

Group hopes to save girls from abuse

The girls are lured with drugs and other solicitations to leave Windsor Girls Home in Jamaica.

SHEILA HAGAR

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It's the wall that keeps Carl Robanske up at night.

Made of tattered chain-link fencing, the wall at the Windsor Girls Home is more of a symbol of failed security than any real protection.

And security is just what the facility overseen by the Jamaican government is supposed to provide for its residents - the abandoned, abused and orphaned girls of St. Ann's Bay in Jamaica.

The teens are victims of extreme poverty and each one has been abused in some way. Many are not true orphans but have been left at Windsor by families who could not feed, clothe or house their children.

Robanske, founder and chairman of Walla Walla-based "Embracing Orphans," is determined to see things change for these young women, through the use of volunteers and generous hearts.

Embracing Orphans, formed early in 2008, uses fundraising, outreach trips and relationship-building to work with agencies caring for orphaned kids. So far, the organization has concentrated on Jamaica, but will eventually expand, the founder said.

The goal is to change the quality of life for such children by strengthening their lives in education, spirituality, emotional and physical health.

The organization, in collaboration with Christian Life Center church in Walla Walla, previously supplied playground equipment and furnishings to younger children at Blossom Gardens child-care facility in Jamaica's Montego Bay. The center cares for 70 children, from newborn to 8 years old.

It was during that trip last summer Robanske and his crew visited Windsor Girls Home. On the first approach to the facility, they saw a cyclone fence laced with holes large enough for people to pass through, he said. The wire was bent and the gates nearly useless.

On one side of the fence sat the orphanage, a number of decrepit buildings stretching into a small valley.

On the other side were the men. Sitting on rocks or leaning against the wire, waiting for the night.

Waiting for the girls of Windsor.

The customers come, for the most part, from a nearby squatters camp, Robanske said. The men, some just boys, start hanging around during the day, increasing in numbers with the setting sun.

It doesn't take much to entice the girls to weave through the holes in the fence, emerging on the other side. The men call out, sometimes offering drugs for the company of a compliant female.

But the Windsor Girls Home clients - some barely hitting puberty, others already pregnant - are just as hungry for a hug, a kind word, the comfort of being needed. Not all are willing to "go to the fence," but plenty are, said Robanske, who recently returned from another trip to Jamaica.

These kids have already constructed plenty of emotional walls - one made from ripped fencing is no barrier at all, he added.

When they leave with the men, some girls will run away from Windsor; others will be gone for the night.

"The girls want the community and the attention," Robanske said. "They are looking for any kind of relationship."

Administrators and employees at the orphanage seem powerless to stop the process, and no one else has stepped forward, he noted.

The plan is to change things in a two-fold way, he explained. One component is physical: tear down the compromised fence and put up 1,200 feet of cinder-block wall standing 8-feet high with razor wire coiled along the top. "That's typical for Jamaica. Here it would look like a detention center."

Even that won't stop the most determined transactions of drugs and human flesh, Robanske believes. Still, the better barrier, costing about \$50,000, will allow for "a longer decision-making process" for the Windsor girls, he said.

Getting around a new wall may dissuade many girls from leaving the compound. As well, the men outside will not be able to easily see into the grounds, targeting the girls with their shouts and pleas.

For all the expense and hassle, the new structure is the easy part. The old habits and acceptance of the lifestyle will be the most difficult to change, Robanske believes.

The second half of his plan is to sponsor the first Young Life camp in Jamaica, one specifically for the teens at Windsor Girls Home.

"To be there, to be around those girls for five or six days, that is a really big thing," he noted.

The faith-based Young Life organization has a presence in more than 50 countries, with about 90,000 kids attending its summer camps each year for one week.

Traditionally the camps are structured with special speakers, music, physical activity and "controlled chaos." The focus is on accepting children exactly as they are and showing them the love of Jesus Christ, according to the organization.

While Young Life operates in Jamaica, it reaches a relatively small demographic and hasn't hosted a summer camp there.

That, Robanske said, is going to change. He and team of volunteers will pay their own way to organize and run a camp the third week of June, following Young Life's successful template.

With the camp situated in Mandeville, two hours away from St. Ann's Bay, many of the girls will be farther away from their situation than ever, he said. "They'll see it's safe."

The crew, which includes a Walla Walla counselor, will slather on attention and love, working hard to convince the girls they are "princesses. Daughters of the king," said Julie Woods, executive assistant for Embracing Orphans. "We're looking to give these girls some dignity."

Joyce del Rosario will be the featured speaker at this first endeavor. The Californian is a school guidance counselor and spent nine years working for Young Life. While she's helped American kids with dire circumstances, the Jamaica situation is compelling, she said. "When I heard the story of these kids, I realized the kids in the U.S. at least have had families, have some resources. These girls, the only messages they've gotten ... are so negative."

Shane Prudente, director of Young Life in this area, fit the organization's slogan to the situation. "There is a phrase we use - 'We're respectful of who they are, but hopeful of who they can become.' That can go such a long way for these girls who have been abused."

The children of Windsor Girls Home need parents, but a week of camp is the closest Embracing Orphans can come, Robanske added. "Let these girls know they are loved ... let them know they are loved by God."

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