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July 10, 2020

AZ Builders Alliance 2019 Leadership Development Forum Class Project Impact Report

In March 2019, the ABA 2019 LDF class selected A New Leaf as the beneficiary for their Community Service Project. Not knowing the scope of what this group wanted to do for us, we showed them our kitchen at our youth shelter program site in Mesa and told them what we really needed was a new commercial oven. But this group of 31 construction professionals and future leaders set out to blow our minds. The result was a completely remodeled kitchen, with new appliances and custom fixtures, as well as a remodeled dining area and new furniture for the kids to enjoy their meals. Additionally, the group coordinated a fantastic holiday celebration for the kids and staff, handing out gifts to all the kids, AND surprised us with a \$17,300 check.

Over a year later, we are still basking in the glow of the honor of being selected for this amazing gift. The work done at our youth shelter program has significantly improved the functionality of the common areas. The space now offers teens who are separated from their families a safe and comfortable environment to heal and grow during their stay. These communal spaces are now a home-like gathering space that helps foster positive interaction and comfort during a traumatic time for teen refugees. The kitchen typically feeds 184 teens daily and inspires a sense of community.

This group's service and dedication was admirable – finishing the project four months ahead of schedule. We are grateful, not only to the LDF class members, but also to the companies that they work for, which donated the majority of equipment and supplies for the project. These contributions allowed the class to make an impactful monetary donation which was used to complete renovations at a second shelter program site, including much needed structural repairs, window replacements, paint, and other facility improvements.

Perhaps the most moving aspect of this project, was the time and consideration the class members gave towards understanding the needs of the teens this program serves. A New Leaf's Youth Refugee Shelter Program provides safety and support for 800 youth/teens each

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year who have fled their home countries, desperately seeking safety. They make the dangerous journey all alone to escape extreme poverty and violence. Many times, they have lost their family due to gang violence or sickness, or their family has used all the money they have to help them escape. Along their journey, they often encounter more violence - trafficking, physical and sexual assault, starvation and dehydration, robbery, and abandonment. Those who have visited the Program are struck by how humble, polite, and gracious the kids are. But there is a deep sadness and fear that shows in their eyes, an uncertainty about where they are going, and an understanding that they have nothing to go back to.

A New Leaf strives to address the trauma and physical pain that youth refugees have endured and to give them an opportunity to just be kids - to laugh and play, free from stress and fear. The Program serves kids like Nitza, who fled her home in Honduras when she was just 14 years old. She had been kidnapped and sold into sex trafficking. Her uncle was able to find her three months later, but she had been badly abused and disfigured. She was also pregnant. Nitza went into hiding because if they found her, they would probably kill her. Nitza's uncle gathered what money he could to pay a coyote (smuggler) to help her flee to the U.S. Her journey was terrifying and difficult. Their group was abandoned in the desert for three days with very little food or water. They continued their journey when another group of coyotes picked them up. When this group demanded more money from Nitza and she did not have any, they beat and raped her. Her group was abandoned again, and they were apprehended by border security. Nitza entered the U.S. severely malnourished and dehydrated, and with severe physical injuries. Shortly after being detained, she had a miscarriage. Nitza was transported to A New Leaf's Youth Refugee Shelter Program. She required significant medical care for injuries and for a sexually transmitted disease. She did not speak for seven days but gradually she began to heal and trust the program staff. She finally realized that she was safe. After two months, Nitza was united with a relative in another state. She is fifteen now – still a child but with more than a lifetime's worth of pain and suffering behind her.

In December 2019, kids at the shelter were treated to a special evening as ABA class members served them a delicious meal and celebrated the holidays and their culture with them. Seeing the smiles on all the kids' faces and the hope in their eyes for a new beginning was a gift in itself. It was A New Leaf's honor to recognize the Arizona Builder's Alliance's 2019 Leadership Development Forum Class at the organization's Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon this year. The special recognition video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXDrh5pJS4Y>

Thank you to the Arizona Builder's Alliance for convening this amazing group of people, and for making community service a part of your leadership development program. Most of all, thank you to the LDF Class of 2019 for giving your time, talents, and heart to this project and the kids that it benefits. Your legacy will live on through your good work.

