

Community Kitchen Helps Feed Poor Youth

By Rebecca Kimitch

Tico Times Staff

**EXCLUSIVE
REPORT**

In groups of three or four at a time, children show up in the doorway, holding their empty plates and wearing shy smiles, waiting for what will likely be their only full

meal that day.

The woman who walks over to collect their plates and return them filled with food could be the mother of any of them. In the back, another mother stirs huge pots of rice, beans and meatball soup while another mixes water into a huge vat of juice.

Together these women have taken the responsibility of feeding the children of the shantytown Triángulo de Solidaridad, in Tibás, north of San José.

Every day, approximately 250 children come here hungry and walk away with plates, bowls or whatever container they have full. They take the meal to their homes – crumbling structures pieced together with scrap tin and wood.

The lunches are simple – perhaps spaghetti, ground beef casserole or hot-dogs, plus the standard rice, beans, plantains and juice – but half a year ago many young residents of this impoverished community could only dream of such a complete meal.

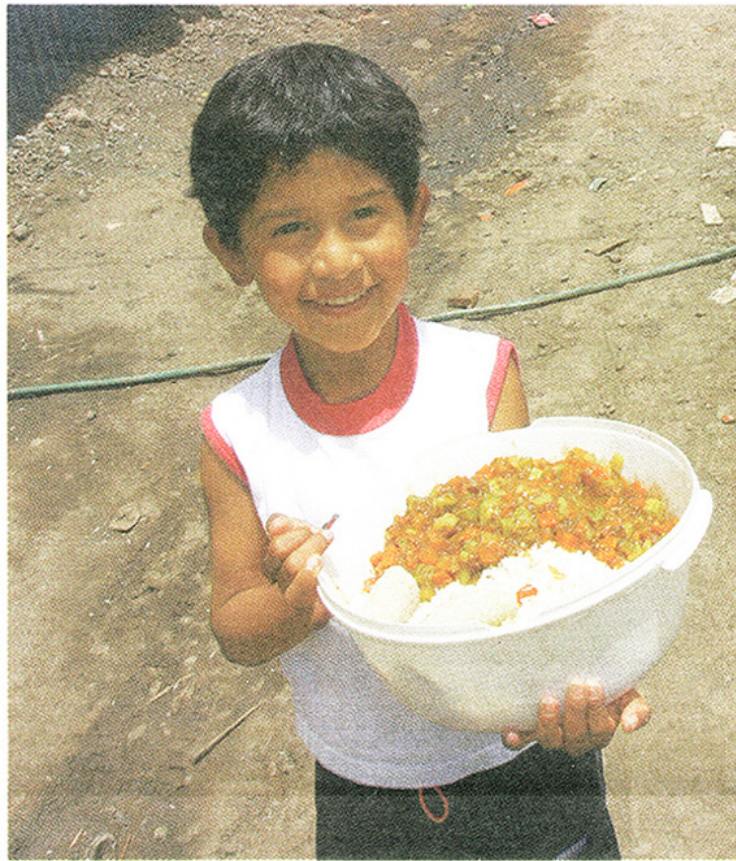
A Catholic priest and a handful of residents founded the community kitchen last October as a project to both ensure the area's children have at least one solid meal a day, and provide the area's women with something meaningful to do. Approximately 20 mothers from the shantytown rotate working in the kitchen, preparing the daily meal one week per month.

"Most of the time I am at home, taking care of the kids. I am always looking for something to do, looking for work. But I haven't found any," explained mother Janet Blandon, who works in the kitchen. "With this project, it makes us feel useful, so we don't feel just closed inside the house. It allows us to distract ourselves for at least two or three hours."

Furthermore, the kitchen allows the women to work together, learn from one another and share – ultimately allowing the community to move forward, Blandon said.

"It is very important to understand that this is not just about providing nutrition for the children who live here, it is about building an alliance between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans (both of whom live in Triángulo de Solidaridad)," added Father Luis Gonzalo Mateo, who moved to Costa Rica from Spain and has been working with the community since last year.

Beyond Father Mateo's moral support, the kitchen is financially backed by the



A Warm Meal: Seven-year-old José Antonio Montoya carries food home to share with his four siblings. He is one of hundreds of children fed every day through the comedor (shown at right) in the Triángulo de Solidaridad shantytown in Tibás, north of San José. Volunteer cook Juana López, above right, dishes up the day's meal.

Photos by Mónica Quesada | Tico Times

Catholic Church, which provides regular provisions of rice, beans and oil. Through donations coordinated by Mateo, the mothers also receive approximately €150,000 to €200,000 (\$297-\$396) a month to buy food.

With these resources they are able to feed the community's children age 10 and under, which number in the hundreds.

"We had to set a limit at that age, otherwise we wouldn't have enough," explained mother Patricia Alonzo.

The kitchen hasn't been without its problems. Because there is not enough food for everyone, leaders have heard of cases in which mothers take the plates of food from the children and give it to their spouses.

"We go visit the children's homes and talk to the parents," Alonzo said. "We have to think of the children, we can't think of ourselves."

As a young girl bends over and excitedly shows a school notebook to her friend, it is easy to understand why these mothers look to their children with hope. While their husbands are barely able to provide for their families with jobs in construction or gardening, many of the children are attending public schools. They visit the community kitchen on their way to or from class to get the nourishment they need, Blandon explained.

"It's frightening the conditions in which

they live. I don't know how they still maintain spirit, but they do," Mateo said.

Beyond the Kitchen

Hanging above the door that leads to the small home that houses the kitchen is a sign that reads *Comedor Infantil Maestra Julita de España* (Children's Kitchen, Teacher Julita from Spain).

The humble structure is named after a retired teacher from Spain who volunteered in Costa Rica and provided the seed money for the program.

"She told me she had a tip for me," Mateo said. "I thought she meant a book or something. But then she took me to the bank and took our 6,000 euros."

These funds were used to supply the kitchen with a large gas stove, with burners large enough to fit the huge cast-iron pots needed to cook for some many children. In addition, \$2,500 in renovations were made to the scrap-wood home provided by a family to house the kitchen. A steel frame was built inside the structure in order to support a second story where the family now sleeps.

The dirt floor of the structure's main room was paved with cement and colorful murals were painted on the walls. It is hardly an architect's dream, but it serves its pur-



pose. While most of the children take their lunches home to eat, kids who don't have a plate or cup can use ones provided by the kitchen and eat in the main room.

The space has become more than a dining room. A kindergarten was recently started there; it has been used for Bible workshops; and the Nicaraguan Embassy paid a recent visit to help community residents with their passports. It may also be used as a health clinic in the future.

"The kitchen is just the beginning, a beginning of what we can do," Mateo said. "Little by little they are moving forward and organizing themselves."

The priest would like to see the space also used as a school for older Nicaraguan children and adults who cannot register in public schools because they are not residing legally in Costa Rica.

While such vision may have seemed far-fetched a year ago, the community kitchen has helped residents believe such things can happen.

"When people see this, it gets them excited to help more," said mother Juana López.

This is true of not only community members, but also nonprofit organizations, she said.

"Everyone has a dream, and step by step we have to tend to them," Mateo said. ■

How to Help

While the community has received help, it is still in need of a refrigerator for the kitchen, chairs for the dining hall/classroom or any degree of support. To pitch in or obtain more information, contact Father Luis Gonzalo Mateo at 222-5057.