

## Pinole resident launches nonprofit to help Guatemalan orphans

By [Katherine Tam](#)  
[West County Times](#)

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Diane Springer sits in her Pinole living room surrounded by tubes of thick socks, sweatshirts, coloring books and enough oatmeal to feed 100.

Nothing fancy, just the basics you'd find at any store for a few dollars apiece. She'll pack and ship them 2,500 miles to an orphanage on the outskirts of Guatemala City, where children arrive with little else but what they're wearing and are sometimes barefoot.

For the past two years, Springer has collected money and goods such as clothes and school supplies for the children. A real estate broker by day, the 56-year-old spends her spare time in person and on the phone asking organizations for donations, as she plots her next trip to the orphanage.

"They call me 'Deana,' and I tell them I'm their abuelita," Springer said, Spanish for "grandma."

Springer first visited the Hogar Miguel Magone orphanage in 2006 in a volunteer abroad program. Struck by its financial need, she decided to set up the nonprofit Orphan's Hope Project.

Since then, Springer has gathered hundreds of donated items and raised \$35,000, which she has funneled into necessities such as food, educational tools and even a walk-in refrigerator.

"The average person in Guatemala lives on \$2 a day.

How do they do that?" Springer said. "I was never much of a shopper, but now when I go, I say, 'I don't need this' or 'I don't want this.' Until you've lived in an orphanage, you don't realize how lucky you are to have a house, to have a car, to have money."

Springer has not been shy about dispensing her message, and donors have responded. A neighbor sewed curtains. A Vallejo woman knit blankets. The Richmond YMCA gave more than 50 T-shirts. The Oakland Raiders offered backpacks, soccer balls and more.

"When she gets involved, she grabs the jugular of that organization," said Dominic Silvestri, a bank product manager in Walnut Creek and a donor. "She doesn't just send an e-mail saying 'FYI.' She sends an e-mail that says, 'Here's what I'm doing. What can you do to help?'"

People talk about her, spreading the message. Friends of friends have donated. People on the East Coast have seen her Web site and shipped goods.

"A little bit here and there helps. It's amazing how much money adds up," she said.

Springer's laptop carries hundreds of photos from her trips to Guatemala — young boys putting on new shoes, hugging toys, praying before dinner, hugging Springer.

One boy's thank-you letter asks her to come back soon. Springer averages two to three visits per year.

The children are so grateful, she said. "They don't feel entitled."

The nine-year-old orphanage is among the lucky few among the more than 200 in Guatemala: It has running water and electricity, when the power doesn't go out. Hot water and heat are luxuries the children do without. Sparsely furnished rooms provide eating, homework and play space for 97 children. Laundry dries on lines dangling over the concrete playground.

The orphanage originally served only boys but this year began accepting girls. The oldest child is 16. The youngest are 3-year-old twins.

Some are truly orphans without family. Many children are there because their parents cannot afford to care for them. Some have been abused. One watched his father stab his mother to death.

Some parents find ways to take their children home, but adoptions are uncommon. Most families prefer to adopt the very young. So most of the children will stay until they can take care of themselves.

Springer typically begins her orphanage days at 5 a.m. The children make their beds and clean the bathrooms while Springer prepares breakfast for them and walks students two miles to school. She tidies up the orphanage, sorts donations, answers phones, picks up the children after school, and plays with them.

She leaves her mark in other ways, too. A better education is typically out of reach, but Springer is funding private school for 10 children at \$600 a year each.

She hopes her program can expand to aid other orphanages and to draw more volunteers.

She is the mother of an adult son, but she says, "I don't have one child. I have 97."

Reach Katherine Tam at 510-262-2787 or [ktam@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:ktam@bayareanewsgroup.com)

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### **Hometown Heroes**

- Name: Diane Springer
- Age: 56
- City of residence: Pinole
- Occupation: Real estate broker
- Endeavor: Launched the nonprofit Orphan's Hope Project to collect donations for a Guatemalan orphanage where about 100 children live.
- details: [www.orphanshopeproject.com](http://www.orphanshopeproject.com)

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