

MEXICAN CHILDREN GET HELPING HAND

By Marty Hope, Calgary Herald *August 7, 2010*

It's got all the makings of a movie plot line.

A couple visiting a foreign country fall in love with the place they are staying.

They plan to spend more time there, so they begin to learn more about the people in the small town nearby.

They become involved with local schoolchildren and set about providing some of the educational tools the students are so lacking.

This story is about Dale and Lynda Lyster, retired Calgary teachers who have become personally involved with giving a helping hand to the schoolchildren of Barron, Mexico.

Although the students want to learn, they have been held back by the lack of educational fundamentals -- things Canadian kids take for granted, like computers, library books and blackboards.

The Lysters are part of a movement called the Friends of Barron.

The couple bought a condo at Estrella Del Mar resort in 2003 and developed a fractional ownership arrangement with six friends so they could go to Mexico twice a year for a month at a time.

Since then, they have purchased a second condo and have staked their claim to a building site on the Robert Trent Jones, Jr., golf course that is part of the resort, with an eye to using it as a retirement residence.

In 2006, the Lysters were exploring Barron -- a town of 3,000 which has always had a close connection with Estrella because many of the staff at the resort's golf course, restaurant, grounds and housekeeping services come from there.

The little town has a bakery, small stores, a cantina, restaurant, ball diamond and three schools.

It was on one of these side trips that the Lysters stopped in at the elementary school to see if there was an opportunity to volunteer.

At their first tour of the school, the language barrier was immediately apparent.

Neither the principal or teachers spoke English and the Lysters didn't know Spanish.

It was also obvious the school needed help.

"We were sad to see the poor condition of the tables, chairs and desks and the poor quality of the blackboards that had been painted with blackboard paint so often, you could no longer see the chalk," says Dale. "The

students, dressed in their navy pants and skirts with white shirts, were ready to learn, but there were no books in the classrooms, no art supplies and very few resources."

When asked about computers, the principal proudly showed the couple four outdated machines in a room the size of a closet where three children sat on old metal benches, fascinated by what was happening on the screen.

There was no Internet connection. The teacher only had access to a couple of reading and writing programs.

"In another closet space was the library," says Dale.

"About 100 Spanish books were imprisoned in boxes sitting on the floor. There were no bookshelves for the books and the children were not allowed to use the books as the school had no way of tracking them."

The Lysters became determined to help the town's 300 or so children.

On Valentine's Day in 2007, the couple held the first of many meetings with the principals of the kindergarten, elementary and secondary schools, who were joined by an interpreter and the town's mayor.

"Wish lists were generated from the school staffs and principals and that was the beginning of an amazing journey over the next three years that has culminated in wiring an empty classroom and equipping it with 30 computers and restoring a dilapidated classroom into a beautiful new little library," says Dale.

Through the financial support of Pat Butler -- the president of Club Acquisition Co. which developed Estralla Del Mar -- his staff and the generous Americans and Canadians from the condo complex, the Lysters started a fundraising program for the schools that continues today through the Friends of Barron.

The charity's focus in 2011 will be on the creation of more scholarships for deserving Grade 9 students to attend high school in Mazatlan -- and the building of a computer lab for the 100 grade 7, 8 and 9 students who have only three computers in the entire school.

"Lynda and I believe that providing an excellent education is the best way to change the future of the young students who live in Barron," says Dale. "Education can open doors to a better standard of living and employment for Mexico's bright young students."