

Kathy Fox - PRAY

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's go to the Governor's Mansion at Cedar Crest in Topeka. A holiday reception is underway. The Governor and First Lady are visiting with their guests. But this is not some fundraiser with big political donors – in fact, it's not a fundraiser at all. This is a reception to honor missionaries, volunteers and supporters of a project which is serving needy children overseas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Kathy Fox of Topeka is President of the Board of this initiative. Kathy first learned about it when attending a women's group. A speaker named Helena Kilian told about a voluntary effort to build a children's shelter in a poverty-stricken region of Brazil. The effort was called Project Rescue of Amazon Youth, or PRAY.

PRAY was founded in 1999 by three women: Maria Kientz, Sally Savery, and Jennie Dieball. Maria is originally from Brazil. She met and married a Kansan who was in Brazil on a mission trip and moved to his farm near the rural community of Wamego, population 4,220 people. Now, that's rural.

In Kansas, Maria became good friends with two women named Sally Savery and Jennie Dieball. In 1998, Maria was planning a visit back home to Brazil, and she invited Sally to go with her. Unfortunately, there was no money for airfare. But Maria and Sally planted and sold 3,000 canteloupe and raised the money to make the trip.

When Sally got to rural Brazil, the conditions which she saw touched her heart. She saw children in abject poverty and abandoned kids living on the street, with no home, food, or health care.

She and Maria came back to Kansas with a desire to build a children's shelter in the Brazilian village of Jacunda. Jennie Dieball gave this initiative a name: Project Rescue of Amazon Youth, or PRAY for short. With support from Presbyterian and other churches in Wamego and elsewhere, the project began. Funds were raised and a shelter and medical clinic were built in Jacunda.

Kathy Fox learned about PRAY in 2009. Her son, a K-State alum and medical school applicant, was looking for an opportunity to do volunteer work overseas. Ultimately, Kathy and her son and daughter went to Brazil to volunteer with PRAY.

“We were dragging our feet at first,” Kathy said. “It is a hard trip. There are two or three plane changes to get to Brazil. Then you take an eight-hour bus ride to Jacunda.” The roads are bad and the buses break down frequently.

“But it changes your life,” Kathy said. “The children are so excited and so loving.” Kathy and her family painted walls at the mission and interacted with the children. Her son even met his future wife. Talk about changing your life! Now he is married and in medical school.

Kathy joined the PRAY Board of Directors and eventually became its President. Sally Savery joined the Fraternity of Missionaries and became a full-time missionary, now known as Sister Magdalena. Sadly, Jennie Dieball passed away from cancer. Memorial gifts in her honor will be used for an educational building at the mission.

The PRAY Board continues to raise funds to sustain and expand the mission in Brazil. Several hundred children have come through the children’s center with excellent results. A teen house has been added in another Brazilian community.

Helena Kilian serves as volunteer coordinator. Martha Seaton of Manhattan, a former English teacher in Brazil, helps with translation. Maria Kientz's daughter Hannah, a K-State student, is also helping, along with many others.

Governor Sam Brownback and Mary have supported the project for years, as an excellent example of a private sector, faith-based relief initiative. In December 2012, they hosted a reception to honor the Fraternity of Missionaries and the PRAY volunteers and supporters.

It's time to leave Cedar Crest, the Governor's mansion in Topeka, where the Governor is honoring those who are serving the needy in Brazil through Project Rescue of Amazon Youth. We commend Kathy Fox, Maria and Hannah Kientz, Sally Savery/Sister Magdalena, Jennie Dieball, Helena Kilian, Martha Seaton and all the other board members and volunteers for literally making a difference in the lives of these Brazilian children.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.