

Father William Wasson Already Has 6,000 'sons and Daughters' and Expects Another 1,000 Soon

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It began on an August day in 1954. Father William Wasson, then a newly ordained priest in Cuernavaca, Mexico, took a call from the police. Would the father testify against a 14-year-old street tough caught pilfering \$24 from the church sacristy? Wasson refused. Instead he asked for—and received—custody of the boy. Less than a week later, the police chief called again. His officers had rounded up eight more homeless orphans. Did Father Wasson want them? He did—that time and the next. And so on. Five months later he had 32 kids. By 1965 they numbered 400; by 1977, 1,000. Today, after three decades with new arrivals replacing those who have been schooled and graduated, Wasson, at 61, can call almost 6,000 orphans “my sons and daughters.”

Since 1970, home for his “family” has been the Hacienda San Salvador, a 200-acre farm and campus 12 miles outside of Cuernavaca, 77 miles southwest of Mexico City. The hacienda (which survived the recent earthquake with little damage) is reminiscent of a south-of-the-border Boys Town, and though Wasson called his community Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos—“Our Little Brothers”—orphan girls have also been accepted since 1959. With few exceptions the children were the victims of wretched childhoods, kids who had been beaten and sexually abused and sometimes abandoned to forage in the streets at age 2 or 3. They arrive at NPH singly and in bunches, as an orphan may enter the program only if all the child’s brothers and sisters come along. “We’ve taken families of six, eight, a dozen,” Wasson says. “If we separate

them, one gets a chance at an education, another can't afford it and a third ends up in the street. They can't keep track of each other."

Furthermore, the siblings are never split up. In fact, *pequeños* (as the kids call themselves) are never put up for adoption or sent to foster homes. "If we took even a single child and put him up for adoption," Wasson reasons, "every child here would feel insecure." His promise to *pequeños* is that each will be a part of an extended family for life, that each will be fed, clothed and prepared to make his own way when grown. And indeed, virtually every child at NPH receives at least a high school education before he or she leaves, and the most promising go on to college in Mexico, the U.S., even to Europe. On reaching adulthood, most graduates find jobs outside as truck drivers or laborers, secretaries and clerks. Some become doctors, dentists, lawyers or accountants.

Before that, however, every *pequeño* alumnus gives at least one year of voluntary service to the family; those who have received an advance education at NPH expense often give a second year. These year-of-service graduates, supplemented by volunteers who come from as far away as Canada and West Germany, staff the classrooms and lead the *pequeños* in work programs. One group, for example, rises at 3 a.m. daily to grind corn for tortillas by the thousands. Younger teens staff the kitchen, wielding three-foot wooden spoons to mix fresh fruits in giant bowls. Others tend to the livestock and feed the chickens (they raise 12,000 every eight weeks). A cornucopia of corn, beans, tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, onions, carrots and sugarcane is cultivated on the hacienda's 160 tilled acres.

William Bryce Wasson, the older of two sons, learned about caring from his father. The elder Wasson, an insurance salesman and real estate broker in Phoenix, counseled delinquents and runaways in his free time. Young William often accompanied his father on visits to detention halls and saw teenagers "locked in cages. I developed a lot of sympathy for them," says Wasson, who during his college summers counseled orphans and runaways.

He studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood at Conception Seminary College in Missouri. "I would have been ordained in 1948," he says, but in his final year, his face, hands and feet swelled grotesquely. Wasson was treated at the Mayo Clinic for progressive thyroid deficiency. After his return to the seminary, he was shocked to learn that the bishop would not ordain him. "In those days," Wasson explains, "they didn't know whether the disease would recur, so if you had a goiter, you were considered finished. I was always very naive; still am, I guess. I'd thought there would be more understanding, more compassion." He applied for ordination all over the U.S. but was refused every time.

He left the seminary with a bachelor's in education and went on to San Luis Rey College in California for a master's in social sciences. In 1949 Wasson's father gave him \$100 for a vacation, and he headed for Mexico City. "The climate seemed to agree with me and I decided to stick around awhile," he says. After studying Spanish he landed a job teaching sociology and criminology at the University of the Americas. Then, in 1953, a colleague told him of a shortage

of priests in Cuernavaca. Wasson went there to meet the bishop. At 29, he became Father Wasson.

A year later the street orphan project was under way. Parishioners and friends chipped in with blankets, beds, an old stove, three goats and enough cash to rent a former brewery for use as classroom and dorm. As his brood of orphans burgeoned, Wasson scrambled with makeshift housing until 1970, when NPH had at last accumulated sufficient donations to buy the Hacienda San Salvador, an abandoned sugar plantation that dates to the 16th century. "We held classes in buildings without windows, often no walls, just support columns and a shaky roof to keep the rain out," recalls ex-pequeño Beto Cabral, 26. But aided by local volunteers, the pequeños hauled debris, tiled floors, bricked archways and vaulted ceilings. They rewired, updated plumbing and converted a machinery shed into a 200-foot-long dining hall with its own bakery. They opened dorms, outfitted a dental clinic and small hospital, built pig sties and chicken coops. Two years ago they set up a fish pond that yields nearly a ton of African Tilapia for their tables.

Today the pequeño population at the hacienda numbers about 700, with another 340 or so scattered to schools in Mexico and abroad. NPH encourages graduates to come back home to contribute to their own culture rather than to migrate. "The idea," explains Joan Provencio, widow of an NPH volunteer and now the organization's executive director, "is to train them to be good citizens of Mexico." She concedes that not every pequeño is an exemplar of youth. "But I'd say our percentage of willing and cooperative kids is pretty good." Behavior problems at the hacienda are minimal; only six teenage boys are housed in a separate dorm where they receive psychiatric counseling. Among younger children, runaways are unheard of; 17-year-olds and older may leave at will. And tragedies such as teen suicide are unknown.

From the start, Mexico's government and the church have followed a hands-off policy, neither helping nor hindering Wasson's work. NPH always depended heavily on volunteers and outside contributors. (Its international board of advisers includes Sargent Shriver and Helen Hayes.) NPH's 1985 operating budget of \$1,058,000 projects a slight deficit.

No one doubts that Father Wasson is the engine that makes NPH go, but associates worry about his health. "He gets so caught up in his work he forgets to eat, forgets to rest," says board member Henry von Morpurgo, a California marketing executive. "Then he falls on his face—whap!—and they have to take him off to recuperate. Then he starts in all over again."

Now Father Wasson is organizing a second NPH, this time in Honduras. His donors are buying 2,200 acres near Tegucigalpa on which Wasson plans to build cottages to house 1,000 orphans, most of them refugees from the strife in El Salvador and Nicaragua. "The question that constantly confronts us is, who will see to the children?" says Wasson. With an estimated 45 million orphaned and abandoned children in Latin America alone, "the number is staggering," he admits, "but that's no reason to give up."