

Chela's Story

At the age of 8 or 9, Chela was already reaching out to children less fortunate than herself. She lived near an orchard and seeing all the fruit lying on the ground gave her an idea. Why not gather the fruit and share it with the many hungry children that were always around? So she did. And their joy encouraged Chela to extend her hospitality. She started inviting these kids right into her home and feeding them. She probably should have asked her mother first, but then, her mother had always set an example of cooking food for the hungry and taking it to those in need.

One thing led to another. A natural leader, Chela started entertaining the children as well as feeding them. She recalls putting on dramas for them or hanging a sheet in front of candles and creating a shadow play with her fingers. One time she lined up about 50 kids on the sidewalk, some of them probably older than her, and taught them how to dance. They put on a wonderful performance, at least in her eyes.

So it is not surprising that Chela became sort of a pied piper, with children naturally being drawn to her. After graduating from high school, Chela did a lot of things. She played soccer on a team that traveled not only around Mexico but also to other countries. She studied to be a teacher, took courses in cooking, and even was trained as a nurse while in the army. When we met Chela, we were working with an orphanage and Chela became the director of the home for the youngest boys. They loved her and called her "mama." But she wasn't

their real mother and though they lived in an "orphanage" they were not really orphans. Too often Chela saw mothers drop their kids off at an orphanage and forget about them. Or when the boys would go home over Christmas or in the summer, all the good things they'd learn under her instruction would be trashed by the bad things they witnessed at home. Chela began to think, "There must be a better way to help families."

When George Arapage started helping with the breakfast at Camino Vivo church, Chela began to work with the children, specifically setting up a room where children could come for extra tutoring during the week. Soon children from Carretas were pleading with her to help them, too. She started meeting with them under a tree, using a tarp for the classroom. One thing led to another and soon the community leaders offered Chela land in Carretas if she would come and help. Finally! A chance to not only work with children, but to be part of a community and be able to influence the parents as well! Chela agreed.

Interestingly, Chela did not become a Christian until her son Napoleon was 3 years old. When Jesus Christ came into her life, her husband got mad at her and wanted things to be the way they used to be. "It's Jesus or me," he threatened. But Chela would not give up her Lord Jesus, so her husband left her to care for three small children on her own. Chela had lived a very comfortable life, but now as a single mother without much income, she learned to make do with less and be creative. Despite the challenges, her children received good

educations and learned English as they volunteered with work teams that came down to Mexico.

One of her favorite verses is Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths."