



## Weavers of Hope

### Overview

*Describe the project or ministry that you would like to have considered for the Mary and Gary Becker Award.*

Weavers of Hope provides educational assistance for students in and around Villa Garcia, Zacatecas, Mexico. Most of our students live in poverty and would not be able to continue their education without this support. The program focuses on preparing students for self-sufficiency through education and meaningful work. Academic achievements, leadership development, and moral integrity are all stressed.

The university students take on key leadership roles in our program. They often share their expertise and experience via presentations at the monthly meetings in Mexico. They provide guidance and modeled behavior for our younger students. They are excellent Christian role models for the younger students and for many of the adults in the village. Sr. Fran Smith, a Catholic sister, has lived in the community since 1998, and provides leadership, love, and monitoring on a daily basis. Scarlett Shaffer has been with us for over 12 years and is a co-leader with Sr. Fran. They work closely together on all matters related to our program. Sr. Fran and Scarlett work with village leaders, school principals, faculty, parents, and selected university students to ensure that our focus is on long-term development and success. They maintain close personal relationships with all of our students (approximately 70 at this time).

Our students have various responsibilities in order to continue in the Weavers of Hope program. They must:

- Maintain at least an 8.0 grade point average (on a scale of 10).
- Attend monthly student/parent meetings
- Write to their sponsors twice a year
- Perform community service projects



- Maintain high ethics and morals in their behavior
- Generally, have a good attitude

### *How did it come to be?*

Weavers of Hope began at St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Austin in 2002. A group of parishioners, including myself, were going through a 30-week formation process called JustFaith. It focuses on poverty and the root causes of poverty. Themes of social justice and Catholic Social Teaching (CST) are woven throughout the program. During this class, we got connected to Sr. Fran in Villa Garcia. The local people had just experienced a catastrophic flood. An earthen dam in the hills above town suddenly ruptured and water ripped downward overflowing the channel and taking out everything in its path. Two people died in the flood, many were injured, and there was extensive property damage.

Eight of us from the JustFaith group visited Villa Garcia in early 2003 to meet the people and get their ideas on where support would be most helpful. Almost unanimously, the families told us that education for their children was the issue that they most valued. Together, with the people of Villa Garcia, we started Weavers of Hope to help the community meet their educational goals. The program began to grow and expand to several other Catholic parishes in the Austin diocese. Due to the growth, a separate organization was needed to plan and manage this work. In 2004, Weavers of Hope became a licensed, non-profit corporation in the state of Texas (EIN 73-1689389). We also received an IRS 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt status.

The JustFaith class taught us the concepts of CST, and the project work allowed us to put those teachings into practice. The cross-cultural relationships have grown significantly over the years. Many people in the diocese of Austin have gotten to know the people in Mexico. This has led to a growth in unity and solidarity among many people from both countries. There is also a committed personal prayer connection that unites us across the border.

### **Impact**

#### *How has the project benefited others?*

Approximately 60% of our students are in the university. The rationale for that distribution was that they would be able to graduate sooner, find jobs, and help their own families. This has proved to be true. The other 40% of our students are younger. They are influenced by the university students and encouraged to continue their education.

Rafael Castaneda, a highly respected community member from the Villa Garcia area, has consistently supported the work of our grant program. Mr. Castaneda, like many of our students, is a first-generation university graduate. He knows from personal



experience the struggles that our students face to obtain a degree and professional success. He currently teaches math in a well-known university in Zacatecas. Mr. Castaneda believes that he can see a visible change in the way the people in the community think regarding the value of education. He attributes that to the work and guidance that is provided by the Weavers of Hope team.

Jose Alfredo graduated from the university with a degree in teaching. He said, “After graduating from high school, I went on to study primary school education. There were many challenges, but Sr. Fran and the other people in the parent’s committee were always supportive. Thanks to their support and your support I am now a licensed primary school teacher. I am so happy to have reached a dream that I often times doubted would ever become a reality.”

*How many lives has the project or ministry impacted?*

Over 130 students have graduated from the university during our 18-year history. They cover a wide range of disciplines, e.g. teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, computer professionals, accountants, business majors, engineers, etc. As of this time, we have helped over 335 students to continue their education. Many of them would not have been able to stay in school without this support.

*What are the long-term impacts?*

The long-term impacts are huge. Many of our university graduates are becoming community leaders. Some of them return to Villa Garcia to give back to their neighbors.

- Jesus Campos, who graduated with a Master’s degree in counselling, began returning to Villa Garcia on Saturdays to provide free counselling services to the local people.
- Octavio Cruz, an electrical engineer, helps Sr. Fran with electrical problems whenever called upon.
- Juan Carlos Elias and several other graduates have returned to our monthly meetings to give testimony about their educational journeys and how they led to jobs. They talk about what they are doing in their work and paint a picture which relates education to jobs and quality of life.
- As our graduates marry and have their own children, we can see the generational impact of our work. They are clearly focused on sending their children to the university. We are slowly helping to break the cycle of poverty through education.

## **Engagement**

*How has the project or ministry impacted the local community?*



Weavers of Hope students are required to attend monthly meetings. For each meeting, Scarlett designs a creative activity that stimulates a reflection on morals and values in our daily lives. There is time for sharing and conversation around the topic that the activity addresses. We focus considerable attention on developing our students holistically. These meetings also help to develop a bond among our students, and with our staff. Families are invited to these meetings, so the bonding process also occurs organically among the adults. Often, it helps to bring families closer together as parents and children share their thoughts on these social issues. In conversation together, they explore the importance of living lives of integrity and honor. This is my favorite part of our program as it unites families and shapes lives in an incredibly thoughtful and caring manner.

*Has the project or ministry invited and involved volunteers from the community?*

Weavers of Hope began with our volunteers asking families in the community for their advice on what would be most helpful in their lives. The overwhelming answer from them was to help with education for their children. We recognized the importance of community involvement from day one. With this focus in mind, a parent's committee was formed and nurtured from the very beginning. The parents help in so many ways with the administration of the program, e.g. helping with the meetings, sponsoring raffles, providing input on potential new students, interviewing families on special needs, accepting applications for entry, participating in conversations about morals and values, handing out the grants at the meetings, leading the prayers, etc.

*How are those served involved in the decision-making or leadership?*

In addition to the parent's committee, there are other families in Villa Garcia who are community leaders and support our work. They help us with the nuances of getting things done in their culture, provide insights on situations to watch out for, and help us to assess the credibility of various things that come up with our families at times. Local people are intimately involved in the decision making and leadership for Weavers of Hope.

We also talk with our graduates and students about the program and solicit their ideas for improving our work. They are encouraged to help us to guide and shape what we do.

## **Sustainability**

*Are there funding sources in place to sustain the project or ministry?*

We have over 130 sponsors and donors at this time. They have provided most of our funding since our inception. We plan to continue to receive the majority of our funding from our sponsors through active efforts to present this work to various individuals and groups. I've been able to speak at the weekend Masses in various



Catholic parishes over the years, and this is an excellent source of attracting new sponsors. Weavers of Hope, the book, has now been distributed to over 1,500 people. We were also featured in a video which was produced by JustFaith Ministries for their GoodNewsPeople program. This program was given in many parishes across the U.S. This 5-minute video can be viewed on our website at [www.weaversofhope.com](http://www.weaversofhope.com) by clicking on “Books & Videos”. This exposure results in additional awareness and funding.

In many prior years we have received grants from the Austin diocese’s Ashes to Easter grant program, and the Congregation of Holy Cross.

*Is there is a strategy in place for hiring staff or recruiting volunteers to see the project or ministry continue?*

Weavers of Hope is run by all volunteers with one exception, Scarlett Shaffer. Scarlett came to us as an intern over 12 years ago when she was working on her Master’s degree in Sustainable Development. She works as a Field Co-coordinator in Mexico. She and Sr. Fran along with the parent’s committee run the Mexico end of our operation. We have an outstanding group of volunteers, and a large network of Just Faith graduates and other parishioners who help us in various ways. Should we ever need to hire anyone else, it would be led by our Board of Directors with significant input from Sr. Fran and Scarlett.

As new students enter our program, some of the parents are interested in learning about the parent’s committee. These potential new members are given an orientation on what the parent’s committee does and how they might be asked to participate on the committee. If they are still interested, they are invited to attend a meeting. There, they begin to receive training from Sr. Fran, Scarlett, and the other members of the committee.

*Describe how the award funds would help the project or ministry.*

This grant is requested specifically to help our educational sponsorship program. It would allow us to help fund the educational expenses for existing and new students in our program. There is a long waiting list of good students, most of whom live in poverty, who seek admission to our program. These funds would help us to admit some of them.

### **JFM graduate(s) involvement**

*Provide some history of the JFM graduates involved in the project or ministry.*

As mentioned, 8 people from our 2002-2003 JustFaith class made the initial trip to Villa Garcia to assess the situation in February 2003. Half of them have been actively involved in the project for these 18 years.



Personally, I have been the ministry leader in my parish, St. Ignatius Martyr Catholic Church, for JustFaith programs for 10 years. We have sponsored a 24 to 30-week class each year, so the number of graduates is bountiful. We also had over 200 parishioners go through the GoodNewsPeople program. This has given us many volunteers over the years to help with Weavers of Hope.

*Give some sense of the impact of a JustFaith Ministries program on the nominee's commitment to the project or ministry.*

JustFaith was a life changing event for me. It changed the way I look at everything. It was the single most important class that I have ever taken. It also had a profound effect on many of those who went through the program. Several of them are now active members of the Weavers of Hope team.

