

FACT SHEET

Guided by the belief that the best form of charity is to lend a hand to people and communities that enables them to help themselves, Paper Houses Across the Border works as partners with the poor of the colonias in Mexico. Paper Houses works to improve health, education, and the opportunity to work, which gives the poor an opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty.

We first, try to understand the nature of challenges in the communities and families by walking the dirt roads of the colonias. By visiting people in their homes, by visiting hospitals, schools and shelters we hope to understand the immediate needs and the underlying causes of the immediate needs. We then work with the families and the community as partners in bringing about a solution.

PROGRAMS

- Shelters
- Education
- Medical and Health
- Addiction Recovery
- Housing
- Temporary Emergency Assistance
- Missions

Board of Directors

- Bob Decker, chair
- Elias Mtanous, Field Operations
- Emma Mtanous
- Jennifer Hicks, Secretary
- Mary Beth Carney, Treasurer
- Jesus Soday, on-site Mission Coordinator

STATISTICS

Number of employees: 0

Administrative Costs - paid by board and volunteer donors

Alliances: Giving Hope Worldwide

The Park Foundation

Legal Status

Paper Houses Across the Border is a 501(c)(3) corporation under the IRS code and is incorporated in the State of Texas.

GEOGRAPHIC REACH

Paper Houses Across the Border focuses upon the colonias in Mexico, near the Texas and Mexican border. Our primary focus is in the colonias of the city of Acuña, minutes from Del Rio, Texas.

Locations and Contact Information

- Primary Address: 10827 Colt Chase, San Antonio, TX 78254
- Donations- MSC 980, P.O. Box 2954, San Antonio, TX 78299-2954
- paperhouses@sbcglobal.net
- <http://paperhouses.org>
- Telephone - 210-232-3897

MONTHLY COMMITMENTS

- Shelters for Children - \$2,000
- School Meal Program & Education Assistance- \$4,000
- Rehabilitation Center (drug recovery shelter) - \$1,000
- Casa Emmaus - \$1,000
- Special Needs Program - \$1,000
- Medical Care \$5,000
- Family Food Pantry - door to door delivery of food \$500
- Emergency Family Assistance - \$500
- Total Monthly Commitments - \$14,000

Mission Costs are self-funded (paid by participants)

Administrative Costs are paid by the board and volunteers

History

Bob Decker founded Paper Houses Across the Border after making a wrong turn on a vacation and seeing the living conditions of hard working people living within a mile of the United States.

Bob's background is in law-enforcement, having served in the Baltimore City Police Department from 1971 to 1980 and in the Houston Police Department from 1980 until 2005. Bob retired much earlier than he or any of his colleagues ever anticipated, devoting his life to managing Paper Houses Across the Border. Speaking at his retirement ceremony, a lieutenant at the Houston Police Department said, "I've only known Bob a short time, but I've known of him for many years. It was always said that Bob is so dedicated to law-enforcement that he would probably bleed 'police blue' and we were surprised that he announced he found something he loved doing even more."

As a police officer and sergeant, Bob Decker earned numerous awards, commendations and citations. He was also recognized by the Mayor and City Council of Houston for his work with Paper Houses when he was among the first recipients of the City of Houston Bravo Award. His work was further recognized by the Center for Law Enforcement Ethics, when he was awarded the Excellence in Law Enforcement Ethics Award.

Throughout his adult life, Bob has served as a church volunteer, working with youth and is still sought as a keynote speaker at church youth events. Although a devout Catholic, Bob insisted that Paper Houses Across the Border be a religiously neutral organization welcoming people of all faiths and people of no faith.

Bob's three daughters and his grandchildren help and encourage him in his work with the people of the colonias.

In 2002, Bob visited a Mexican border-city and accidentally drove into a colonia. He was stunned to find hundreds of working-families living in cardboard shacks, cooking on campfires without electricity and water. He returned twice a month to explore 'colonias' in various cities across the border from Texas. He distributed food and water and gradually came to understand the basic facts about life along the border.

In Del Rio, Texas his guide, Olga Magana took him into the city of Acuña, a short walk from Del Rio, Texas. There, he visited a shelter for children where he learned that they no longer had support and discovered that the shelter was literally out of food. Bob stocked the pantry and returned every two weeks to pay the bills at this shelter. (He worked part-time jobs every other weekend to meet the expenses of the shelter).

On one of his visits, he went to the Emiliano Zapata Primary School and asked the teachers about their needs. He expected the teachers to ask for pencils, paper and books that he was sure that he could bring on his next visit. However, each teacher said that the need at the school was food. The teachers explained that the little children come to school too hungry to concentrate and that some have fainted in class because of their hunger.

Bob was dismayed. There were 1,000 children at this school and he could not feed that many. He decided to simply act in faith and do what he could. He was able to pay a lady to bring enough food for 40-children.

Back in Houston, Bob explained the situation at his church, without asking for money. Instead, he invited people to come with him to Acuña. At the police department, officers discovered "Sergeant Decker's" new hobby and the Houston Police Officer's Union ran a four-page story with photos of the colonias in their union paper, [The Badge and Gun](#)."

The article drew such positive response that the Houston Police Officer's Union offered to pay an attorney and all costs associated with establishing a nonprofit corporation. Bob was reluctant to accept this offer until a friend said, "You need to do this, not just for the kids in Mexico, but for the people right here. I don't know exactly what happened to you, but you are happier than I've ever seen you and your entire life's changed. Set up the nonprofit and take Americans to the colonias and let them have the experience that you have."

Paper Houses Across the Border, Inc. was incorporated and recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in December of 2002. The Houston Chronicle read the article in the "Badge and Gun" and sent a reporter and camera-person with Bob, as part of a group he was taking to the colonias. The following Saturday and Sunday addition of the Houston Chronicle contained a four page story with photographs of the colonias.

Subsequently, People Magazine, Geraldo at Large, Fox News, Naomi Judds' Morning Show and many other media outlets interviewed Bob and many came to the colonias for the real story.

Today, Paper Houses remains a small nonprofit with an all volunteer board and staff. Thousands of school children receive free meals in many schools, thanks to Paper Houses. Cafeterias were built and furnished to be used by five of these schools.

Hundreds of children receive life changing medical care that would otherwise be unavailable. Children walk, hear and see as a result of Paper Houses.

In 2011, Bob became aware of the many children diagnosed with Down

syndrome in the colonias. Although Paper Houses Across the Border helps with their medical needs, these children need more than just medical help. Bob gathered 50-families with members diagnosed with Down syndrome and discussed their problems and suggested that he help them to form their own organization to address the challenges in education and community acceptance and the medical needs.

Bob continued to meet with these families every two weeks and today they have the support of local business people, doctors, educators and charities as they work to form their own organization in Acuña, Mexico.

Bob said, "During the first year we will help you as a Paper Houses project. We will not worry about the money issues. I learned a long time ago when I started feeding 40-children that we only need to work hard and take action. Everything else will fall into place." Largely because of Bob's enthusiasm and reputation in the colonias, at least 50-families show up every two weeks with serious goals and agendas to establish an organization to help those diagnosed with Down syndrome.

Drug Cartels

In 2006, tourism in Acuña and all border cities fell apart. The news stories about the drug cartels were so often repeated that an entire industry was crushed. It was not until 2010 that a cartel related death occurred. An state police lieutenant, alleged to be working for a cartel, was found murdered in the street. A placard lay on his chest with a warning to others cooperating with the Zeta cartel.

This murder had little impact on tourists and visitors to Acuña, because the press had long since stopped tourists and visitors to Acuña.

The Zeta Cartel remains in Acuña. Rumors about extortion in local businesses are confirmed by some of our close friends. However, there are no acts of violence. Law Enforcement speculates that the lack of violence in Acuña is because the cartel uses Acuña to cross guns into Mexico and narcotics out of Mexico and that nobody wants to draw attention to Acuña. Others speculate the opposite. "There are few highways into the United States at the Acuña crossing. From Nuevo Laredo (hundreds of miles away) there are multiple highways to various U.S. cities and the truck traffic is so dense that it is easier to cross at that point.

Whatever the reasons, Acuña has comparatively little cartel activity. There is an army base in Acuña and the military regularly patrol the streets of Acuña.

Is It Safe?

Very few shops are open in the tourist area, but during the daylight hours I believe the area is safe. However, what used to be tourist bars are now empty and the streets in the tourist area are empty. At night, I would not recommend people wander empty streets in any city (American or Mexican).

Organized mission trips remain safe, although few occur. The reason for the curtailment of the mission trips was the perception of violence. To date, no person on any mission trip reports being injured or accosted in any border city. We ask anyone with direct knowledge to the contrary to contact us.

Cost of Living

We are not experts at determining the cost of living, but we can share our personal observations. The cost of rent and groceries is similar to the cost of groceries in most American cities. (We shop in Acuña, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Baltimore and York, Pennsylvania and observe similar prices).

The price of gasoline is less expensive, but few of the poor own vehicles. The price of fruit and vegetables is a little less expensive, but the quality of the fruit and vegetables are poor.

What we've seen of the average family we help, may put things into perspective. The average family brings home less than \$65 a week and after paying for water and electricity, many have less than \$7 a week to spend for groceries.

Changes Through the Years

In 2008 we saw many people participating in a government backed housing program. Based upon their years of employment and salaries, people qualified for loans to purchase new homes. Payments for the homes are deducted from paychecks by the government. Regardless of future job changes, if a person works and pays taxes, the money is deducted from the pay.

We saw several problems with the new homes. First, they are only two bedroom homes and most families have three or four children. Second, they are poorly constructed. Some actually collapse before they can be sold. Also, the poor cannot afford these homes. If the family purchases a home based

on two incomes and an emergency occurs, the family is in dire straits. The money is payroll deducted, so they cannot simply pay the mortgage a little late this month. The family cannot simply walk away from the house, because the payments continue to be deducted.

When the U.S. economy tanked in 2008, the factories laid off thousands of worker. Because tourists had stopped visiting Acuña, the laid off worker could not hope for a job as a waiter or even a busboy in the tourist area. They could not have even begged on the streets.

Many people left Acuña, and returned to the farming country. Some told us, "It is sad for the children because they can get a good education in Acuña and not where we used to live. We must return because we must eat. Working on a farm of my cousin I will not have to pay for the house we purchased. We will not have much of a future, but we will all eat."

By 2010, the economy had improved, but there was a large flood that washed away many cardboard shacks. The government offered these people the opportunity to buy one of the abandoned houses without meeting the required employment requirement. The people had to be employed, but their length of employment was no longer a requirement.

Driving the streets of Acuña has changed. There are few cardboard houses. The freshly painted houses where many of the very poor live make the neighborhoods seem more affluent. However, the poverty is only hidden. This new program, like the poorly built homes covered with fresh paint, will likely fall apart in time.

Are the people better off than when they lived in the cardboard shacks? This is a difficult question. More than one house has collapsed. We know of at least one child that was killed when the center beam of a house crushed his skull. We know of at least one electrical fire because of poor wiring. Still, we know of many fires at the cardboard houses.