date on their child's progress and meet with the families if desired.

The Hanna Family Foundation still sponsors the majority of students. Genner said he hopes that one day it would be able to become a Catholic charter school through public funding.

"We're confident they'll (donors) come forward," Genner said. "Our objective is the school will become largely self-funded through donations, which will allow us to provide funding from the Hanna Foundation to start a second school. We see the potential for some close relationships between donor families and recipient families."

He is confident the donations will help provide the children with an excellent education based on the national "core knowledge curriculum." He calls the program for the school comparable to instruction at "the finest schools in the city." Students who completed the first school year scored in the top 10 percent nationally in the Aprenda II test for Hispanic children in an English-speaking environment, Genner said.

Solidarity School is seeking accreditation through the Southern Association of Independent Schools.

"The objective is to provide the level of education so that these children will qualify for scholarships to enter some of the city's finest independent and Catholic schools or to qualify for public magnet schools," Genner said.

The curriculum includes Catholic religious formation and Spanish as well as English. Mexican and Latin American history and culture are taught, in addition to U.S. history and culture. Genner has found parents deeply appreciate the opportunity to give their children Catholic education and education about their heritage. In Mexico, he said, there are more opportunities for families, even poor families, to send their children to Catholic schools.

In kindergarten instructions are also given in Spanish, but after that the program is all in English. Students are grouped by broad age range for homeroom, but are grouped for classes according to skill level so that, for example, a 7-year-old who speaks little English can learn with younger students at the same language level.

An optional one and a half to two hours will be added on soon to the 8:30 a.m.-3:45 p.m. school day for parents who work late and summer vacation is a month. While public schools make good efforts with non-English-speaking Hispanics despite lacking resources, ...Solidarity focuses entirely on the specific needs of Latinos.

In public schools "they're not able to get the attention they need to master the language so they kind of float through school. And then when they get out of school they're not really ready to do much of anything in the American society. And that's been proven nationally. The focus is really to give them an excellent education with complete immersion in English so that when they leave us in grade five they're ready to get into the system, public or private, and excel," [according to ISC]. "You talk to our kids who have been here a year and they are so far ahead of the game its amazing in terms of their knowledge of concepts but also their understanding of the language."

Solidarity seeks volunteers, who need not know Spanish, for an after-school mentoring program to help

students in English. [ISC] is pleased with the "incredible generosity of spirit" of parents. They just began a PTA. [ISC noted] that parents feel safer getting involved in a small Catholic school than public ones, as in Mexico there is more reporting between public schools and the state.

...Genner added the bilingual teachers are important in facilitating communication with parents who typically don't speak English, and that they send bilingual progress reports home every two weeks.

"They speak no English in most cases when they arrive at school. When they go home in the evening parents don't speak English, can't help with homework. They're listening to Hispanic TV and (reading Spanish) newspapers. The odds are entirely stacked against them in terms of succeeding in an English-speaking environment."

A 2001 report from the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans estimates that as many as one-fifth of Hispanic students who have limited English proficiency receive no special services to help ensure that they learn English while making progress in other academic subjects. It reports that in 1998, the high school completion rate was 90 percent for white students and 81 percent for black students, but for Hispanic students was only 63 percent.

Dávila, a founding teacher who taught previously in a public school, likes teaching her 7-year-olds in the nurturing, Catholic environment. Her founding pupils have become much more comfortable in English and are nearly fluent. She recalled one shy girl's mother took her out of the school for public school where she was teased and struggled but then brought her back to Solidarity where she progressed.

"She was very shy about her English," she said. "Her confidence has bloomed with us." She encourages her parents to also learn English through the Holy Spirit mission.

"Some of them work a lot so it's hard to find time for that. If a mother's not working outside the home she's taking care of a lot of kids in the neighborhood," she said. "I work more with parents. They're right across the street and most of them pick them up. If there is some behavior issue and academic issue, I can talk to them easier and faster."

Seeking to bring the presence of the church and needed English classes to those parents and other Hispanics in the neighborhood, Msgr. Edward Dillon, pastor of Holy Spirit Church and a Solidarity School advisory board member, happened to be looking for a site at the same shopping center. When he learned of the school and decided to lease space there, the village concept was conceived.

Now there's talk of adding a thrift shop, Catholic bookstore and a police precinct. The center, once plagued with violent crime, has been a safe haven since they moved in.

"This has created an amazing difference in the community. What it's doing for the kids is good. What it's doing for the overall community is amazing," Genner said.

Genner called the Holy Spirit parish picnic this year the "best ever" as Mexican families brought tacos and music, and recalled how Solidarity families mingled happily with Holy Spirit members and neighbors at the school's first graduation ceremony.

"The work of the mission and school together has brought these Hispanic families into the mainstream church instead of being isolated."

The Holy Spirit mission site, called Centro Católico, began in March 2000 and is run by director Monica Opperman and pastoral assistant Sister Inez Ramos, MAG. It offers spiritual and social services, including religious education, sacramental preparation, referrals, mentoring, English as a Second Language and computer classes. There are 184 volunteers from Holy Spirit, neighboring Hispanics and elsewhere at the mission, which has served about 2,676 people since it began.

Sunday Mass is celebrated by Father Jose Refugio Oñate, parochial vicar at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church, Atlanta, and other Hispanic priests as available, and draws about 200 people. Most children from Solidarity School and their families are parishioners.

The pastor said they're still trying to determine what other social services the community needs. As most in the area have no medical insurance they're looking into arranging modest primary care service. Many showed up for lawyer Jesús Nerio's first talk on immigration issues. As there are Hispanics all along Roswell Road between I-285 and Buckhead, Msgr. Dillon plans to serve more eventually.

"ESL is a very big project for the people there. Also there's a good bit of drug and alcohol counseling. That's a fairly good size issue for a lot of people in that community," Msgr. Dillon said. "We've tried to approach it on a fairly slow and deliberate basis, not getting started addressing another program until we have one program fairly solidly established."

Msgr. Dillon said Holy Spirit's major focus now is working with Catholic Construction Services to plan a renovation of Centro Católico, expanding into a new area to add three classrooms, offices and a gathering area. This will provide a total of 7,000 square feet and allow them to move out of the second-floor suites. They will also utilize some of the schoolrooms at night and on the weekends when classes are not in session. The parish is trying to keep costs down, as the church spent over \$150,000 in 2000-2001 and will always fund the mission.

"We'll have more space and it will be more convenient. It will have an entrance from the street," Opperman said of the renovation project.

Opperman has seen hope grow in the community as people experience God's love through others. A few members volunteered to paint their space to brighten it for a retreat. They held a candlelight vigil after the terrorist attacks, placing burning candles and American flags in the parking lot that weekend.

"It's just building a wonderful community," she said. "It's a blessing. I'm so proud of it. I thank God every day for what's happened there. It really has changed. A year and a half ago I was scared to go there."

On many nights Fierro, an active member of the mission, takes Guadalupe back to the village for the nightly rosary. She's taking the fall English class, one of the mission's biggest projects with 27 volunteers, and along with another daughter became a catechist this year, enabling them to together teach the 3-year-olds. And, having been separated from the church for several years before a relative introduced her to the Solidarity village, she's come to know God's love and community with other school parents, parishioners and neighbors.

"Thanks to God I'm happy because I've met many persons in the school and other places that help us in daily life," she said. "It's not important whether the school is small or big, rich or poor. The teachers are good and treat the children well . . . There isn't discrimination. They treat all the children well. They love all the children."

As for ISC, Genner [is] excited about the opportunity to teach Guadalupe and other neighborhood children while improving the quality of life for their entire community. And the next office project is Spanish lessons. "The school is part of a master plan in community development and that's what makes it so exciting because it's the foundation for so much more"...

People who are interested may contact ISC at (404) 221-0203.