

Springfield church's youth group building homes, changing lives

Group raising funds for Nicaraguans

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Conor Wadle (from left), Ashlyn Wadle, Wyatt Biggs, Jake Troye, Jake Luellen, Daniel Guion and Ben Zimmerman, along with fellow youth group members, are holding a fundraising car wash Saturday from 2 to 5. (NOTE Juliana trying to get IDs for kids.)

Written by: Juliana Goodwin

Ben Zimmerman, 12, was shocked to learn how kids his age live in Hilapo Dos, a rural village in Nicaragua.

Forget Xbox games, television, electricity, toilets or even fresh water. And most kids work in fields at least five months out of the year.

“The stuff I have heard is so sad,” Zimmerman said. “They live in huts with mud floors and one room. We are so lucky to have all of our nice things we have in our good homes, and I think it would be really good to make sure everyone can have an opportunity to have that kind of living.”

Zimmerman is a member of the youth group at National Avenue Christian Church. The church has been working with the nonprofit [Rainbow Network](#) to [build 25 cinderblock homes](#) in the village of Hilapo Dos. The church has purchased a land deed and will relocate the village almost half

a mile closer to a water source and a road. Construction on homes may begin later this year.



The youth group at National Avenue Christian Church is trying to raise enough money to build two of these cinderblock homes in Nicaragua. The homes cost less than \$4,000 each to build. / Rainbow Network

This weekend, the youth group is pitching in and trying to raise enough money to build two houses, which cost less than \$4,000 each.

Saturday, they will build a typical Nicaraguan shack on church property out of “plastic, cardboard, wood, whatever we have,” said Wyatt Biggs, 15, a student at Central High School.

The group will spend Saturday night in the shack, then get up Sunday to host a fundraising brunch, starting 11:30 a.m.

Sunday at the church. To raise money, the students will also hold a carwash from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday.

The goal is to make this community aware of the living conditions in the village.

“We’d really like people to come out and help support us,” Biggs said.

Conor Wadle, 15, youth group member and student at Willard High School, said initially the goal was to raise \$3,000.

“As we looked more into it, we realized we should do our best to do what we can, that is why we raised the goal up to build two houses,” he said.

Improving living conditions

The new homes will be built as basic cinderblock structures — a huge improvement from the current living conditions.



There are no kitchens in these shacks, so people cook inside their homes with open flames, which are always left burning. / Paul Green

The shacks these villagers currently live in are one-room huts, about 200 square feet, with no electricity, no running water and no bathrooms, said Paul Green, a church member who returned Friday from visiting the village. It was his first trip to Nicaragua.

On average, eight people live in each hut.

“What is common in all of them is the cooking area in the house. It’s an open fire they leave burning all the time. The smoke is constantly there and you can imagine the health problems that arise from that. It’s very unsanitary. The smoke alone causes numerous respiratory problems,”

Green said.

In this village, most of the people work on a coffee plantation but only during picking season, which is October through February, said Keith Jaspers, president and founder of Rainbow Network.

“No one gets a regular salary and they have no income the rest of the year. The income is very meager. Most do not have schools or grade schools other than what we set up. No medical care or medicine other than what we provide. They are destined to live in these mud and stick huts forever unless we come along and build them some decent houses,” Jaspers said.

People in this village don’t own their land. The plantation lets them “squat” because it needs workers, but as a result, villagers don’t have space to build their own gardens and if they tried to invest any money in a home or garden, someone could take it because legally the land is not theirs, Green said.

Villagers walk about a mile for fresh water. There are no bathrooms, just outhouses or holes in the ground.

As for the children, the only school is Rainbow Network-sponsored, and when picking season rolls around, the children have to work the fields. Any able-bodied person who can earn money, does, Green said.

Getting involved

Green became interested in Nicaragua after joining the church and learning more about Rainbow Network, a faith-based organization in Springfield that fights poverty in Nicaragua with sustainable efforts such as building schools, clinics and homes.

Green is glad to see the youth group tackle this project.

“It gives them a greater appreciation for what they have and makes them realize the importance of education,” Green said. “In our country, we take education for granted. When you go to this country and see what effort the kids go through for an education, it makes you appreciate education.”

The church partnered with Rainbow Network about a decade ago with an initial focus on improving education and health and helping to provide some sustainable income for villagers, said Mark Biggs, a church member.

When land in the village area became available for sale, the congregation started talking about purchasing the land, building houses and relocating the village closer to a fresh water source and main road, Biggs said.

The church bought the land and is now raising \$100,000 to build the 25 houses. It has raised \$73,000 so far.

The homes are not just gifts. The villagers will buy the homes over 20 years, interest free, said Jaspers.

“They can hardly wait,” he said. “I had one lady say this was beyond her dreams. She said ‘I have dreamed and dreamed I would one day own a house but never thought it was possible.’ They are so happy. These people view something like this as a miracle of God. There is no way this would have happened without some intervention from God. I think the people from National Avenue would agree.”

Rainbow Network does not try to convert the people it helps, said Jaspers. Its philosophy is: “We are here out of the love of God. If you believe in God and people need help, let’s roll up our sleeves and go to work.”

For the local youth group kids, it’s a big project to tackle, but they are stoked.

Jake Troye, 12, plans to stand on the street trying to attract supporters for the car wash.

Wadle said he’s extremely excited for the project.

“I think it’s going to be a good chance for the youth group to show that we can help out in the church, help in the community and make a difference,” he said. “As a small youth group — we can make a difference in the world.”