

RHODE ISLAND

SOUTH KINGSTOWN

A family's peace mission to a Guatemala dump

Johnsons, of South Kingstown, 'ChimeIn,' spend the holidays building houses for needy

By Donita Naylor
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A South Kingstown family, who had expected to spend Dec. 15 through 26 on a quest for world peace by being part of an international camel caravan from Jordan to Jerusalem, instead built houses in Guatemala City for people who live and work in one of Central America's largest dumps.

Susan Johnson, 53, who for almost 20 years coordinated the Roger Williams Park Zoo's major fundraiser, Zoobilee, was organizing the World Peace Caravan until it was canceled in June, she said Wednesday.

The Middle East trek had been envisioned by D. Gary Young, of Young Living Essential Oils, to symbolize the Queen of Sheba's peace journey over the Ancient Frankincense Trail to visit King Solomon.

The trip Johnson was organizing was canceled, she said, because the government of Jordan didn't provide a letter endorsing the project in time. Also, there were safety concerns prompted by terrorism and Mideast turmoil. Fewer than 200 people had signed up.

Johnson said that as part of the project, 12 youth ambassadors, chosen from around the world, had committed themselves to a year of community projects in their homelands, culminating in the peace trip.

"When the caravan got canceled, we wanted to keep the youth ambassadors together," she said. The ambassador from Guatemala, Antonio De La Rocca, 25, had been working in his country for Techo, an organization that, like Habitat for Humanity, builds houses for poor people.

Johnson immediately switched gears. She teamed with Kelly Sullivan Walden and Dana Walden to create ChimeIn.org, which describes itself as a youth-driven initiative to engage young leaders and provide them with a "platform to 'chime in' and make a positive difference in the world." Inspired by the phrase, "Be the change you want to see in the world," the name takes its letters from the phrase "The Change Is Me International."

So, on Dec. 13, volunteers started arriving in Guatemala City to build 10 houses on a capped portion of the

dump, where five women started building makeshift homes eight years ago from materials salvaged at the dump.

They named their squatter city Manuel Colom Argueta, in honor of a murdered mayor.

A group of charter schools in Los Angeles and Louisiana brought 28 children and 20 adults to build five homes, and 16 volunteers from ChimeIn, including Johnson, her husband and their two adult children, as well as 26 Techo volunteers, built five homes. Each group had to raise money to buy the prefabricated materials for their houses, each 250 square feet. The volunteers also had to carry the materials to the building sites.

Although the schoolchildren stayed in a hotel, the other volunteers camped out at a preschool-elementary school that had already closed for Christmas break. They slept in sleeping bags on the floor, showered with cold water from a 55-gallon drum and shared breakfast and supper cooking duties. Each of the Johnsons was teamed with a different family.

Lunch, as required by Techo, was provided by the new homeowners, who were also expected to pay 10 percent of the cost and help build.

One of the mentors, Benjamin Swatez, designed murals



Susan Johnson with her family: daughter Kaitlin, son Cameron and husband Kevin, spent Dec. 15 through 26 in Guatemala building houses for families that live at a dump. The effort was part of ChimeIn.org, a volunteer organization cofounded by Johnson. PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/ DAVID DELPOIO

that the volunteers painted on all 10 houses and the school where they stayed.

Susan's husband, Kevin Johnson, 51, said he was overwhelmed at first but began to notice that the families were just like his own, "only in much more challenging conditions." The trip, he said, awakened a spirit that had been dormant in him, and, he said, "As much as we were leaving them something, I felt like I

walked away with far more than I left behind."

Cameron Johnson, 21, a senior at the University of New Haven, said he found happiness. "I just look forward to going back next year."

And Kaitlin Johnson, 19, a sophomore at Philadelphia University, said she noticed how open the people were and "how much they loved to share. ... A kid would sit down with my parents and

put their arm around them. They were not afraid to be close, and not as guarded."

Susan Johnson said the families spent Christmas in their new homes. "My little mom said she was so excited because this is the first Christmas they have been warm."

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