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FIRST PERSON

Helping Women End the Nightmare

A shelter gives at-risk women comfort — and the skills to live a productive life



Photo: USAID/Fernando Arévalo

(From left) Monseñor Alvaro Ramazzini, Bishop of San Marcos, Guatemala; Vinicio Barrios Gonzalez, Mayor of Tecún Umán; Sister Luz Angélica García, Director of Casa de la Mujer; and D. Bruce Wharton of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala attended the inauguration of Casa de la Mujer.

Marcia says, “In this world a woman tries to get ahead, but she is exploited, abused and dumped into a world of violence and prostitution. Casa de la Mujer helped me break free and end my nightmare.”

Marcia is Ecuadorian, a devoted grandmother with a small business. With hopes of a better life, Marcia decided to risk migrating to the United States. For her \$10,000 payment, Marcia received water, fruit and a ride in a flimsy boat. But after 16 days on the high seas, her journey ended abruptly. The boat disembarked in Guatemala, where the “coyotes” she’d paid left her. Marcia ended up in the village of La Verde, where she accepted one woman’s offer to take her to the United States for \$1,500. The woman never lived up to her promise.

In desperation, Marcia approached a local priest for help. He told her about Casa de la Mujer, a USAID-supported shelter and training center in the border town of Tecún Umán. At Casa de la Mujer, Marcia was given hospitality and food — and she also learned how to produce commercial cleaning products for sale. Armed with a wheelbarrow and years of experience as a saleswoman, Marcia now sells her products door-to-door. Her work paid off; Marcia has built a loyal clientele and supports many of the women and children residing at the Casa, while saving money for when she leaves the Casa.

Casa de la Mujer’s training center, Casa Antonia, offers 150 women training in how to sew, style hair and make cleaning products. A third of the women were victims of trafficking, while the rest were considered at risk — daughters of prostitutes, friends or relatives of drug traffickers, friends or relatives of gang members, or illiterate and poor youth. Community members now regularly come to the Casa to buy haircuts, make-up, clothes and cleaning products.

Marcia says that the training center is critical for women and children who fall into the clutches of traffickers because it gives them the comfort, safety and skills to find productive alternatives to violence and prostitution.

Marcia plans to earn enough money to return to Ecuador and be reunited with her family. Still, her dream to move to the United States someday lives on. Now she says that if she is ever to get to the United States, she will do so legally because the risk of traveling without the proper documents is too high. Marcia says she learned the hard way and is happy she survived the lesson — thanks to the safe haven at Casa de la Mujer.