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Open Arms

Brazos Abiertos, the Houston-based HIV/AIDS education and healthcare project, serves the Yucatan.

By Tracy Morris

What do you get when you combine a group of dedicated Houstonians—including a former dancer-turned-educator/developer, a busy Texas mom involved with myriad nonprofit boards, a Harvard-trained attorney, a bed-and-breakfast proprietor with public-relations expertise, and one of the original HIV medical experts—with a renegade Catholic priest in Mexico? You get Brazos Abiertos, an innovative new HIV clinic and educational resource for the residents of the Yucatan peninsula.

Located at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico, the Yucatan juts out into some of the most beautiful and hospitable water in the world, all just a few hours' flight from Texas. Two Yucatan cities, Cancun and Cozumel, are favorite destinations for Houston vacationers, and a second home to many. But as is often the case with tourist spots, the areas most visited by gringos don't represent the conditions in which many of the natives reside.

"The people who live in remote mountain villages are of Mayan descent," says John Truax, one of the founders of Brazos Abiertos (Spanish for "open arms"). "The conditions there, coupled with the generations of cultural stigma between the Mayans and the Mexicans of more Spanish ancestry—in many ways, it's like stepping back in time to what it was like in the U.S. in the 1980s as far as the prevention and diagnosis of HIV, and even treatment."

In Merida, the capital city of the Yucatan, quiet attempts have been made, often by missionaries, to meet the needs of the many orphaned children and neglected adults with HIV in the area. Politics, religion, and cultural norms have been obstacles to serving this socially stigmatized population. But so far, those barriers have not stood in the way of the formation and development of Brazos Abiertos.

"It's all happened much faster than we anticipated," Truax says, "thanks in large part to an anonymous donor whose contributions put us on a whole different playing field than when we started."

Eye-Opening Experience

The idea for Brazos Abiertos started in 2004 when Truax, who shares a home in Merida with his partner, Jose Solis Pacheco, heard about a shelter off the beaten path. At the time, he and Solis, an attorney, owned the bed-and-breakfast property Angeles de la Merida, which they have since sold.

"The idea of this shelter, which is owned and operated by an independent organization based in Mexico, is to be a place where people with HIV can get their meds and assistance so they can move on with their lives," Truax says. "But really when we went there, out in the jungle, the reality was that it housed and acted as a hospice for, at that time, 38 people, including 18 children."

The first mission for the loosely organized group of ex-pats and Mexican residents (now called the Merida Advisory Board) was to help support existing services at this shelter. A fundraiser was held to pay for the installation of water and septic systems for the facility. Brazos Abiertos continues to provide the shelter with monthly food supplies, using funds raised at the regular Dinner with Friends gatherings that have become popular in Merida, a city of about 730,000 in the Yucatan interior.



The Dinner With Friends gatherings raise money for Brazos Abiertos.

In Merida, quiet attempts have been made to meet the needs of the many orphaned children and neglected adults with HIV.



Brazos Abiertos's board of directors.



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Truax then mentioned the conditions of the shelter to his friend, the physician Gordon Crofoot, M.D., the renowned HIV specialist. When Truax told Crofoot about an eight-year-old girl with Kaposi's sarcoma, Truax recalls, "he was just floored and said, "That shouldn't be." With an initial thought of instituting a widespread testing program, Crofoot began traveling regularly to the area to further investigate possibilities of helping the residents.

What Crofoot and the other Houstonians found was disturbing, recalls Sally Russ, who is the Brazos Abiertos board member in charge of educational efforts. Truax had asked his friend Russ to join the board of directors because of her wealth of experience with culturally sensitive educational programs for organizations that have included Planned Parenthood. As the Houstonians learned, just offering testing could actually create problems for affected people in the Yucatan. (Photo caption board of directors: l-r Jose Solis, Susan Rule, Jane Kavanagh, board president Dr. Gordon Crofoot, Chris O'Niell, Sally Russ, John Truax, and Nita Lindley. The board was photographed in Crofoot's Houston offices.)

That's where the Catholic priest who has lived in the area for several decades entered as a tremendous resource.

"He and some others who'd lived in Merida for awhile are savvy regarding the healthcare system in Mexico," Truax says. "They let us know that just testing people for HIV might actually do more harm than good. They explained that the stigma of HIV is still so great there, and one's diagnosis is made public. For example, women who test positive are likely to be put out of their homes and on the street. People lose their jobs, regardless of their positions. Treatment options there lag behind the U.S. by 20 years. So just knowing your HIV status isn't going to make a big difference and could actually be harmful."

To serve this population, Crofoot and the Brazos Abiertos board decided to develop a freestanding clinic. Scheduled to open later this year under the direction of a Mayan physician, Dr. Carlos Cabrera, the clinic will serve patients in the Yucatan who test positive for HIV, offering a new option for treatment, one that will provide the dignity and confidentiality often not experienced with other area healthcare services in the region. Even prevention efforts in Mexico are still under the scrutiny of the government; residents are required to sign their names in order to obtain free condoms from government-connected sources such as clinics. "You're then thought to be either a prostitute or gay, just for obtaining condoms," Truax says. "So, of course, many people won't do it." The Brazos Abiertos team always has thousands of condom packages on hand.

The clinic will be serving four groups of people, Truax says: "those who test negative and need education on how to stay that way; those who are diagnosed early, are healthy, and can learn lifestyle management of the disease; those who are later in their diagnosis and in need of medications; and those with end-of-life issues."

Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Rather than simply treating those who are already HIV-positive, the rapidly developing nonprofit decided to work from an additional angle: to educate the area's young people about prevention.

Sensitive to the nuances required in cross-cultural education and using her experience on the Planned Parenthood board as a foundation, Russ realized the need to create a peer-education format for the Mayan and Mexican residents of the Yucatan.

"We looked at the many possible approaches and groups in need of education—including men who are bringing HIV home to their families via connections with prostitutes—and we decided that our initial target should be the young people," Russ says. "You can change behavior and give more opportunity for future choices there."

Using the priest's existing network of families and villages, Russ and Brazos Abiertos developed an exchange-type program in which Houston undergrads and medical students are trained as prevention educators and then share what they have learned with students in the Yucatan. Their first educational efforts—programs with students in 2007 and a recent seminar with adults—have been incredibly well-received.

"A local nurse practitioner said we must be doing something right, because of the numbers in attendance at our workshops," Truax relates with obvious relief in his voice. "She can't believe we've attracted as many people as we have." One mother who attended the adult seminar in January said that everything she knew about HIV she had learned from her teenage son—and that everything he knew he had learned from Brazos Abiertos. So that's why she was there.

Helping the Helper

Brazos Abiertos will hold its first Houston fundraiser on May 10, a wine tasting with music at a local residence. During the evening, Grammy Award-winning artist Oscar de la Rosa of the group La Mafia will be honored for his work as an HIV and health issues spokesperson. Tickets (\$100) may be purchased through the website www.brazosabiertosyucatan.com.

Truax points out that \$100 is far more than a drop in the bucket for this nonprofit. Because of the value of the U.S. dollar in Mexico, far-reaching activities are realistically attainable in the Yucatan at a relatively low cost, compared to the United States. "With our dedicated board donating their time, and our incredible development team far exceeding my expectations, our contributors feel like they're really making a lasting difference down there, where only \$100 can feed a family for a month," he says.

"Our support systems in both Houston and Mexico are absolutely amazing. It's such a compelling project. Everyone who's involved is totally committed, down there with the kids in 100-degree weather doing the workshops, besides applying for grants and putting on fundraisers."

Upcoming Brazos Abiertos workshops include a middle school run by members of the Jehovah's Witnesses church, a university-level program, and more adult-education sessions. Lessons in basic anatomy will be the starting point for these programs, Truax explains. "We've had questions from high schoolers about the most basic understanding of their bodies, even though it's common in their culture to marry after the ninth grade. It's a whole different world down there, and it's so gratifying that we can see the difference we're making in an immediate way."

Tracy Morris reported on legal and emotional issues for same-sex couples in OutSmart's February issue.

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