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# School of Dreams

If you build it, Christine Brady knew, the students will come. But if you give impoverished Mexican kids a *beautiful* building and teach the basics plus the arts, they'll also be inspired—and so will their entire community.

by Sharon Boorstin

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Imagine a place where kids spend seven hours a day exploring every subject they could possibly need or want, under the care of a dedicated, motivated staff. Now picture the facility itself—not a concrete box but a series of sculpted, white-washed stucco classrooms decorated inside and out with unique, colorful mosaics and clustered around patios. Finally, envision this school in a town with a huge drop-out rate—with 40% of students leaving before fifth grade. Welcome to Colegio La Esperanza, the high school founded and run by Christine Brady in the poor, overcrowded neighborhood of La Esperanza in Tijuana, Mexico.

On a sunny morning at the start of the school year, Christine checks out the new classroom that was added to the campus over the summer, thanks to a generous donation from one of her college friends and the work of more than 50 volunteers. “We had both locals and people from the States doing everything from the roof to the drywall to the drainage system,” says the 51-year-old mother of four, who makes the

one-hour drive here each day from her home in San Diego. She points to the plastic sheeting over the window openings. “Now all we need is some glass.”

Christine’s journey started small, just over 20 years ago. “I was recovering from a bad marriage,” she says. “My therapy was working in a Tijuana orphanage. While I was there I learned that the average family income in the town was \$28 a week. And I realized how much help the kids in the community needed.” What people wanted was a kindergarten. Christine resigned from her engineering job and started a nonprofit she called the Americas Foundation, then put her energy into convincing the Mexican authorities. When she finally got the go-ahead two years later, she decided the project had to make an impression on the whole town. “I wanted the school to be absolutely stunning,” she says. “It was important that everyone in the community appreciate it, whether or not their kids attended.”

So she invited southern California designer James Hubbell, famous for his inspiring public art installations, to the site.

“La Esperanza is one of those forgotten places where the only reason you know it exists is when something bad happens and it makes the news,” says Hubbell, 77. “Christine and I agreed a beautiful school would make the community proud and give them hope.” He signed on to help and waived his usual fee.

To fund the rest of the project, Christine solicited contributions from U.S. Rotary clubs, women’s organizations, church groups and foundations in southern California, as well as alumni from Princeton, Christine’s alma mater. Even then, she needed donations of building materials, including local salvage. The unpaid labor came from parents of potential students, friends of Christine’s from the U.S. and Hubbell’s former students.

Hubbell also designed the mosaics that adorn the kindergarten, named Jardin de Niños La Esperanza. Volunteers put each

piece of broken tile, cut glass or stone into place. He was awed by how quickly they formed into teams. “We’d start a wall, maybe one or two people who knew what to do,” he says. “The other 12 or 15 would catch on instantly. The result was a piece of art that looks like it was made by one person.” The best part, he says, came at the end. “You could see that everybody felt a big sense of accomplishment.”

Soon after the kindergarten was up and running, grateful parents asked for Christine’s help so their children could continue their education in a school like La Esperanza. In response, Christine raised money for an elementary school on a hilltop acre six blocks away. Also designed for free by Hubbell and built by volunteers, Colegio La Esperanza has the same colorful appeal as Jardin de Niños. There are mosaics everywhere. “By making even the bathrooms beautiful, we’re telling the students that everything in life is important,” says Hubbell.

The next step was a high school. This time Christine refinanced her home to fund the project, the first secondary school in an area with a population of 180,000. The initial graduating class was 24 students. Significantly, 6 of them have gone on to college and 8 more plan to, an amazing accomplishment no matter how you look at it. “Thousands of students are rejected from the Autonomous University of Baja California every year, but our kids got in,” says Christine.

Christine also pays close attention to nutrition and exercise. The elementary school students start their day with a government-subsidized hot breakfast prepared by mom volunteers,

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## Kids study music, art, dance, computers, ecology, English and French.

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then play soccer on a dusty field. “Before we had outdoor space for P.E. everybody’s idea of a good sport was jumping off the roof,” recalls Christine. High schoolers have more freedom to choose their food and may end up with less than a well-rounded meal. But Christine and the teachers eat with the kids, modeling both good food choices and healthy socializing. “Part of their education is learning manners and conversational skills,” she explains. On Wednesdays after school, Christine drives the high school boys’ soccer team to games at the city’s sports center and stays to cheer them on. “The games are too far away for the boys’ parents or friends to come,” she explains. “I’m their coach and their cheerleader.”

In addition to offering twice the amount of mandated P.E., La Esperanza is the only school in Tijuana running the full curriculum required by local regulations. Kids also take music, art,



The high school’s external decor is a work in progress but classes are in session. (Below) The kindergarten, built in 1990, now serves preschool through first grade. (Inset) A mosaic from the ballet room.



dance, computers, ecology, English and French classes. “Our goal is to develop the whole person,” says Christine. “That means not just academically but also physically, socially, ethically and artistically.”

“Artistically” means dance—as in ballet for everyone. Christine, who as a teenager trained with the Joffrey Ballet and American Ballet Theatre in New York, oversees a series of student productions throughout the year. “We’ve done *The Nutcracker* and *The Lion King*, a Mexican Ballet Folklorico for Christmas and a spring show built around *The Jungle Book*,” she says.

For the dance performances, volunteers make the costumes and the refreshments, and the whole community turns out to watch. Money from the modest entrance fee goes to the building fund. “Our productions are more than fundraisers; they’re ‘culture-raisers,’” says Christine. “When the parents see their kids dancing and being part of a group effort, it gives them a sense of hope and pride.”

La Esperanza is a private school and tuition is \$90 a month. But more than half of the families are on scholarship—funds Christine must also raise. This year, with the U.S. economic crisis, it has been harder than ever to find the money. “I’m now devoting all day every Tuesday to beating the bushes for donations,” she says. “It’s pretty scary out there.”

Christine deals not only with the school’s financial, procedural and academic problems, but also with families’ personal issues. Sometimes that can mean counseling parents who are having trouble with their children or even with each other. And she has had her own share of difficulties: “All the guys I’ve gone out with were jealous,” she says. “They said I was married to the school and didn’t care as much about them as I did about La Esperanza. And you know what? They were right.”

Her daughters are more understanding, but Christine admits she often feels exhausted and worried that she’s not

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## The whole community turns out to watch the dance productions.

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giving them enough attention, especially the two still at home. (Her oldest, Ana Rosa, 23, is married and has two children. Emily, 22, just graduated from UCLA.) Isabel, 15, is in a special dance program at Coronado High School in San Diego. Beatrice, 12, graduated from La Esperanza’s elementary school this past summer and is going on to a San Diego junior high. There isn’t one at La Esperanza; Tijuana kids go to public school, then return. “I’m going to miss my friends,” explains Beatrice. “Plus, you get so many more classes and



**A full-service principal, Christine oversees fundraising, construction, curriculum and even coaches the soccer team.**

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experiences at my mom’s school than in an American school.”

Christine has huge fans among the staff too. Brenda Soto Alvarado, who teaches sixth grade, used to work in a Tijuana public school. “Here the kids are given much more support from the administration, and it makes them happier and more motivated,” she says. “It’s all because of Christine, who treats the students and teachers as if they’re as important to her as family.”

Especially in light of the current economic problems, Christine draws energy from “Volunteer Days,” a tradition that started when the kindergarten was built. Every third Saturday volunteers converge on the three school buildings to provide maintenance or work on new construction projects. “Next Saturday we’re going to paint the benches we built for a new outside lunch area, and tile the floor in the new classroom,” says Christine. “What matters most is that the kids are happy,” she says. “But it also centers me to see progress with the buildings, no matter how small.”

James Hubbell often joins in the fun, as do Christine’s daughters Isabel and Beatrice. “It’s amazing to see the little kids run up and hug our mom when she shows up and the parents thank her for all she has done for their families,” says Isabel.

The girls also like to take the long view. “We know our mom has made a lot of sacrifices for La Esperanza, but it has meant so much to the community,” says Beatrice. “My sisters and I have agreed that when we grow up, we’ll make sure that what she has accomplished at La Esperanza will live on.” ●

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