



A Jesuit's work with the shoeshine boys of Quito, Ecuador

He started with lunch. Quito, Ecuador, has 100,000 shoeshine boys. You see them on every street corner, in every plaza. Some are only five, six years old. They work long hours to help support their families. Some earn up to 85 percent of their family's entire income.

In 1964, Fr. John Halligan, a Jesuit from New York, was working with indigenous poor in the Chimborazo province of Ecuador, south of Quito. Even during theology studies he had dreamt of just such an assignment.

"I was interested in working with poor people," he says. "I heard they had Indians and jungles [in Ecuador], but I didn't know anything about them."

Happy in his assignment, Halligan balked when his superiors asked him to move north and look into the problem of Quito's shoeshine boys. "There were

thousands of kids out early in the morning until late at night," he remembers. What could one man possibly do for a hundred thousand boys?

Well, he started with lunch.

Halligan set up shop in an attic above the Jesuit high school, then sent word out on the streets that there was a free lunch for any kid who was hungry. Eleven showed up that first day. By the end of the week he was feeding 35. Within six months, 250 hungry boys were lining up for lunch.

The priest had only two rules. Hands had to be washed before eating (despite the fact that there was no running water in the attic). And each boy had to deposit 50 *centavos* in a savings account that Halligan scrupulously maintained.

When he wasn't feeding the boys, he was begging money. He outfitted his makeshift kitchen with a real stove and pots and pans. After a year he was able to



DON DOLL, SJ

*story by Brad Reynolds, SJ
photos by Don Doll, SJ,
and Brad Reynolds, SJ*



DON DOLL, SJ

About 40 years ago Fr. John Halligan, SJ (below), tackled a tough ministry: caring for shoeshine boys in Quito, Ecuador. He started out offering them lunch; now he's able to offer them and their families three meals a day, education, and vocational training at the Working Boys Center. Betty Calanilla (above) runs the library at the center, the only free library in Quito.

buy some tables and benches. Six volunteers from the Peace Corps and a nun signed on to teach trades and crafts. With the tables pushed to one side, the dining room was turned into a classroom. By 1966, Halligan was providing medical and dental care for the boys.

Ironically, instead of attracting more kids, the expanded services had the opposite effect. Numbers started to drop. Padre Juan failed to realize that boys do not naturally gravitate toward doctors, schools, and rules about washing hands. He had built his staff up to seven people and was spending \$2,000 a month, but only a hundred boys were showing up.

In 1967, the padre's struggling project got a huge shot in the arm when a BVM sister from Iowa, Sr. Miguel





Gloria Pazos and Jorge Gomez help with the more than 35,000 meals the Working Boys Center's two campuses prepare weekly.

Conway, signed on. Halligan credits her with bringing order to chaos. A new kitchen was installed, along with water storage tanks, toilets, and showers. They started serving three meals a day. A small library came next. Within a year, construction began on a permanent center for these working boys.

Now the kids not only had a padre looking after them, they had a madre, too.

Sr. Conway—Madre Miguel, as she is known—recalls her first impressions of Halligan's place. "They had a little carpentry shop set up in front of the kitchen—lots of sawdust over everything. There were guys teaching shoemaking, carpentry, and metal crafts. The doctor and dentist were in place. He had games for the boys. He even had a little pretend school for those who couldn't read or write."

During her first two years, the Madre was the only full-time staffer besides the Padre.

"We were the mom and dad, the teachers, the

scolders . . . everything," Conway says. She could read and write in Spanish but couldn't speak it. "I learned to speak Spanish by looking at the children's books and having the kids read to me."

They moved into their new center in 1974, hanging a sign above the door: *Centro del Muchacho Trabajador Número Uno*, Center for the Working Boys Number One. A new rule was introduced: any boy wanting to enroll in the center had to sign on his whole family. Parents, brothers, sisters—everyone had to participate. They called themselves "A Family of Families." Meals were served six days a week, and medical and dental services were available for all. Everybody, parents included, was expected to complete grammar school classes taught by faculty and volunteers and then go on to one of several trade schools: metal and auto mechanics, carpentry, toy making, baking, sewing, and beauty care.



DON DOLL, SJ

Halligan's offer of lunch to the shoeshine boys now includes three meals a day for the boys and their families. Everyone is encouraged to take classes in reading and writing and to learn a trade.



DON DOLL, SJ

Sr. Miguel Conway, BVM, Fr. John Halligan, SJ, and Sr. Cindy Sullivan, BVM, are the mainstays of the Working Boys Center staff.



Ernesto Canchalla works at the bakery training center. Such vocational training offered at the Working Boys Center helps break the cycle of poverty.

With skills like those, job opportunities became available to a population chronically underemployed. “In 41 years we’ve never had a problem getting a job for one of our graduates,” asserts Halligan.

Halligan, now 76, oversees a team of seven co-directors and a staff of over 200, some of whom are graduates of the center. All are dedicated to improving the individual and family lives of the people in the program. At any given time, about 400 families are enrolled at the center, which has expanded to two campuses.

Halligan estimates they serve 35,000 meals a day. At breakfast, lunch, and dinner the huge cafeteria is filled with families, all dining as one. The priest wanders from table to table, stopping to visit or helping restore order to a long line of children waiting for their food. Before lunch, one end of the room is used as a makeshift chapel for daily Mass. Most everyone attends.

The staff believes their program is probably the only “total family” project in Latin America. “I think it’s one of the unique things about this program,” claims Halligan. “When you call it a family of families, it’s the real deal.”

Each year, volunteers arrive to help out in the classrooms and training shops. The only recruitment is by word of mouth, mostly at Jesuit colleges and universities, including Fairfield in Fairfield, Conn., Le Moyne in Syracuse, and Marquette in Milwaukee. “We get as many Jesuit-educated kids as we do,” says Halligan, “because the Jesuits are educating them to come and serve others.”

Before volunteers arrive, Halligan writes each one, explaining that a commitment to the community is essential. “Community is made,” he instructs them. “It doesn’t just happen.” The volunteers live in community along with Halligan and Conway and



DON DOLL, SJ

Beauty care instructor Elsa Quadrado (left) shows Tania Rochina how to do a facial.



DON DOLL, SJ

Machine shop teacher Gabriel Lopez shows student Edwin Cadena the ins and outs of lathe operation.

Marquette University alumnus Pat Hurley ('03) is representative of the center's many volunteers who hail from Jesuit institutions, including Le Moyne College in Syracuse, N.Y., and Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn.



DON DOLL, SJ



Cindy Sullivan, also a BVM sister. Each person has a private bedroom with bath, but everything else is shared. The evening meal, at 8, is scheduled so all can be present.

The minimum wage in Ecuador is about \$150 a month, but Halligan estimates only about 25 percent of the population make that much. He said the average income for families coming to the center is about \$2 a day. The families they serve have no way to pay for the costs of the center. So to raise the \$1.3 million to keep the program running, Halligan spends half his time on fundraising and development. Most of the grants and gifts they receive come from the United States, but, according to Sullivan, donations were cut in half after 9/11. She regularly makes trips to the States to reinvigorate their donor base.

Halligan has built a small strip mall facing a busy

street at the edge of the five-acre main campus. The businesses include a beauty parlor, restaurant, bakery, and a variety store that offers crafts made in the trade schools. The employees are students at the center; they learn how to deal with customers and earn a modest income.

Halligan emphasizes, however, that profits are not the primary objective. He wants to keep the focus on education. “We need to earn something so we can show kids that this is how you make money,” he explains. “When I’m gone, the temptation will be to make it profitable. But then you’ll no longer be with the poor.”

Despite immense poverty, Halligan believes the people of Latin America can build successful lives for themselves through education and hard work. He disapproves of those who leave their homeland, abandoning their families to find work up north.



DON DOLL, SJ

Dr. Pamela Hidalgo is one of the center's dentists who sees to students' teeth twice a year.

(Opposite page) Thirteen-year-old Juan Carlos Malisa gets treated for measles by Dr. Ximena Guerra at the center's clinic.



DON DOLL, SJ

University of Wisconsin nursing graduate Laura McNally volunteers in the health clinic, here taking the measure of two-year-old Michelle Guatta.

Halligan recognizes the problems but insists that emigration is no solution.

"It can be turned around. The whole show can be turned around."

After 40 years of working with Quito's shoeshine boys, Halligan knows he won't save them all. But that doesn't stop him from trying.

"Of the one hundred thousand shoeshine kids, there are probably ten thousand who want to change," he claims. "Those are the ones we go after. The others just hear about the rules—you have to go to school, they make you take a bath—they're not interested in us."

He pauses, looks around the crowded lunchroom, and smiles. "We know there are over five thousand families we've changed," he says. "They'll never be poor again." ■



Fr. Brad Reynolds, SJ, is the artist-in-residence at Gonzaga University in Spokane. Fr. Don Doll, SJ, is a professor of photography and digital video documentary at Creighton University in Omaha.