

Mill Valleyans lend a hand to the bereaved

By Ryan White, *Mill Valley Herald*

The prospect of losing a child is the parent's ultimate horror. When the unimaginable cruelly morphs into the real, grieving parents and families often find their misery further compounded by social isolation, unable to summon the energy for dinner parties and all too aware of the discomfort and embarrassment their grief often causes in their more fortunate friends.

Two Mill Valley mothers recently started a program called Project Grace that attempts to give bereaved parents a support network while giving them a chance to alleviate their grief by doing service projects in disadvantaged communities.

Project Grace, founded by Catherine Bowen Stern and Carole Mahoney, conducted its first two service trips in April and September of this year to an orphanage in Bucerias, Mexico. Three more trips will take place in February, April and June of next year.

"These are not spa vacations," Mahoney said. "This is washing children in a kitchen sink, getting them dressed - this is so much better than sitting on a beach with an umbrella drink."

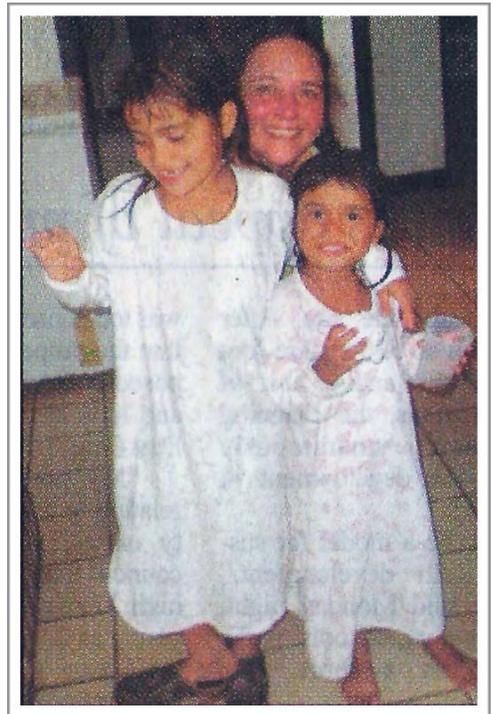
The organizers say the mothers who went on the trips were able to feel they were doing something useful while sharing their stories of loss with other women in a unique position to understand. Stern, 42, said she was deeply moved by the compassionate atmosphere the group shared as they recounted their individual experiences. "It was just lovely when they would tell their stories and the other women could provide support for them," she said.

"They don't have to apologize for their grief," Mahoney said. "They can talk openly about their child's death without making anyone feel uncomfortable."

In addition to working at the orphanage, the groups handed out food to some of the 250 people who call a landfill outside Puerto Vallarta home. "I think being exposed to this puts things in perspective about your own life and your own situation," Stern said.

Despite the dire straits in which many of the dump inhabitants find themselves, "there's definitely a sense of community and joy and togetherness with them," Stern said, an observation Mahoney, 50, finds instructive.

"I found that Americans don't have the secret to happiness," Mahoney said. "I found out it's possible to find happiness even if



Mill Valley resident Maria Craft-Neto visits with Elena and Anita at an orphanage in Bucerias, Mexico, during a Project Grace trip last April.

you live at the dump. You want to make their lives better but you don't necessarily want them to come to Mill Valley and live in a \$2 million house. We don't have the secret, necessarily."

Mahoney and Stern, neither of whom has lost a child herself, both served on the board of what was then the Center for Attitudinal Healing in Sausalito (the nonprofit has since been renamed CorStone). They share a mutual friend who had lost her daughter several years earlier, and immediately thought of her after receiving an e-mail from a documentary filmmaker looking for grieving mothers to participate in a service project in South Africa.

Their friend ended up being one of six mothers on a 17-day trip to Africa, which was documented in the film "Motherland." The concept left a strong impression on Stern and Mahoney. "After hearing about [their friend's] trip and seeing the trailer, both Carol and I were so touched," Stern said. "It made perfect sense to us, a way of working with your grief and putting it toward something positive."

An upcoming 10-day February trip to San Salvador will target men for the first time and will be led by Todd Evans, founder of Seeds of Learning, an organization devoted to improving education in Latin America, and will help build a school in an impoverished community.

Stern hopes enough men, not always eager to share feelings in a communal setting, will sign up to make the trip viable. The idea, she said, is not to coerce the group into talking but rather "just send them off to go work, build a school, be together with other men."

An April trip will again bring mothers to Bucarias, and the June trip will escort grieving families to Nicaragua to meet local parents and teachers while building a school. Participants, who have come from around the Bay Area, generally pay their own way but scholarships are available.

Both Stern and Mahoney say the results have been inspiring. "We've seen lots of revelations, restorations and certainly a global lesson that we can heal ourselves if we go outside ourselves," Mahoney said.

An ethos of helping others is central to the founders' philosophy. "The secret to happiness on earth is serving and loving others," Mahoney said. "This is a small gesture in that direction."