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Tucson Baptist Center Programs Offer "Overflowing Pop-cornucopia"

By Tim Nicholas

TUCSON, Ariz. (BP)--A constant flow of popcorn--nearly 100 pounds are popped each month--mixed with a lively variety of programs has helped to make the Baptist Friendship Center here a regular "pop-cornucopia" that overflows with benefits for those who attend.

Everyone involved in the programs at the center receives a free bag of popcorn. Even center director Ross Hanna is likely to be munching popcorn as he practices what is usually "one-shot counseling."

People seldom come to the center for regular help, Hanna points out. So he tries to provide all the guidance he can on their first visits. "They'll be back," Hanna says, "but with a different problem."

The center offers a variety of programs aimed at meeting a variety of needs.

One program that has been not only therapeutic but entertaining is an interracial puppet show, directed by Peggy Rhodes, a Southern Baptist US-2 missionary recently appointed to the center staff by the SBC Home Mission Board.

The puppets, made by a group of high school students who regularly write and perform most of their own scripts, represent the general racial make-up of the low to moderate income community around the Friendship Center: Negro, Chinese, Mexican, Indian and Anglo.

During the performances, including the story of "Adam and the Snake," kids in the audiences talk to and interact with the puppets in a way that many will not do in face-to-face conversation with other people, Miss Rhodes points out.

Started by volunteer summer workers from San Diego, Calif., the puppeteers performed 25 times in two weeks last summer to a total of 1,500 Vacation Bible School students in the Tucson area.

The center, however, does not confine its programs for youth and youngsters. Although it has a full program of ministries to youth and pre-school children, the center also seeks to minister to the entire family.

In the fashion of a free university, women who attend the functions at the center can learn sewing, take English and Spanish literacy classes, study the Bible, and practice in a Bible choir.

Each month the extension center at the University of Arizona gives cooking demonstrations to the women by preparing an economical meal at the center's kitchen facilities. The extension center also regularly teaches family planning and family management.

Hanna teaches a sex education program which the mothers in turn teach to their children at home. "This allows the parents to choose content and speed for teaching sex," says Hanna.

He has volunteered the center's facilities for group therapy sessions led by a juvenile court counselor who trains adult volunteers to counsel youth before the youth get court records.

"Between the time a young person is picked up by police and released without charges, and the time he's picked up and booked, that's when he needs help," Hanna observes.

Although Friendship Center has no regularly scheduled worship services, Hanna does teach a regular adult Bible study at the center. The study concentrates on subjects relevant to the participants' daily lives. When questions arise, Hanna turns to the Bible and says: "Let's see what the Lord says."

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Feeling a responsibility to get people into church for worship, Hanna directs the bus ministry for nearby First Southern Baptist Church of Tucson. Two of the six church buses enter the community around Friendship Center, picking up an average of 73 each Sunday.

For those who use English as a second language, Hanna carries the gospel into their homes with cassette tapes in Spanish, Papago-Pima (Indian), Mandarin and Cantonese.

"Tapes in their own languages can reach these people in a way I never could," says Hanna. Friendship Center also sponsors Indian and Spanish radio programs on a local station.

Though continuation of full adult and youth programs depends on volunteer help, Hanna and the other Southern Baptist home missionaries assigned to the center never go out recruiting volunteers to help. "We don't have to," Hanna observes.

"After our monthly overnight camp-ins or after summer youth camps, parents call in to ask what they can do to help at the center," Hanna says. "The more you get involved with helping people, the more they'll want to get involved," he observes.

With 15 permanent volunteers assisting the center, Hanna has devised programs around the talents of the volunteers, rather than making volunteers fit a preconceived program.

Now occupying cramped quarters, the center has already received authorization from the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to expand its building program. Hanna envisions a room for recreation, showers in the restrooms for those in the neighborhood without hot water, and a craft workshop. "I already have three volunteers lined up to teach in the shop," he beams.

To implement more night programs, Hanna hopes to recruit a live-in volunteer who can supervise recreational activities for older youth.

While the indefatigable Hanna sets the pace for Friendship Center, Peggy Rhodes reflects the general attitude of the place.

"Hello friend," she says to each person she passes in the neighborhood.

The greeting seems appropriate for a Friendship Center aimed at winning friends for Jesus Christ, and for Southern Baptists, in Tucson.

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Georgia's First Spanish Baptist Church Organizes

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ATLANTA (BP)--The first Spanish-speaking Baptist church to be formally organized in Georgia was constituted here at First Baptist Church, Atlanta, after three years as a mission group of the Atlanta church.

Jorge Comesanas is pastor of the group, which was constituted as First Spanish Baptist Church of Atlanta. It has more than 100 Spanish-speaking members.

The mission project has been jointly supported by the First Baptist Church here and the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

Abdel Silva, Georgia Baptist missionary to Spanish-speaking people, said there are about 30,000 Spanish-speaking people in the state, with 16,000 of them in Atlanta. Most are Cuban refugees.

Silva and Comesanas joined with Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Baptist Church here, and L.D. Wood of the language missions department of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in conducting the constitutional services for the new church.

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