

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Fulfilling doctor dreams

Foundation launched by St. Agnes sister helps Nicaraguan women attend medical school

By PATRICIA LEFEVERE

What does a retired professor do when she finds rich academic talent among indigenous Nicaraguan high school students and learns that many of these young women want to become doctors but have no possibility of paying for medical school?

In the case of St. Agnes Sr. Ann McKean, she initiated Adelante Mujer/Advance Woman, a foundation whose mission is to aid women who want to become doctors in the eastern region of Nicaragua, an area in dire need of improved health care.

The country's Caribbean coastal area is among the poorest in Central America — second only to Haiti. It has but one doctor for every 3,000 inhabitants. Only 4 percent of women in eastern Nicaragua can even afford to go to a university, McKean told *NCR* in a series of email exchanges.

Such need can concentrate one's twilight years, she's discovered. When she founded Adelante Mujer in 2009, her goal was to win approval of the venture by the Sisters of St. Agnes, headquartered in Fond du Lac, Wis., where McKean now lives in active retirement. She made several trips to Nicaragua in 2009, studying three universities before selecting the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast — better known as URACCAN — to be a partner for the foundation.

Within a year, the organization had awarded its first scholarship to a woman in the school's medical program. McKean wanted to aid more students and quickly set to publicizing the effort and raising funds. She enlisted an executive team and a board of directors to obtain 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in the United States.

Donations began to flow from men's and women's religious congregations, from Mary's Pence, the Knights of Columbus, and Soroptimist Fond du Lac, as well as from a number of individual donors and a small core of contributors who give \$1,000-3,000 each year. The foundation has set itself an annual scholarship goal of \$62,030.

"This is truly a project of the people," McKean said, expressing delight that Adelante Mujer "is blessed to be the connection between generous donors and young women with the desire to serve their people as medical doctors."

In December 2014, McKean saw her dream realized when eight Adelante Mujer students graduated as medical doctors. Currently, all eight have undertaken two years of social service in clinics and hospitals assigned by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health.

On Jan. 27, five additional Adelante Mujer students pronounced the Hippocratic oath and became physicians following a celebratory graduation Mass in St. Peter Catholic Church in Puerto Cabezas, the coastal city where the URACCAN medical program is located. The five began their internship at the local hospital in February.

Another 23 women are recipients of Adelante Mujer scholarships, which help them pay for textbooks, a computer, lab coat, stethoscope, scrubs,



—Sr. Marise Meis, CSA

St. Agnes Sr. Diane Bauknecht (front center) poses with students in their sixth year of study May 22. The students, who have received aid from Adelante Mujer, are set to become doctors in December.



Ann McKean, CSA

surgical masks, thermometers, blood pressure cuffs, hand sanitizers and other essentials of medical education that many students cannot afford. In addition, monthly stipends help with transportation costs to Puerto

Cabezas and provide one meal a day.

While medical school education lasts six years, the Adelante Mujer grants are awarded for the last five years, following the initial trial year. Students must maintain an 80 percent grade point average to continue to receive aid.

"There's a great need for a similar program of aid to be offered the men studying to be doctors," McKean said, but Adelante Mujer funds only women and accepts about 50 percent of those who apply. About half of the country's physicians are women, she said, adding that people are happy to see any doctor. Given the doctor shortage, physicians often see 60 to 75 patients a day, she said.

McKean, whose religious community has worked 70 years running clinics and schools in Nicaragua, knows well the poverty and needs of the country. In interviewing several potential university students, she found that many wanted to go to medical school because they had experienced the loss of a loved one due to lack of medical and prenatal care in their region. They had witnessed deaths due to dengue, malaria and chikungunya when no physician was at hand.

For cancer patients, it was the impossibility of having radiation or chemotherapy unless they were able to pay for the \$150 flight to Managua, the capital, where about a fifth of the population lives. Getting to the capital — and back — is impossible for most, as the average income in Eastern Nicaragua is \$1,126 a year. Eighty per-

cent of that income is spent on food alone, McKean said, leaving little or nothing for education or emergency health needs.

The nun pointed to poor infrastructure that also impedes health care in the eastern region. Most visiting doctors — when they can get to these remote areas — are often unable to assist the local population adequately, she said. Trained in Spanish, the majority of physicians do not know the indigenous languages spoken in the area, and indigenous patients are distrustful of doctors they cannot understand, who do not appreciate their medical traditions.

In researching how to overcome these disadvantages, McKean chose to partner with URACCAN, because it was the first school to train "intercultural physicians" in a program that combines ancient and traditional knowledge with modern medicine.

McKean, 81, is no stranger to modern medicine, having had cancer on four occasions and undergoing open-heart surgery two years ago. But she has also used traditional medical practices learned in Nicaragua for digestive ills, wounds and rashes "with good results," she said.

No longer able to make trips to Nicaragua, she keeps in touch with students via Facebook, Skype and Messenger and particularly through her able assistant, Sr. Diane Bauknecht. The former general vicar of the Sisters of St. Agnes, Bauknecht serves as secretary/treasurer of Adelante Mujer's board of directors and is a frequent visitor to the region.

"Sr. Diane keeps us up to date on why we are on the board," said Sr. Susan Stucki, one of five St. Agnes sister board members. A retired neonatal nurse who lives in Chicago, Stucki said she enjoys "Sr. Diane's photos and stories that bring to life each woman as an individual. I truly believe the strength of the program is the personal connection with each woman."

The board is tasked with carrying McKean's work far into the future and

developing the structures, policies and long-range plan that can make medical education accessible to the area's poor women.

St. Agnes Sr. Caryl Hartjes, the newest board member and a retired nurse and missionary to Nicaragua, called Adelante Mujer an international collaboration that addresses a well-documented, critical need of the people living on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. She said the medical students themselves identify very specific needs — things like food allowances or postgraduate continuing professional development — and convey these needs to an on-site coordinator and to Bauknecht during her visits.

"These are the benchmarks of a solid program," Hartjes told *NCR*.

Laywoman Esther Hicks serves as the board's vice president and brings an extensive background in mission promotion, educational and systems planning, interreligious learning, writing and teaching. Hicks also works with the bishop and with aid partners in the Nsukka, Nigeria, diocese. She said she's happy to support McKean's commitment to "uplifting the lives of women in Nicaragua."

For McKean — who has taught Scripture, women's studies, world religions and anthropology at colleges, universities and a seminary, in Wisconsin, Tennessee and Texas — nothing compares to the work she is doing now to advance women.

"If I were offered a million dollars to return to teaching, I would turn it down. I have never found any work so fulfilling. I love the women I work with," she said. "To play a part in seeing them fulfill their dream of becoming a doctor cannot be beaten."

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime *NCR* contributor.]



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