

# THE TALITA CUMI STORY



Children of Talita Cumi

## In the beginning

The children's home, Talita Cumi, was founded in 1999 as *Fe y Esperanza* (Faith and Hope) when the Bolivian government office of the prefecture seized the home of a drug trafficker and declared it would be used as an orphanage until the man was released from jail.

The Christian Assemblies Church of Bolivia oversaw the home for the first two years. Then the director contacted Walter Suarez, the pastor of a modest Christian Assemblies church on the other end of the city. "I've been diagnosed with leukemia," said the distraught director, "and I'm going to need help at the orphanage. I don't know how much longer I can stay here."

Pastor Suarez did not have to think long before finding a possible solution to the director's problem. A young lady who attended his church, and his daughter's best friend, Graciela Alba, had been seeking and praying for at least a year for a way to serve God. She was a 22-yr-old skinny firebrand of a Bolivian with a recently rediscovered love for God. After praying about it, Graciela agreed to move into the orphanage for at least three months to relieve the ailing director.

Graciela was slightly nervous the first day as she arrived at the home to volunteer. The door was opened by one of the children, who eyed her suspiciously. "Where is the director?" Graciela asked the teenage girl.

"He's gone," she replied.

"Oh. Well, when will he be back?" Graciela asked, assuming he had left to run a quick errand.

"I don't know."

"When exactly did he leave?"

"Yesterday. He took everything."

Later after meeting with the government prefecture, Graciela learned that both the prefecture's office and the police were looking for the fugitive director of Fe y Esperanza. It had been discovered that he was sexually abusing the girls at the home and that he did not have leukemia. He had stolen everything he could take from the home the day before Graciela arrived, leaving only the beds.

Graciela told the head of the prefecture that she would leave the mess in their hands, since it was their jurisdiction, but he told her no, they needed her to stay at the home until they could arrange for other orphanages in the city to take the children.

It was difficult for Graciela to return to the home, but she did what she could to make sure the children were fed, washed, and cared for. Distressed, she prayed, "God, what do you want of me here? If you indeed want me to stay here, then you will open the doors so that everything turns out alright."

Not long after she prayed, the Assemblies of Christ church and the prefecture asked her to become director of the home. If she refused, the home would be disbanded and the children doled out to other institutions, which would attract the attention of the local news networks. Some other Christian orphanages had recently fallen to the same fate, so the scandalous stories broadcast by the news media would further discredit the Evangelical Christians in the city. It became clear to Graciela what God wanted her to do.

Graciela Alba works diligently.



## **A Change in Direction**

*"You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, Psalm 16:11 NIV*



Original home with unfinished construction

In March 2001, Graciela became the director of the orphanage. Many changes occurred in a short amount of time. First, over half the children at the home were sent back to their families, leaving only those who had no families or whose families posed a danger to the children. Those who were returned were only in the home because their parents had paid the former director to care for them. This decreased the number of children to a more manageable 16.

Graciela changed the home's name to Talita Cumi, from the words spoken in Greek by Jesus to the

synagogue official's daughter when he brought her back to life in Mark 5:41. "Little girl, I say to you, rise up!" After what the children had been through, this name seemed appropriate. But the changes in name and church sponsorship caused financial problems for the home. Because of the long bureaucratic practices at the prefecture in processing the paperwork, the home had very limited financial support only from Pastor Suarez's church. There weren't even enough plates or eating utensils for all the children. Some children had a nasty skin infection that needed treatment.



Security wall declares a new vision

## **Progress was slow and hard**

*ὑπομεινεν* have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Revelation 2:3 NIV

"The first six months were very difficult," relates Graciela, "and the kids didn't trust me for three or four months." She says that no matter what the difficulties were, she persevered, remaining "still", trusting and listening to God, because, as she says, "He is my Boss"! Graciela was concerned for the children's relationship with God, too. There was a sheltered area where the children did their homework, with walls on three sides. Protruding from one of the walls was a light bulb.



"We don't understand."

A shelf had been attached to the wall under the light bulb, with flowers placed on it just under the light. Graciela noticed that the light was always left on, so one day she turned it off. The children immediately became very frightened and upset. They had been taught that the light was the presence of God in their home, and as long as the light was on, God was there. So, Graciela reluctantly turned it back on so as not to frighten them.

Graciela then began teaching the children about Jesus, and how He is the light of the world. "It's not necessary to have a light bulb to act as the presence of God in the home," she said, "because all we have to do is ask Jesus to come into our hearts, and then the light will be in us all the time – wherever we go, whatever we do. The light of Jesus within us will never go out, never fade. God's presence can abide within each one of us." The children accepted Jesus into their hearts and started going to church. Some time later, Graciela noticed someone had turned the light off, so she removed the makeshift altar and dead flowers.



School room with shrine

## **Many volunteers answer God's call to help**

*"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Luke 10:2 NRSV*

Little by little, conditions at the home improved as God answered prayer and sent people to help the plight of the children. In early May 2001, the home received a tremendous blessing in the form of a doctor from the United States, Dr. Bruce Kniegge. After learning of the children's situation, he began to use his connections in Santa Cruz and the U.S. to provide gifts of clothes, medicine, and food.

A young missionary teacher from Alabama, Katherine Jackson, began visiting the home on Saturdays to teach the children Bible lessons.



Katherine Jackson is a gifted teacher.

In October 2001, another missionary, Heidi Janecke, began helping at the home, using her artistic talents to brighten the children's lives. She painted a mural on the courtyard security wall and began teaching the children how to paint on chiffon scarves using watercolor. Sale of the scarves provided money to help buy food. The children also began baking bread and selling it to raise money.



Graciela formed friendships with other orphanage directors in the city, who gave her advice and taught her useful things such as where to buy food in bulk. A teacher began coming to the home mornings and afternoons to teach the children, in hopes that in a year they would be ready and disciplined enough to enter the school system. A Texas couple living and working in Santa Cruz, J.R. and Eve Roberts, began helping in December 2001; and the International Women's Club of Santa Cruz began sending money on a monthly basis to pay for food.



Beautiful hand-painted scarves

## **The earnest prayers of many**

*"For You, O my God, have revealed to Your servant that You will build for him a house; therefore Your servant has found courage to pray before You." 1 Chronicles 17:25*

Despite the steadily improving economic conditions for the home, the Talita Cumi facility itself remained a big problem. The drug dealer's home, parts of which had never been finished, was structurally instable. The walls surrounding the home were ineffective in keeping thieves out, and the home was frequently robbed. Twice during 2001, the office of the



Dilapidated laundry facility for 35 children

prefecture threatened to close the home and send the children to other orphanages. Graciela shot back that if they didn't want the children there, then they should find them a new facility!

It became clear that Talita Cumi could not and should not remain in that facility any longer. So in December 2001, Graciela and the home's supporters began praying in earnest that God would provide a new home. Twice a month, they would spend a day fasting and praying for a new home, beseeching God to help them once again. And there were scores of people who had come to visit the orphanage who began praying as well. They remained confident that God had started this work and that He was going to sustain it.

Graciela also desired *Personeria Jurídica* for Talita Cumi – legal standing before the government as a non-profit entity, which is a long process and requires lots of organization on the home's part.



Many Christians blessed the children with visits.



Street view. High roof is large covered play area.

In October 2002, Tim and Holly Nyquist, friends of the home, learned of a Dutch missionary doctor living in Sucre, Bolivia, who was selling his Santa Cruz home. Graciela and others visited the home and saw that the clean, spacious home in a safe neighborhood would be excellent, but his price of \$100,000 was not affordable. Two months later, the missionary doctor visited Talita Cumi and offered to sell his home to them for \$65,000. All he wanted was a down payment of \$10,000 and they could pay the balance as the Lord provided. He even gave them the keys before they paid the down payment!

### **The Lord provides**

*"...They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over..." Luke 6:38 NASB*

Talita Cumi had only \$5,000 for a down payment, but once again they came before God, asking Him that if it was His will, He would provide the remaining \$5,000.

God was already at work in the hearts of many people around the world. A couple in California decided to reach out and help after the husband had visited. They began praying and telling the story to many different Christian churches and organizations in California. This resulted in a marvelous donation to Talita Cumi!

Kathrine Jackson told her home church in Alabama about the need. Their hearts were moved to begin praying about how they could help not only financially, but also with construction work teams and VBS teams. They also presented Talita Cumi with a sizeable donation.

A couple who had just come to Santa Cruz from England heard about what was going on and bestowed an unbelievable anonymous donation. A lady from Texas purchased scarves which had been



One of three buildings on the site.

handmade by the children and topped off her purchase with yet another generous donation. And the list goes on and on with many heartfelt donations of love, prayers and manual labor.

Two weeks later, their prayers were been answered – four times over. \$20,000 had been contributed toward the purchase of the new home.

January 1, 2003, before they had even moved into the home, a party of thanksgiving was held in the new facility. Anyone and everyone involved with the home was invited to celebrate God's provision for the children of Talita Cumi.

A month later Graciela and the children left behind the dilapidated old home with its unstable walls and ugly memories and moved into their new home. A local construction company paid for the move, and provided all the equipment and tools necessary to prepare the home for occupancy. What a praise!



Improved entry for rainy days.

Volunteers decorated the boys' dorm.



Girls' dorm - also decorated by volunteers.



New screened dining area.

### **Talita Cumi today**

*"This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 118:24 NIV*

Today, Talita Cumi continues to enjoy God's blessing as more things are provided for the home, such as volunteer construction crews from North American churches who have come to expand the girl's dormitory and build an additional storage structure.

A board of directors was formed, and vision and mission statements were written. Soon the home will achieve the *Personeria Jurídica* status that Graciela dreamed of years ago.

The children are healthy and well fed, attending a nearby public school, and growing up in a more stable environment. The sadness and difficulty of growing up without a mom or dad is countered at least in some degree by the dozens of surrogate *tíos* and *tías* (uncles and aunts) the kids have – the friends of Talita Cumi, the board of directors, the faithful volunteers.



Rice and chicken is a staple diet.

## **A vision for the future**

*"Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he." Proverbs 29:18 KJV*

The Talita Cumi story is not over. Their vision is to expand by purchasing two homes that are for sale adjacent to the facility. One would be used to house the 12 boys who now share one small room. The board hopes that a man will be called by God to oversee these boys. Graciela would like to use the other home as a transition for the teenage girls who require more privacy and will soon be too old to continue to live at Talita Cumi. Here, they could learn the skills required to live independently when they will have to leave the safety of Talita Cumi.



Volunteers expand the dormitories.



Happy children hard at work and play.



Graciela wants the best for the children that she takes care of...as if they were her own! She keeps strengthening her faith, always knowing that God and only God can keep the work of Talita Cumi going forward.



The children love to help at their new home.



***"Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things."*** Hebrews 13:18 NASB