



Sewing Seeds of Hope in the Desert

by Rachel Laramée, CSC

Tacna, Perú: Holy Cross Center fosters resilience.

In 2000, after much research and reflection, the Sisters of Holy Cross opened a new mission in Tacna, the capital of the southernmost region in Peru. For the first few years, we lived in diocesan housing and spent our time exploring our new surroundings, becoming acclimated and learning about the cultures of our ethnically diverse neighbors who had come from the coastal region, the mountains and even the jungle. Gradually, we became involved in the most impoverished areas and began befriending people there.



Four years later, Holy Cross priests also came to Tacna and located in Vinani, a very poor area on the edge of the desert, which was inhabited by people recently displaced by an earthquake. We joined the men in their work and, after much negotiation, the municipality of Tacna gave us a plot of land on which to build a Center and a residence.

Because this is a desert area with no electricity or water and 30 minutes away from any source of materials, constructing new buildings was no easy task! But, after four years, due to the ingenuity and persistence of

Sisters Françoise Savoie and Fabienne Vachon, we were able to open “Holy Cross Center” and move into our new home.



The Center provides opportunities for impoverished youth and adults to develop talents and learn skills that enable them to enhance the well-being of their families and improve the local micro-economy. This, in turn, contributes to the region’s macro-economy.



- Children find a place to do homework, receive tutoring and access library resources.
- Teens are taught computer skills, intellectual debate and organized sports.
- Adults receive leadership training and counseling; special programs for women include knitting, crocheting, and sewing classes. Items the women craft are then sold in the local market.

Teaching the women to sew has been slow going, but the project is filled with promise. These women are very poor - displaced people from the interior of the country. They live in straw huts, with only the bare necessities of life - no running water, no kitchens, no bathrooms. Since gardens are not possible in the desert, their only financial resources come from reselling on the street items they have bought at a lower price elsewhere. These extra pesos allow them to feed their two or three children.



When the Center opened in March 2008, the five participants in the class knew practically nothing about sewing. Slowly, in the months that followed, they learned to operate a sewing machine, sew in a straight line, identify different types of fabrics, and cut the material successfully. While the women were at work in the sewing center, their children were schooled in “day-care” under the guidance of a paid instructor.

By December 2009, the women had learned to make pants, blouses, and children’s clothing for their families. However, they still needed to earn a living so arrangements were made for them to sew uniforms for students in the primary grades at a nearby school. Now the women are able to earn money to provide for their children. And equally important, the quality of their own lives has improved and their status risen both in their families and in the community.

In January 2010, five new women began an apprenticeship. What’s next for the Center? Who knows for sure? But our dream is to expand the program, introducing more and more women to marketable trades that will enhance their personal lives, help their families thrive, and strengthen the resilience of their community.



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