

Sausalito group's service trips help women, families in grief

By Nancy Isles Nation, *Marin Independent Journal*

It was just five months after Nancy Ross lost her son, Patrick, that she traveled to Mexico to work at an orphanage with two other women whose children had died.

She heard about the Mexico trip from a relative and decided immediately it was for her. The Berkeley resident's grief was still raw and dark in those early stages. She cried daily about the son who had fought cancer for 16 months before he lost the battle at 22.

Ross got in touch with Project Grace and signed up, thinking it would provide her with the opportunity to do something that would take energy and engagement.

"It felt like a lifeline," Ross said. "Some people would spend more time deliberating but when I am my normal self, I like to go and do. Here was something that was so profound that I could go and do."

Project Grace is a program of CorStone, the Sausalito organization that works to develop and support emotional resilience for children and adults who are dealing with challenge, conflict or crisis.

The program was founded by Catherine Bowen Stern and Carole Mahoney, two Mill Valley mothers who had been CorStone board members. They were inspired by a documentary film, "Motherland," about six women from across the United States, each grieving the loss of a child, who headed to rural South Africa to volunteer to work with children in need.

The film shows the immediate bonding of the women and their ability to share their grief while helping children, many of whom had lost parents to HIV or AIDS.

Project Grace was set up from that model and Stern and Mahoney arranged two service trips this year to Bucerias, Mexico, where they worked daily at an orphanage cooking, cleaning, teaching and playing with the children.

"What we were not prepared for, and was most moving about the 2008 trips was the enormous amount of compassion and support shown by the women to one another," Mahoney said. "Our service trips 'are providing a unique community and peace for those who have lost a child, where the experience of service to others provides some relief and some support."



Nancy Ross of Berkeley gets a hug from Angel, a Casa Hogar resident in Mexico.

Stern said it was gratifying to see how much the women were there for each other and that they gained by being able to give.

During the weeklong trip, each of the women was assigned a day dedicated to her child. They talked about them and the others asked questions. It was something Stern and Mahoney felt would give the women the opportunity to talk to' their heart's content about their children - something that is not done culturally in the United States.

"They would go past the layers of grief and just to the memories," Stern said. "They would talk about the happy memories of their kids."

Ross said it kept her from worrying about how often she talked about Patrick. She said they would have dinner together each night before returning to their hotel, where they would talk, laugh and cry as they shared memories of their children.

She said Stern and Mahoney did a perfect job of making the arrangements and keeping focused.

"They were interested in people sharing something common and being able to help each other through it," Ross said. "They pulled it together and came to it with their maternal instincts and a grand sense of energy."