

Casa Franciscana back on track

Elizabeth Rydeen

This past year has been a transition from the depths of the pandemic to a renewal of the mission in San Rafael. Sisters Janice Wiechman, Aurora Tovar and Isabel Berrones highlight their accomplishments.

Casa Franciscana

For a time, we thought the education program might be coming to an end. During the pandemic some potential students decided to live with their boyfriends and form a family instead of continuing their studies. Gradually, some towns are establishing high schools and transportation is more readily available. However, in the spring semester, five students lived in community with the sisters and attended the high school in San Rafael, two of them graduated in July. Then more requests came from communities farther away. For the fall semester, there are 10 students in the program, six are first year and one goes to the small local university in San Rafael. Two students will graduate next summer, and there are already inquiries for fall 2023.



From left: Reyna Torres Casas, administrative assistant; Lourdes Gamez Peña, graduate; Francisca Peña Aguillon, graduate; Denise Luna, supervisor; Sister Aurora Tovar, director

Adult Education

Sister Janice, who's been involved in adult education for years, had hopes of expanding her work to another village. In the small community of Miguel Hidalgo, she was successful in registering eight women who wanted to work on their 9th grade certificate. One has received her certificate, one is done with the course and waiting for her certificate, two continue to study and two withdrew. Two were told they already have certificates, which was news to them. Sister Janice is helping them attain the documentation. Sister Janice looks forward to offering the program in another town in the coming year. In her quiet way, she instills trust in the people living in the outlying villages, especially the women. A ninth-grade education opens the door to job and education opportunities and builds self-esteem.

Catechesis

Sister Janice, along with two local women, have formed a prayer group and offer catechesis at Casa Franciscana. Families close by have a distance to walk to the main church, which keeps them from participating regularly. The sisters are happy with this element of outreach and faith formation right in their neighborhood.

Support for outlying communities

Sister Aurora, trained in human development, offers counseling and spiritual accompaniment. She leads a group for women who have been hurt by violence and/or alcoholism. She holds workshops for both men and women with topics relating to communication, expression of emotions, self-esteem, personal development, family values and avoiding domestic violence.

To support faith formation, Sister Aurora travels throughout the parish leading Celebrations of the Word and building small communities of faith. She's grateful for the help with transportation that the Brass Family Foundation grant provides. She is also the director of Casa Franciscana.

Finally, in the past year, the sisters expanded their mission to the large city of Saltillo about an hour from San Rafael. Sister Isa Berrones leads this new endeavor. Modeled after Casa Franciscana, Casa Maria serves young women attending university in Saltillo. These students, primarily from rural areas, are often overwhelmed by the "big city." The sisters offer hospitality and accompaniment and tutoring in math and English. The students participate in community life in the Franciscan tradition. The local diocese offered the sisters a house rent free for five years and agreed to pay the utilities. The house has room to accommodate up to 10 students. This fall, three students joined the program. We are grateful for this partnership and new ministry—a tremendous opportunity to support the advancement of women through education.



On hand for the blessing of La Casa Maria – seated: Sisters Michelle L’Allier, Carol Schmit, Pat Forster; standing: Father Luis Fernando Morales, Blanca Rosa Tamez (AC board member), Sister Aurora Tovar, Bishop Hilario Gonzalez, Sisters Isabel Berrones and Carolyn Law, Armando Rodriguez (board member)