

Pine Island Baja Builders return from a successful home-building mission trip.

After more than a year of fundraising, a group of 55 people, mostly from Saint Paul Lutheran Church in Pine Island, saw the fruits of their labor bloom in the arid lands of western Mexico. The group worked hard and gave freely of their own finances, time and talents to see their dream of building five homes for families in one of the poorest regions of that country—in Vicente Guerrero, Baja, Mexico.

Calling themselves the Baja Builders, this is the second time in the past three years that Saint Paul has sent a group like this to Mexico over MEA break. Families made up most of the group, with 13 of the members being children ages 12-18. Several in the team had construction expertise, and they were called up to lead the five teams of home builders. Everyone contributed their talents and muscles in many ways, and all worked together to saw, hammer, tar, paint, wire and whatever else was necessary to erect the 20'x22' homes from the ground up.

Most of the people who live in this arid part of western Mexico are farm workers, and many live in crowded conditions in makeshift tents, shacks and old campers. Although the conditions are poor, the group found the people warm, friendly, gracious, appreciative and extremely generous. Many of the teams were fed authentic Mexican meals at their worksites daily. The food was abundant and delicious. “At first I was concerned that our family that we were building for was spending too much money to feed us. I didn’t want to be a burden to them. But then I realized that they were doing this out of love and appreciation to us. It was their way of thanking us and we accepted with a glad heart,” said Tina Culbertson. Her daughter Annie added “It was the best food I have ever eaten! I wanted to ask Guillermina to come back to Pine Island with me to be our school lunch lady!”

All of the Baja Builders paid their own travel and lodging expenses for the week-long trip. The purpose of the fundraising was to purchase the needed building materials for the five homes. However, because of the overwhelming generosity of the community, the group found themselves with several thousand extra dollars and quickly went to work to find the best ways to use it to better the lives of the people in Baja.

Spanish speaking team members canvassed the neighborhoods where the homes were being built and determined that basic necessities were badly needed by many. Therefore, several outhouses, shower houses, stoves, gas tanks, water stands, bags of cement for floors and hundreds of bags of groceries were purchased and delivered to these neighbors.

Karen Doll recalled the experience: “I will never forget two men who ran down a dusty, rut-ridden road to catch me and ask for a bag of food to feed their families. We had dropped off dispensas (bags of beans, rice, flour, oil, and soap), throughout the neighborhood where we found someone home, but these men had just returned from a 12-hour shift in the field. How precious food is to the poor, and how difficult it must be for these proud and dignified human beings to have to ask for it to feed their loved ones.”

A handwritten note was received from the Reyes Rosajel family, who was given a stove. Translated, it read: “I give a thousand thank yous to you pastors and for each one of you for your generosity, for your care for me and mine and for the huge amount of help and blessing that you gave me with the stove. I pray that Jesus guards the large heart He gave you and that everything you do is with all His love.”

The group carried 55 suitcases, each filled with clothes, shoes, diapers, toys, school supplies, dolls and soccer balls to Mexico with them. These items were delivered in person to those in need, many of whom live in migrant worker camps and have very few personal possessions. One

of the camps visited had a building where they held worship services. The sparsely-furnished shed was wired for electricity, but they had no generator. The Baja Builders group was able to purchase a generator and arranged for benches to be made for the church so those weary from a long day's work in the fields could sit down and rest in God's house.

Other funds were used to support a local school, an orphanage and a newly-founded women's shelter in Vicente Guerrero. The needs are great in this part of Mexico, and many from the group look forward to coming back to this area again in a couple years.

A highlight of the trip for many that had been there before, was returning to the homes that they had helped build in 2008. Members of the original teams were able to reunite with the families that they grew to love in the week they spent together three years ago. It was heartwarming to find the homes in good repair (some had been added on to accommodate growing families) and the families doing well for themselves. A three year old photograph of the smiling team and family, posed in front of their then newly-built house, was proudly displayed in one of the homes.

Although the obvious benefits of the mission are to provide homes and other blessings to the poor, most group members would tell you that they themselves are the ones who are richer from the experience. Lezli Weis stated, "I was lucky enough to join the team going to Mexico just a few weeks before we left, and I'm so glad I took this chance. I learned so much in just a few short days and feel so blessed to have been able to provide a new home for such a wonderful and deserving family. Gabriella, the mother of our family, did not stop smiling the entire time we were there. Putting joy in her life was well-worth the trip. I also am thankful for the opportunity to get to know the members of my church and community better. Everyone on the trip worked so hard. This is not an experience I'll be forgetting anytime soon."

Photo captions:



1.
The Baja Builders 2011 Group

Top row: Pastor John Lohre, Tom Bollman, Kelvin Grabau, Dale Roers, Gary Lechelt, Art Gust, Scott Culbertson, Steve Pleshcourt, Doug Baska, Dave Sween, Gary Quimby, Jerry Vettel, Danny Thompson, Bob Doll, Mark Aarsvold, Dan Langworthy, Fred Knudsvig

4th row: Beth Roers, Ann Fahy-Gust, Nancy Grabau, Mary Lohre, Kari Toft, Kari Strandell, Karla Thompson, Julie Baska, Kim Aarsvold, Marsha Knudsvig, Lorraine Vettel, Karen Doll

3rd row: Paul Kohner, Beth Kohner, Stuart Weis, Doug Strandell, Tina Culbertson, Rose Harris, Jerry Harris, Becky Lohmeyer, Jeff Lohmeyer

2nd row: Sam Baska, Julia Doll, Lezli Weis, Emma Culbertson, Annie Culbertson, Caity Fahy, Caleb Toft, Donielle Hrtanek, Katie Pleshcourt, Jared Lohmeyer, Adam Pleschcourt, Drew Lohmeyer

Front row: Sophie Langworthy, Marcus Aarsvold, Noelle Langworthy

Missing from the photo: Terry Timm and Glenn Weeks



2.

The group was able to provide many badly needed items to neighbors in the area where the homes were built. This woman was given a four-burner stovetop. When it was delivered it was discovered that her family lived in a dirt-floor house made entirely of cardboard and plastic. Twelve bags of concrete were delivered to her home the following day so she will soon have a concrete floor.



3.

A sense of accomplishment and pure joy shows on the faces of all those who worked together to erect this home for the De la Cruz family. Baja Builders team members pictured are: Stuart and Lezli Weis; Dan, Sophie and Noelle Langworthy; Kari and Caleb Toft; Gary Lechelt, Beth and Dale Roers, and Tom Bollman.



4.

The children in the neighborhoods and camps were anxious to play soccer, get piggyback rides, have their fingernails painted, and play with the dolls and stuffed animals the group brought to Mexico with them. Katie Pleshcourt is shown here with her new friend at one of the camps the group visited.



5.

The group of 55 Baja Builders from Pine Island erected five houses in Baja, Mexico during MEA week. The families that received the homes were anxious to help with the building and painting and many of the mothers prepared delicious meals for the workers. Annie Culbertson was happy for the assistance of an eager little helper.