

ECUADOR ENTERPRISE HELPS CHILDREN THE ECUA-CLUB HELPS YOUTHS WITH MEDICAL CARE AND MORE. MEMBERS FROM ALL OVER SOUTH FLORIDA MEET MONTHLY

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Betty Silva remembers vividly what it was like growing up poor in her home country of Ecuador. "I was a poor kid and I have not forgotten what it is to be poor," she explained.

That's why the Weston resident is the secretary and active member of the Ecu-Club, the Ecuadorian-American Club of Broward, an organization that helps out needy children in that South American country."

"I know that Ecuador is a poor third-world country with lots of children begging in the streets," Silva said. "I have been blessed, and have a lot more than I ever expected."

Several years ago Silva read about the club in the *Sun-Sentinel* and decided to become active.

"We raise funds to help out hospitals and organizations that work with children," Silva explained. "In many of Ecuador's hospitals they don't even have sheets. You have to bring or buy everything including sheets, food and medicine."

Today, the club is made up of 52 Ecuadorian women who meet every month for friendship and to carry out the club's mission. Members are drawn from all over Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.

"The club began seven years ago among a small group of friends," said Leonor Teran Alvarado of Fort Lauderdale, the club's current president. "It has been a dream come true to do something for needy children, and it's growing."

The club's founder, Sonia Sanchez-Dominguez of Davie said that she originally gathered together 15 of her Ecuadorian friends to unify the expatriate community here during a time of tension between Ecuador and Peru. "We asked what we could do," she said. "Then, I visited a shelter for poor children in Guayaquil and saw the needs of the children. I had always known that they had needs, but had never seen them close and in person."

"We decided that we needed to do something to help the children of Ecuador," she explained. In the past 7 years, the organization has donated almost \$90,000 to various projects in Quito, Guayaquil, Machala, Manta and other Ecuadorian cities and towns.

The Ecu-Club holds several major events a year to raise funds. "We sponsor a bingo in September, a gala in May with a sitdown dinner and a raffle in December," said Alvarado. Last December the organization raffled off one round trip airplane ticket to Ecuador that was donated by the Chilean airline Lan Chile.

“We also hold an annual peña to raise funds,” Sanchez-Dominguez said, describing a common Ecuadorian Karaoke-style party involving traditional Ecuadorian folk songs.

The organization donates money through various charities in Ecuador, selecting those that purchase medicine or provide social services to needy children and their families.

“We usually send the money with someone who is going to Guayaquil or Manta and they are able to deliver it to the organizations,” Alvarado explained. “Many times a family needs help right away to buy medications or other things.”

Ecuia-Club also donates money to schools in Ecuador to help provide books and other needed equipment, and to various children’s homes throughout the country.

“Schools in Ecuador resume their year in April, so that, along with Christmas, is one of our busiest times,” Silva said.

To help raise funds for this April’s projects, the club is planning a Paella luncheon on February 9 in a member’s home. For information on the luncheon, call Betty Silva at 954-384-9430.

In addition, the club will sponsor their annual gala—a sit-down dinner and dance on May 31. The gala will also raise funds for the club’s projects.

In addition, Alvarado said that the group helps Ecuadorian children who come to south Florida for medical treatment.

Late last year, Juan Martin Narvaez of Quito underwent extensive treatment at Bascom-Palmer Eye Institute in Miami for blindness caused by a cerebral tumor.

“Ecuador has limited ability to treat this kind of thing,” said his mother Helena Flores. “He was not improving in Ecuador and they could not treat him there, so we made an appointment in Miami.”

Doctors told Flores that there is no hope of her son regaining his sight, but they were able to treat him for other problems and to enroll him in a rehabilitation program at the Miami Lighthouse for the blind.

“We were able to donate \$500 for his treatment,” said Alvarado.

“All of our women work hard,” Alvarado said. “Most of them work outside of the home and they do this voluntarily on the side.”

“My father always told me to love my country,” said Sanchez-Dominguez. “I have lived here for 32 years and I love the United States, but I also love my country and that’s why I want to help.”

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