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# Helping the sick and lonely

In Madrid, approximately 100,000 of the city's elderly live alone. They face many difficulties in their current situation. The Development and Assistance Foundation coordinates the work of hundreds of volunteers to reach out to those in need.

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**Urban Volunteers**

Although the public health system has increased the accessibility of free loans and social services provide much financial relief, the need for solidarity, for attending people with care, or just having a nice time for chatting or accompanying them in a small service, still exists.

There are more than half a million elderly people in Madrid; one fifth of them live alone. Many more, who live in nursing homes and hospitals, or even in their own homes, suffer from diseases or disabilities. The Development and Assistance Foundation (DA, *La Fundación Desarrollo y Asistencia*), which is a NGO, coordinates the work of more than four hundred volunteers of all ages. It's goal: to accompany and provide services to all those in need; to offer their time and friendship.

José María Sáenz de Tejada, one of the veteran volunteers and now

President of DA, started visiting military hospitals in Madrid when he retired from the military as Chief of Staff. On many occasions he would talk with his friends about his experiences and the needs he had identified in Madrid at the end of the 1990's. Many of them knew Opus Dei and they knew that its Founder, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, also carried out works of mercy helping with his priestly ministry to ease the tight situation in some of the poor suburbs of the capital. So they started meeting and programming their first social activities. "At the end of 1995, we were a small group of men and women. We started out working at San Carlos Hospital, one of the largest hospitals in Madrid", affirms Sáenz.

Following the Founder's example, DA pioneers resolved to carry out this social work as a manifestation of the Christian principles they tried to live.

Their faith has been a stimulus for them to serve those who are most alienated from society. The President of DA says that "after four years the NGO has 420 volunteers, men and women of different ages and convictions. The words of Blessed Josemaría explaining how the Work was born and developed among the poor and the sick of Madrid continue to motivate me and many others who have come afterwards."

Every morning, the fifth story of an office building is full of activity. An open view of the Roundabout of Cuatro Caminos -a popular suburb of Madrid- with the tower of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels standing out on one side, can be seen through the windows. The sound of traffic is mingled with telephone calls in the DA offices. A couple of volunteers fold brochures in one room, while the board of directors studies the results of their last seminar in

another. Notwithstanding their high positions in the NGO, all of its members are still regular volunteers and distribute themselves among the five action programs that currently exist.

Besides the Hospital, the volunteers help at two nursing homes for the elderly, a municipal shelter called San Isidro, and a special education center for disabled children in Vallecas. The fifth program, Home Service, is conducted in five of Madrid's districts. "Volunteers usually dedicate two or three hours every week. We follow our own methodology, two by two. It is a way of making sure the service does not fall through. If one of the two can not go, the other can provide the desired continuity. On the other hand, it is always easier to do the work with someone else, and beginners can benefit from the experience of those who have worked longer", says Rafi

Santos, Psychiatrist and Vice-President of DA.

## **Making Friends**

Although the public health system has increased the accessibility of free loans and social services provide much financial relief, "the need for solidarity, for attending people with care, or just having a nice time for chatting or accompanying them in a small service, still exists today; that is why we offer our volunteers", assures Rafi.

Requests for help reach the NGO from the offices of five municipal districts: Tetuán, Centro, Salamanca, Retiro and Chamberí. "We communicate regularly, so a short fax from the public centers containing the appropriate information is sufficient", says Elvira Bemaldo de Quirós, a Chemistry major, and program coordinator.

"Then we do a first visit and assign volunteers and weekly services."

Luis has a special place in the NGO's history. He had terminal cancer and received home assistance from Enrique, José Luis and Luis. They became great friends. Through their conversations, the volunteers helped him reestablish his Christian life. When he heard about the origin of the NGO, Luis decided to help out and offer up the pains of his last months to God for the work of service to souls as do members of Opus Dei. The volunteers help to make all the funeral arrangements.

Manolita and Asunción were encouraged by the volunteers to solve problems, big or small. Manolita, for example, abandoned the idea of asking for public housing, for which she had been asking for years when she realized she could count on the company of volunteers

some days each week. The change has been more relevant for Asunción's life. With the help and the constancy of the volunteers' therapies, she has recovered mobility and can now walk without help. She is no longer confined to her wheelchair.

### **In the Hospital Corridors**

The San Carlos Hospital -with more than a thousand beds and a total of five-thousand employees- is one of the largest in Madrid. In January 1996, DA signed an agreement with the hospital to accompany the incoming patients. The contract was later extended to guidance and information for the external patients.

Accompanying patients relieves to family members or substitutes them when they are absent or do not exist. Volunteers give a warm assistance that does not interfere with the medical attention. Every day



requests pour into the small office DA at the hospital. "Social workers, ward supervisors and nurses tell us whom we should visit; they know who feels discouraged or who has nobody to visit them. Our job is to supply the care and company they may lack", affirms José María. In other cases, the presence of a volunteer permits the relatives to take some time off, which is greatly appreciated by those who take care of a patient with a chronic disease or one that requires extensive hospitalization.

The guides organize their work on the spot. They wait in the main hall, wearing white robes and arm bands, to give the new patients any orientation they might need. "This help is one of the most appreciated services at the hospital, because it is impossible for the personnel to accompany all the patients. The volunteer can show them the way to

where they need to go, give them words of encouragement and calm their nerves in the moments before the medical appointment. Most of our requests come from the elderly, disabled and those who attend the ophthalmological clinics", assures Rafi.

## **Irreplaceable Pieces**

The volunteers at DA have little in common, except for the desire to help others. They vary greatly in age, work, social status and place of residence. One fourth of them are retired and, in general, the majority are women. The older volunteers at DA are an "irreplaceable piece." They offer the customers fidelity and constancy -their lives have less sudden changes-, aspects that are greatly valued in people who have suffered the abandonment of their loved ones.

Although the collaborators in the NGO have different backgrounds, their services arise from deep Christian convictions. "We try to ensure that the concept of the person, that each one being created and loved by God, is reflected in all our projects. Socioeconomic criteria - how many people we can reach or what resources we will need, though, of course, we need resources do not matter as much as achieving that our clients feel cared for, because they deserve it, and that becomes contagious", assures Mar.

"The experience of solitude, poverty, and the faith with which some events and diseases are accepted often leads the volunteers to ask themselves questions", explains Rafi. "When they hear that some of the people that work here, go to activities organized by Opus Dei and that they too can participate in the Christian education offered by this institution, they want

to take advantage of the opportunity. In fact, many of the volunteers and beneficiaries participate in some of the Christian doctrine talks and spiritual direction offered by the Prelature. Some of them are cooperators of the Opus Dei."

## **In Shelters and Homes**

Javier Barandiarán, a retired Engineer, coordinates the volunteers in the San Isidro Municipal Shelter. More than three hundred people, immigrants or homeless, live there, alternating between days out in the streets and days in the hospital. The deterioration caused by alcohol and drugs can be felt in the environment. "The biggest problem, however, is loneliness. Many of them hardly talk and are completely engrossed in themselves, and the smallest thing you do -taking a stroll with them or going with them to the doctor- cheers them up. The communication

difficulties make them value the continuity. It is tough work, but DA prepares us well", he says.

The priority at homes are the elderly with disabilities. "When we arrived we asked a woman that was in a wheelchair if she wanted us to take her for an outing. She asked us to take her downstairs to attend to Holy Mass. This is now a service, among others, that we never leave aside, because many of them request it", says Mar Garrido, a History major and member of the DA Board of Directors.

Ángeles started to work at the NGO a few days after becoming a widow and has been working there for more than a year. "The first day I found myself visiting a woman who was in the same situation as me. She had lost her husband five years ago and was still depressed. Everything I told her to cheer her up also helped me.

Now I continue visiting people and I help out at the office; I have even given a seminar on special education -I am a retired professor- to the young volunteers that work at the center for handicapped children in Vallecas", she said.

Every Saturday, the group organizes outings with these children. "We go to Retiro Park, to the zoo, to a museum or we just do some sport. The children have a lot of fun simply because they make friends -Jonathan for example gets along very well with Miguel, one of the volunteers- and their parents can have some peaceful time off", says Celia. "I remember one mother telling me that she always looked forward to Saturdays because it had been thirteen years (her son's age) since she had been able to go out alone with her husband."

## **Continuous Training**

Development and Assistance take responsibility for the training the volunteers. Before beginning to help out, the volunteers have to complete a six-hour initial course that explains the ideals, limits and commitment this social work implies. They are also informed about the programs and the basic abilities needed to be able to attend to the patients.

Afterwards, sessions for each department are organized each trimester, directed by specialized professionals. The volunteer therefore is therefore provided with a theoretical background, as well as personal experience. At the end of each meeting, coordinators and volunteers exchange suggestions for improvement. The NGO also provides for an insurance policy in case of accidents.

For more information about DAF, or to help in some way, please contact the **director** at:

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