

VISIT TO VILLA DE LOS NIÑOS

Consul General visits students from low-income families

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In September, U.S. Consul General Dan Keller visited Villa de Los Niños, a boarding school and second home for 2,000 boys from low-income families throughout Mexico. The blueprint for the program came from Aloysius Schwartz, a U.S. priest from Washington, DC, whose legacy also includes schools in the Philippines, Korea, Guatemala, and Brazil. Located in the town of Acatlán de Juárez, the Mexico site was founded in 1998 by the Sisters of Mary, eleven of whom lead the institution today.

Tuition is free and enrollment is restricted to the country's neediest children. As a nonprofit, the school relies on public and private donations from in and outside of Mexico. Current local donors include Laboratorios Julio and NICE Jewelry.

The school's students receive a broad academic grounding in math, science, Spanish and English instruction, and also receive specialized training to ensure employment opportunities await them after graduation.

The environment on campus is warm and supportive, but not luxurious. Children are grouped into "families" of 35. Each family room is divided into two parts. On one side are bunk beds three high; on the other sits a communal table for meals. Space is precious, but the difference between the boys' earlier lives and current situation is vast. Sister Nenita Egnas noted that many of the kids who could return home over holidays choose to remain at school.

The day's tour revealed an institution where the passion for learning is palpable. At each stop, students eagerly explained their studies to Mr. Keller and showed off their newfound skills. Perhaps the most powerful moment was the tour's first stop, when the U.S. Consulate visitors walked into the school's gymnasium to the sight and sound of hundreds of children moving in unison, singing a message of welcome. In his remarks to the assembled students and faculty, Mr. Keller thanked his hosts for the unexpected greeting and wished them all successful educational careers, adding that "It's obvious from seeing you, and from your enthusiasm today, that you will have them."

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