



AMERICAN WHEELCHAIR MISSION

A Global Wheelchair Mission Partner



By Annette Nevins

The eyes of the 6-year-old girl lit up when she was lifted and placed in a wheelchair for the very first time.

Before the gift of mobility, the little girl was relying on others to carry her from room to room, placing her in a crib because she couldn't walk. As volunteers rolled the new wheelchair into the simple dirt-floor home, her grandmother, who had recently lost her husband, broke into tears.

"I have been praying for this day for so long," she cried as the little girl now wheeled happily about, excited she could soon go to school. "My prayers are answered."

The smiles of the little girl smile and her grandmother are what Bill Weber of Plano says he will always remember from his mission trip last year to Oaxaca, Mexico — the same kind of joy he has seen over and over again as he has led 10 wheelchair drives and distributions to different cities in Mexico in conjunction with a worldwide ministry.

Oaxaca was his sixth annual trip to Mexico as a member of the Shaun P. O'Brien Knights of Columbus Council 11716 at Prince of Peace Catholic Community in Plano in partnership with the American Wheelchair Mission, which has distributed tens of thousands of wheelchairs worldwide to physically disabled children, teens and adults.

Over the past 10 years, parishioners of Prince of Peace Community have donated over \$695,929 to provide 2,709 standard wheelchairs and 400 more expensive specialty wheelchairs.

This year alone, Prince of Peace parishioners donated \$133,974, which exceeded last year's total of \$129,407, making it the largest donating parish not only in the state but in the world, providing 32 percent of the state total of \$413,394. The POP Council received a Star Council Award and was named Council of the Year, mostly for its involvement in the wheelchair mission.

That's quite a feat, considering that the COVID-19 pandemic sidelined many of this year's pulpit talks that have proven to boost fundraising. It would have been Weber's seventh trip to Mexico in October to deliver more wheelchairs but the event has been canceled due to concerns over the spread of the coronavirus.

The 380 wheelchairs, including 100 specialty chairs, purchased by Prince of Peace parishioners made it to Mexico, this time to the city of Aguascalientes. But they remain neatly boxed up in a

container at the Teletón Rehabilitation Center for Children (CRIT), which remains temporarily closed, another tragedy of the pandemic.

“We are heartbroken that we won’t be able to go this year, but the need is still there; it’s not going to change,” Weber said. “Meeting the recipients of the wheelchairs is always very touching and the people at Prince of Peace are so very generous. We will keep raising funds. And we will be back.”

The pandemic is not stopping the parishioners from reaching out locally. Several storage containers in their church parking lot contain wheelchairs for those around the Dallas-Fort Worth area who might need them. They recently brought a wheelchair to a marine veteran in Plano who had been waiting for a new wheelchair for more than a year and several others were donated to a clinic in McKinney.

Although the mission reaches out to other areas in the United States, some of the biggest need is in Mexico, where Weber and his fellow parishioners each year distribute wheelchairs at one of the 22 advanced and beautiful CRITs throughout Mexico.

These world-class centers, staffed by doctors, nurses and therapists, use medical and holistic approaches in dealing with every type of physical disability. Whole families are involved in the free or low-cost treatments and exercises given to the children so they can continue the therapies at home. But the centers depend on the donated wheelchairs.

The CRITs were built with funds raised during annual Mexico-wide “Teletóns” started in 1996. A former associate of comedy legend Jerry Lewis, who for five decades led the well-known Muscular Dystrophy Labor Day Telethons in the United States, started the Teletóns in twelve Latin American countries.

Lewis’ son, Christopher Lewis, who founded and heads up the American Wheelchair Mission, joins the Plano parishioners on their trip each year to Mexico. He particularly commends the parish for raising enough money to include specialty wheelchairs, which can cost almost three times the standard wheelchair.

“The Knights and parishioners at Prince of Peace in Plano are such a blessing,” he said. “Their generous donations and volunteers have transformed thousands of lives. Their pastor Father Tom has been so receiving of the mission and you can’t find a heart that’s in a better place than Bill Weber’s.”

Weber’s passion for the ministry is personal. His brother, who had Muscular Dystrophy, was in a wheelchair for much of his life until his death 20 years ago.

In 2009, he was given a DVD about the American Wheelchair Mission and was deeply moved by the work of the program.

“There was such a great need that I wanted our Knights council at Prince of Peace to do more than just provide the one wheelchair we were donating each year,” he says.

Weber went to Father Jim Balint, then pastor, with the idea of conducting a wheelchair drive. The priest gave his approval without hesitation.

With that inaugural Wheelchair Drive in 2010, the Prince of Peace Knights of Columbus council had no idea what to expect. They wound up raising \$23,225, enough to fund 154 wheelchairs. As the Wheelchair Drive became an annual tradition, contributions rose steadily.

The first few years Weber traveled alone to Mexico but soon he was joined by church clergy and other parishioners. Elaine, his wife of 40 years, joined Weber the last four years on the trips to Mexico to distribute wheelchairs to needy, handicapped children---a blessing for the child and for the families.

Each brand new wheelchair would normally sell for more than \$500 in a medical supply store. But because they are shipped in bulk containers directly from the factories to the country of delivery, the cost is \$150 each with a certificate that can be personalized as a gift in honor or memory of a loved one.

The wheelchairs allow children with physical disabilities to go to school for the first time, move themselves around their house without crawling or being carried, go outside to play with their family and friends, go to church, and go places that their parents can't carry them. Adults once confined to their homes can go to work to provide for their families and the elderly can get out of a bed that they may have been confined to for years at a time.

Since starting the mission at Prince of Peace a decade ago, the efforts of Weber, 65 and retired from the information technology field, have expanded to at least nine parishes in the Catholic Diocese of Dallas. Statewide, donations have grown.

His leadership and his commitment resulted in the Mobility Hero Award in 2017 and he now serves as the state of Texas Wheelchair Chairman. Weber said he intends to push more Knights of Columbus councils across the state to contribute, with a goal of involving all 700 councils in the mission.

Parishioners from Prince of Peace who go on the annual distribution trips say they are changed by the experience.

“The first time I saw a little boy on the back of his father, I didn't realize that was his only form of transportation,” says Dick Leyendecker, 85, who traveled with the mission to Merida and last year to Oaxaca. “It touched me tremendously. I saw that and realized how fortunate we really are.”

His wife, Lorraine, 82, who accompanied him on the two trips, points out how each wheelchair affects at least 10 people, including the parents and siblings, teachers and doctors.

“We see the good the wheelchair is doing, how it changes the lives of a child and their family and how they can go to school for the first time,” she says. “Then we come back with stories to

encourage others to go. It's such a humbling experience because everything they have they see as a gift from God."

Going together also builds camaraderies with other parishioners, her husband adds.

"I've met people in Mexico who go to church with me in Plano and I never knew," he says. "Now we're friends."

The Leyendeckers don't know how many more trips to Mexico they will be able to make but they say their bags are always packed.

"I can't wait to go back," Dick Leyendecker says.

Father Tom Cloherty, pastor of Prince of Peace, has made the trip to Mexico four times to distribute the wheelchairs.

"Not only were my eyes opened to the need for and benefits of a wheelchair, but even more so, my heart was very much opened as well," he says. "That experience taught me that it was not just the life of the recipient that was touched but the heart of the recipient, their family, and the donors as well."

Several wheelchairs have been donated in the name of parishioner Nelly Carr, who passed away from a battle with cancer in 2018. She had accompanied her husband, David, on a distribution trip in 2016 in La Paz, Mexico. Her husband returned in 2019 to help deliver wheelchairs in Oaxaca to honor his beloved wife.

Carr recalls a time when Father Stephen Ingram, associate pastor at Prince of Peace who had accompanied the group on the trip, bent down to bless a little girl as he placed her in a wheelchair.

"He raised his hands to offer the blessing and she raised her hands and gave him a high five," Carr says. "She was very happy and pleased. This was apparent because she took off like a rocket in her new chair throughout her yard. I now could see Nelly smiling with us all."

The giving becomes contagious even across country lines, says Dan Stoffel, a parishioner at Prince of Peace who has gone to Mexico four times with his wife Monique to distribute wheelchairs.

Each time sent photos and letters about his experiences to his elderly mother in Minnesota.

"We come back with more stories to share and the numbers keep growing," he says. "It's the highlight of the year for us because it's the one place we can go where we can see real joy and hope in the simple things."

Stoffel recounts the time a mother carrying her son on her back invited the group into their home. A pot of carrots was boiling for lunch in a kitchen heated by a propane tank. An outhouse was

behind the house and they brought water in to drink. The floors were mostly dirt and she brought the group into a bedroom where the furniture was made of cardboard painted blue.

“When we present them with a wheelchair their world lights up,” he says. “We can see the answer to many prayers.”

That’s because they have faith that good things will happen, says parishioner Kathleen Welsh, 59, who traveled to Mexico the last two years to distribute wheelchairs.

“It’s so emotional and so life-changing you can’t help but come back with a whole new attitude about the world around you,” she says. “They may speak Spanish, a different language than most of us, but they understand us and we understand them. There’s no communication barrier.”

The CRITs where the children receive therapy are mostly lit with natural sunlight, some have a swimming pool for therapy and a chapel where families celebrate every Mass as if it were Christmas, she says. Everyone is happy, even the dogs don’t bark at you, she adds. Many sleep in hammocks hanging on the wall in cinderblock homes.

The families offer you hugs and homemade cookies and serve you Coke in glasses borrowed from a neighbor. Welsh gave her gold-colored name badge to one little girl who wanted it.

One boy with cerebral palsy who was not verbal, practically threw himself out of the old wheelchair he had outgrown when he saw her approaching with a new one. Her husband, Steve, picked him up and put him in a new wheelchair.

“The look in the mom’s face, it was as if the weight of the world fell off her shoulders,” she says. “They were so joyful I wanted to just take them home with me. But they are happy where they are.”

She also recalls meeting two brothers, both with Muscular Dystrophy. The older boy was in a wheelchair but he shared it with his younger brother who sat on his lap so he could get around. They couldn’t afford two wheelchairs.

When the mother received a new wheelchair for her child she began shouting for joy.

“She kept saying, ‘My child can go to school now. He can go to school,’” she said. “It started 15 days ago but now he can finally go to school.”

Stories like these make it real to those who want to donate a wheelchair, even if they can’t go to Mexico to distribute them.

One young girl at Prince of Peace knocks on neighbors’ doors each year to collect money for the wheelchair mission. Her first year she collected \$150, then \$450 and \$600 last year. This year, because of the pandemic lockdown, she sang a song online and collected over \$1,000.

“When the going gets rough, Prince of Peace digs deeper,” Stoffel says. “In Plano, where we have so much, we yearn for that same simple joy we see in the families in Mexico and we know when we give to the Wheelchair Mission it’s going to a good cause.”

Stoffel has donated several chairs in the name of others, including one for his mother who died at 95 last year.

Remember the correspondence he sent her from Mexico?

One day he opened the seat cushion on the walker his mother used to get around. He was getting it ready to lend it to his friend to help him get around after surgery. Inside, he found all the photos and letters he had written her from his experiences with the Wheelchair Mission in Mexico.

“She kept all of them with her and talked about the mission with her friends wherever she went,” Stoffel says. “It made an impact in Mexico. It made an impact with my mom in Minnesota, It’s making an impact in Plano. Our mission is touching hearts and making a difference everywhere. Our mission is one walker, one wheelchair, one changed life at a time.”