

Educating young minds, nurturing a world's dreams

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

"There's a land so I've been told / Every street is paved with gold / An' it's just across the borderline."

— "Across the Borderline" by Ry Cooder, John Hyatt, James Dickinson

"If we don't do something about our future, we won't have one."

— Sam Birchall, Amigos de las Escuelas

In the book "American Mosaic," Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky piece together a century of first-hand accounts of men, women and children who came to our country to make new lives for themselves and for us. We are all immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Even native Americans, Joan

and Charlotte remind us, "walked across a land bridge from Siberia some thousands of years ago." At the end of a trying year for all Americans, it might do us good to listen to voices about our immigrant past, present and future.

Pauline Newman was seven or eight years old when she came here from Lithuania in 1901. Her family crossed the ocean in the bottom of a big ship. Their only food was "more like a mud puddle than soup." Their two-room apartment in New York had one windowless bedroom and communal toilets out in the yard.

Pauline went straight to work in the Triangle Shirt Factory, infamous for its 1911 fire that killed 146 women and girls. Fire escape doors were locked to prevent immigrant workers from sneaking short breaks during long work days. Labor law inspectors took bribes. Pauline was then my son's age. I shudder imagining him cutting string ends with little scissors from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. instead of going to school and playing at home.

If you talk to Sam Birchall and Rob Foree, who devote their spare time to the nonprofit organization Amigos de las Escuelas, you'll be convinced that giving children a chance at education is good for everyone. Together, Sam and Rob have 101 years of life experience. They know how things are and what they might be. Birchall has a strong "habit of do-gooderness." Foree says flatly, "I am not the volunteer type." Their opposing styles work.

Where they work is with the people of colonia Ferrocarril No. 4 of Rio Bravo, Mexico, across from McAllen. When former Peace Corps volunteers arrived in 1988 after Hurricane Gilbert, there was no school for kindergartners. Sewage, garbage and fetid water filled the canal behind the colonia. More than 1,000 men, women and children lived in dirt-floor houses made of cardboard and plywood. There was no running water.

"Destitute" is how Amigos volunteer Alicia Loving, a 2001 University of Texas at Austin graduate, describes the condition of the colonia when she first visited in 1995. A chicken tied up near a house is still a symbol of well-being.

These families were effectively "illegal immigrants" in their own country, squatting on railroad property until they united and collectively petitioned for community status. Their plan set aside space for a school. But where would they get one? American



Above, Katie Foree, 2, celebrates her birthday with the kindergartners at Ferrocarril No. 4. Her father, Rob, works with Amigos de las Escuelas, which helped set up the school. The school has provided opportunities for many children, including sister Rosario, below left, and Mayra. The girls had been ready to find work to help their family when volunteer Sam Birchall arranged for them to attend school instead. The girls are now straight-A students.



volunteers worked with colonia leaders and residents. The Profesor Donacio Munoz Martinez School now serves 35 kindergartners and 110 upper-elementary students.

Birchall's incurable "do-gooderness" began when he joined the Peace Corps 15 years ago. He stressed his knowledge of small businesses and Spanish. The Peace Corps assigned him to Swaziland, Africa, where he taught woodworking and technical drawing to high-school students for three years.

"You know these government folks," he says with dead-pan good humor. "Sometimes they know more than you, and you have to defer to their greater insight."

Birchall took away an insight of his own. "I realized a good education was the most important thing that happened to me in my life. People from the border communities will continue to

come to our country. It is better for their and our future that they arrive educated and already know and like Americans." And so he goes there with Foree and 60 volunteers for a week every Thanksgiving and every March.

Foree's wife, Julia, and daughter Katie, now 2, go, too. The community of Ferrocarril No. 4 is safe and welcoming for his whole family. This is partly because Foree works hard making sure the Amigos workers are true and committed friends of the people of the colonia, not one-time visitors focused on self-fulfillment.

The kindergarten wall is a good example. Amigos helped build it to prevent vandalism and shelter the children from disrupting influences. Now that Amigos volunteers have added a playscape and mural, the youngsters play and learn in a bright and beautiful environment.

Many children in the colonia quit school after the sixth grade and go work in the campos or in maquiladora factories. Such places are today what the Triangle Shirt Factory was a century ago. Mayra and Rosario, two sisters in a family of eight children, were going to do just that. Birchall arranged for them to stay in school. Today, they are thriving, straight-A students.

Alicia enjoys "spend[ing] time with people who appreciate the tiny simplicities we take for granted." She laughs warmly about the old mapache doll children gave her after she painted raccoons on garbage can lids to teach the importance of throwing away trash. Foree says, "I am motivated to find answers that make sense to me."

The people of Amigos de las Escuelas and Ferrocarril No. 4 have found many small, sensible answers that immigrate four times a year back and forth across the borderline.

Palaima, a University of Texas classics professor, dedicates this piece to his dear grandmother Sophie, who "fell off a turnip truck" on her arrival in Cleveland from Poland in 1913. For more information on Amigos de las Escuelas, go to www.my-amigos.org