

Plight of Guatemalan children detailed at church service on December 11, 2016

Eric Gross, Putnam County Courier

The numbers are staggering. Eight cases of child sexual abuse are estimated to take place daily in Guatemala while only one case is reported to authorities. Sunday, one of the victims of such abuse, which occurred nearly 40 years ago, told her story at the First Baptist Church of Brewster.



Norma Pereira and Pastor Travis Mitchell discuss child abuse Sunday in Brewster. Photo/Eric Gross

During worship services led by Pastor Travis Mitchell -- before a standing room only audience -- Norma Pereira of Carmel described the situation in her native land as being “very, very sad. In the United States, we have laws that protect children and encourage boys and girls to speak up. Back home no such laws exist because so many young girls are sexually assaulted at home by someone within the household. It’s not talked about. Questions are never asked.”

Pereira was assaulted at the age of 8: “I was one of 12 children in the household -- number nine to be precise. When such an act happens, the scars remain forever. I tell my story so others will know and help to teach the victims that it is OK to speak out. No one should ever go through sexual molestation.”

Pastor Travis recently visited Guatemala and through his efforts First Baptist Church of Brewster has begun working closely with a Christian ministry called Kids Alive International. The organization provides homes around the world to make available emotional, mental, physical

and spiritual health to young boys and girls who have experienced abuse. The group also helps to seek justice for young girls by working with authorities to bring their abusers to court.

Pastor Travis told his congregation that during the visit to Central America he met with officials of the Oasis Residential Home—a community of family-style residences for girls who reside in family units with Guatemalan Christian house parents.

“The children attend school—many for the first time—and have access to trauma-focused therapy to help heal their emotional wounds. Most importantly, the children are introduced to the transforming love of Jesus—the source of true healing that they desperately need.”

When queried by the pastor if Pereira believed a problem of child molestation existed locally, because the greater Brewster area is home to many newcomers from Central and South America, the advocate said “in some cases children are not speaking out for fear that their parents will be deported if they seek help.”

What can be done?

Pereira called on the community to be “open and honest. We must understand that our newest residents have struggles besides language. The Child Advocacy Center does a wonderful job. We must also talk to our children advising them that it’s OK to speak up.”

A bit of levity also punctuated the 30 minute discussion when Pastor Travis told the worshipers that Pereira was his Spanish teacher. Pereira chimed in: “Your pronunciation of some words made the class laugh, pastor!”

Pereira was also asked about her early life in Guatemala: “My brothers were able to attend school. My job was to clean, care for my younger siblings and cook. I must have failed in that department because one of the requirements was for the daughter to go out and kill a chicken before preparing it for dinner. It was expected. I tried but each time, I allowed the bird to live. We had no meat that night for supper.”

Following the service, a woman approached Pereira, crying. She told her “thank you; thank you for speaking on our behalf up. I just can't. You are brave.” Pereira I hugged her back advising the woman: “You are not alone!”

Pastor Travis asked his congregants to “show humanity’s true nature by raising funds for children in Guatemala to give them hope. The Book of Proverbs tells us: ‘Teach children how they should live and they will remember it all their lives.’ ”