

BADGE & GUN

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Out of Negative Headlines Comes Positive News Like Decker's Effort

OFFICER-INVOLVED SHOOTINGS IN Harris County have resulted in enough bad publicity about law enforcement officers to last several years. Too bad that the resulting negative publicity - which comes as no surprise - far overshadows the overwhelming amount of good deeds officers perform.

A growing number of stories in the Badge & Gun detail the good side of our lot. In this issue, please read the selfless efforts of Houston Police Sgt. Bob Decker, who devotes a growing amount of off-duty time to helping large numbers of Mexico residents - especially children - who reside in cardboard houses. This account of Decker's efforts also indirectly spotlights the fact that many HPD officers volunteer their time for such activities as teaching young people the Bible at a nearby church.

Decker is one of many of us who would readily admit that we joined a policing agency to help make the world a better place. Sometimes we see conditions that lend themselves to crime and long to use our talents to make improvements. Sgt. Decker has put such words into actions that appear to be improving the quality of life for the young residents of a Ciudad Acuna orphanage.

He says that other officers are interested in helping him by donating money or volunteering their time and talents to improve the crowded cardboard surroundings.

We salute Sgt. Decker and many others like him who spend off-duty hours and money from extra jobs to make a positive difference in the lives of so many people, young and old, rich and - mainly - poor. Out of so many negative headlines, these positive sidelines are a welcome relief.

Texas Police Trust Keeps Fighting Insurance Battles for Officers, Families

PERHAPS NO. 1 ON THE LIST of American institutions needing reform is the health insurance industry. Time and again, this user-unfriendly group provokes more time-consuming frustrations than coverage go-ahead for its thousands of demanding customers.

The group coverage situation in the city of Houston is the perfect example. HPOU members and their families often attest to this fact. Texas Police Trust professionals at the Union office spend countless hours troubleshooting one problem after

Sgt. Bob Decker Discovered Mexican Kids in Cardboard Houses

and Lets Actions Speak Louder Than Words in Helpful Effort to Make Improvements

By TOM KENNEDY

Bob Decker says he's nobody special - he just has many special people helping him with a recent calling in life.

Decker is a Houston police sergeant, an individual who spent 10 years on the police force of his native Baltimore, Maryland, before joining the HPD because it had "better everything."

He regards policing as his first calling in life, yet this story is not entirely devoted to the details of his excellent work, but rather to improving the lives of dozens of youngsters who live in cardboard houses in Mexico.

Over the years, Sgt. Decker has spent many weeks vacationing south of the border, regarding it "as one big playground" with festivals, ski boats, power sailing and snorkeling.

Cardboard Houses and Campfires

Then one day last year he got lost in a Mexican border town. His discovery launched a personal crusade.

He stumbled across literally thousands of people living in

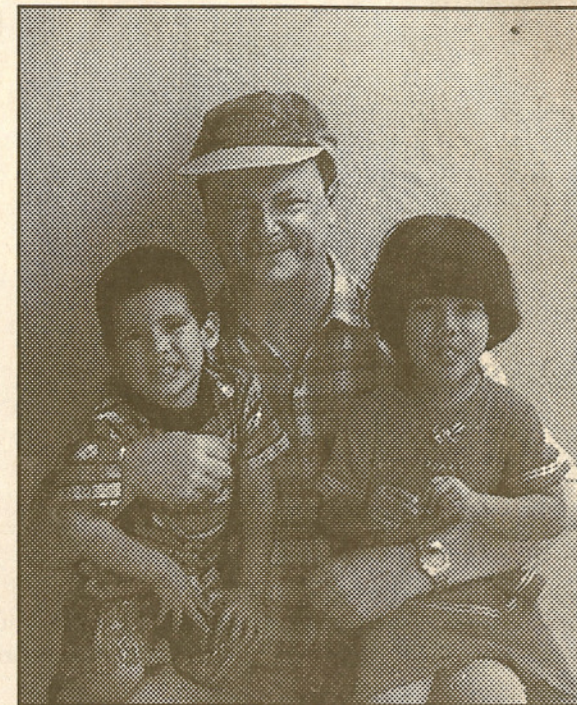
Decker found that it takes four adult salaries in a family to survive at that pay rate. Kids aged 14 and 15 must drop out of school and work to help the family ends meet.

He gets animated when he describes the horrible conditions and vows to help make improvements. This, indeed, is a calling. "It's like a trip back in time - prehistoric time," Decker said. "This is nuts!"

That first trip led him across the border from Brownsville and future forays took him to other border towns up the Rio Grande. Initially, he hired interpreters to ask the residents of these cardboard ghettos why and how they were living through these pitiful conditions. Now he easily finds interpreters in Del Rio who drop everything on a moment's notice, to translate for him.

His mission took a decided leap forward one day when an interpreter introduced him to Antonio and Hermilinda Ramirez, who run Casa hogar del Nino, or House of the Child Orphanage, in Ciudad Acuna, Mexico, across the border from Del Rio.

Orphanages are different in Mexico, where families, often single mothers, are often so poor that they turn their children over to caretakers like Antonio and Hermilinda so



Sgt. Bob Decker with two of his "charges" in Ciudad Acuna orphanage

they can be fed, clothed and educated.

Orphanages Everywhere

Decker found that the God-loving Ramirezes spend literally every night and day caring for 24 orphans aged about 3 to 14, preparing their meals, washing their clothes and getting them off to school.

"They wash about three articles per day for 24 kids," Decker explained. "That's about 75 pieces a day. They scrub the blue jeans by hand and they've got them hanging everywhere, even in the banana trees and on the fences.

"Hermilinda is either cooking for 24 kids or doing their laundry, yet when each child comes to her, she focuses on that child just like it was the only child that's there."

The kids go to school over rocky, broken roads, where the local Mexican police officers watch over them both in the mornings and after classes in the afternoons.

Decker was especially disturbed about the thinly supplied pantry and the three-to-a-bunk sleeping arrangements. And you want mold - like one sees in many of Houston's flooded homes - you can get plenty of it in the two showers

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Cardboard Houses and Campfires

Then one day last year he got lost in a Mexican border town. His discovery launched a personal crusade.

He stumbled across literally thousands of people living in cardboard homes, wooden shacks or - if they had been around long enough - casas consisting of thin cinder blocks purchased two or three at a time over a number of years.

"Some of the mothers had tin buckets in the front of their paper shacks washing their kids," Decker recalled. "They were cooking on camp fires and outhouses are common."

Nearby residents found it impossible to grow their own vegetables in the rocky soil surrounding them.

Are these unemployed adults? Far from it. Many work in the Colonias, the NAFTA-induced factories in Mexican border towns. The incomes for factory workers, however, are far lower than those across the river in Texas.

"Most of them make \$39 take-home," said Decker, who did his own socio-economic investigation. "They work nine hours a day, six days a week."

"The safety standards in the factories are poor. They are dirty - filthy, really - and dimly lit. This is very close to slave labor."

"Some of these workers are even charged for using toilet paper. The first three sheets are free. The rest are payroll deducted."

"If these workers pushed hard for raises in their wages, and better working conditions, the companies would pull out and move to Southeast Asia."

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Here are 22 of the 24 children in the orphanage

(one for the boys; one for the girls).

Pausing for effect, Decker let his descriptions sink in, then said, "There are five more orphanages just like this one - some better, some worse - 45 minutes to an hour away. There are maybe more that I haven't found. Some of these orphanages have children who were in prison for stealing food. Some have children who were living on the street."

The Houston police sergeant, father of three grown daughters and someone who thought about becoming a Catholic priest in his youth took in this scene and asked himself a serious, life-altering question:

"Somebody needs to do something about this. Who? Well, I'm somebody. I could work an extra job and help keep this

computer use in policing. "This was amazing to me. The Chief created a new position at the Police Academy and assigned me as an instructor, based on a letter I wrote as a police officer," Decker remembered.

After several years at the academy, he joined Crime Analysis, a new division developed by Lt. Ron Winzinsky that developed computerized crime analysis methods.

Decker spent a few years with the group before being promoted to Sergeant. He was then assigned to the Northeast Division's Tactical Unit and later to the Northeast Crime Analysis Unit. Since then, he returned to Central Patrol's Evening Shift.

Over the course of his Northeast tenure, Decker was named

side of the issue.

"We are drawn to policing because we care," he said. "You start to empathize and sympathize with people who may be here illegally but are here trying to work and make some money to send back to their families.

"They came here for a better job. I came from Baltimore for a better job. I came here for a better job just like they did.

"Some officers have the thought, 'Send 'em (illegal immigrants) back.' I want them to see the other side with the cardboard houses. These immigrants are trying to make some money to send back to their families. The vast majority have no criminal intent while they're here."

Until conditions improve in Mexico, they will keep coming, he believes.

Decker's answer - his calling, really - is to help make those improvements in any way possible.

"Who knows? The thousands living in these cardboard shacks may fail and may see fleeing to America as their only hope," he said. "I don't think the answer is building a bigger wall. People are always going to come across. The answer is that we need to reach out and help them over there."

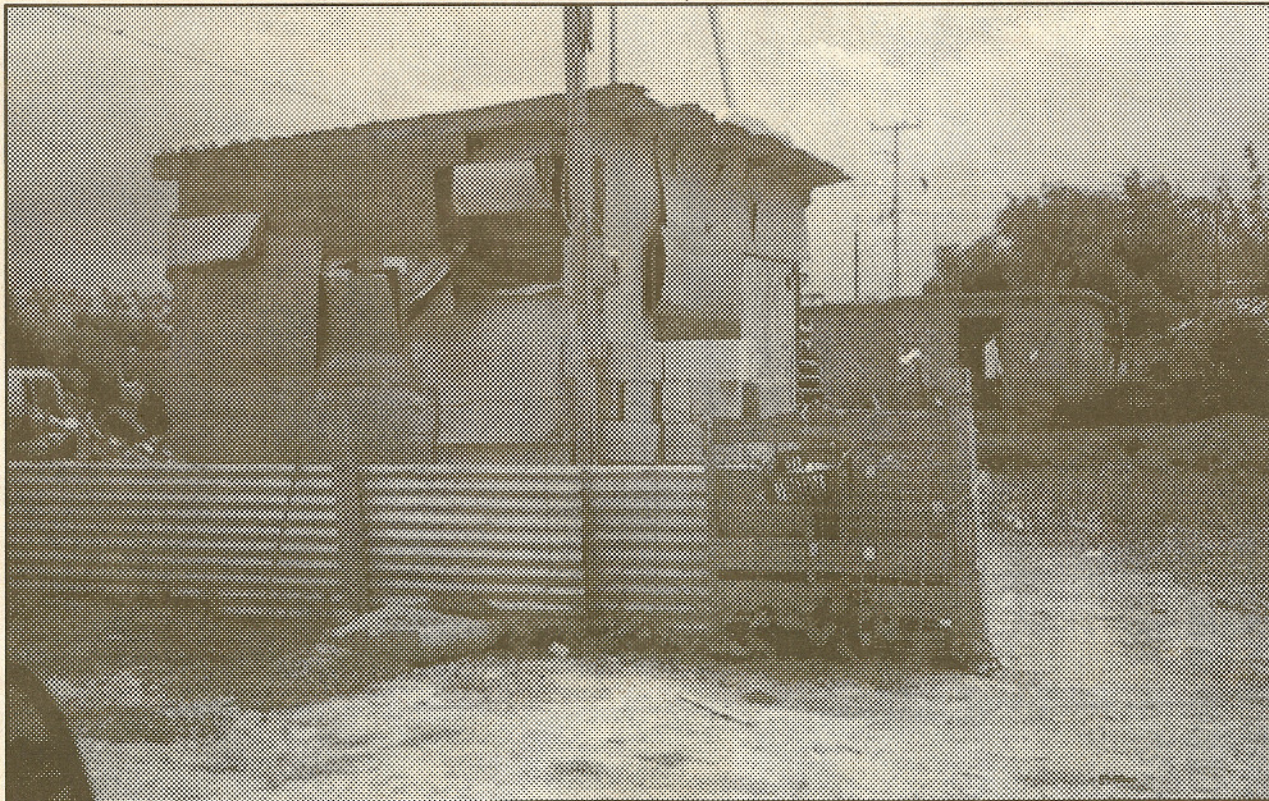
He has a simple plan and works in most of his spare time to see that it works. Mexican laws prevent foreigners from coming into the country with new or used clothing and goods. The import duty on lumber brought in to, say, build better bunk beds at the Ramirez orphanage, makes it more practical to buy it in Mexico.

Importation of used clothing is not permitted because of health issues and records of Americans bringing in "rags" for resale.

100 Percent to the Cause

Decker takes across as much money as he can get and makes sure it's spent, dollar for dollar, for the genuine needs of the orphans. "If someone hands me \$100," he said, "that's \$100 that's going to put food on a table, or pay a light bill."

"Does this really go to the kids without 'an administrative cost?' The 'administrative cost' is I put gas in my car and go. I pay for the travel cost and motel out of my pocket. There is no doubt where the money people have donated is going.



A cardboard home, complete with electricity

orphanage going, even if it's just on rice and beans. I mean, I've thrown away more money on tips, cruises and vacations than what these kids need to survive"

Supervisor of the Year in 1995. He received a Chief of Police (Sam Nuchia) Commendation during National Police Week in April 2000 along with the other members of the Northeast Crime Analysis Unit.

Man With a Computer Plan

He has turned those words into action.

At 50, Bob Decker has spent his adult life doing police work. He joined the Baltimore PD in 1971 and after 10 years found it to be very confining.

The attitude and traditions were very militaristic. The officers were terrific, but the demeaning way so many of the Chiefs talked down to the officers was unbelievable. Many of the officers walked one-man foot beats in some of Baltimore's most dangerous areas. There was a lack of support from the citizens and the department.

Baltimore officers were not allowed to work extra jobs - unless they wanted to drive a taxi part-time "and they told you where to drive it." He and his partner, Bill Staney, heard about the Houston Police Department, the descriptions sounding like an oasis in comparison. They left Baltimore to join HPD Cadet Class No. 97 in 1981. Staney is now an HPD lieutenant.

"My only regret was I didn't get here faster," Decker said. "There was better everything down here, certainly better people. The people in Houston are terrific."

He worked nights in Central Patrol and spent some time in the Juvenile Division. In the mid-1980s, he mastered the HPD computer systems and wrote to then-Police Chief Lee P. Brown about a plan to teach an academy course about

Northeast Crime Analysis Unit.

He was instrumental in the development of the STARS Computer application that allows the department to identify crime patterns, predict crime and link unsolved crimes with suspects. Decker and his Northeast Crime Analysis Unit wrote the program, trained the Command Staff how to use it and installed it in every station.

At an early STARS meeting, Captain Williams (formerly of the Robbery Division) credited Sergeant Decker's programs with greatly enhancing the Robbery Division's ability to identify serial hijackers and link cases to suspects.

Decker also helped to write the computerized offense report review process that sergeants use to review over 2,000 reports every month.

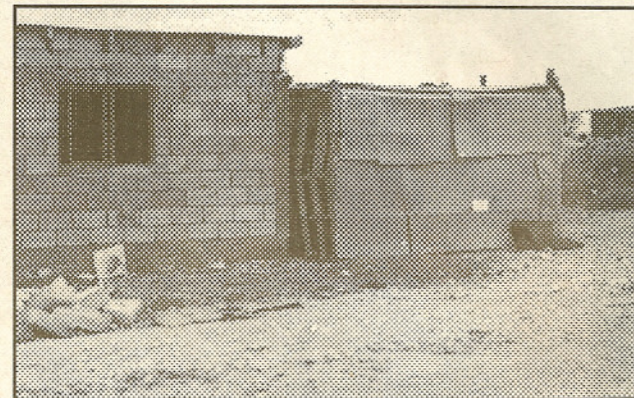
The Other Side

Although divorced, Decker is a staunch family man who is very close to his three daughters - Jennifer, Amy and Mary Beth - and still considers his ex-wife his best friend. Jennifer has provided him with four grandchildren, and Amy blessed him with number five.

He is an individual who obviously cares about providing for his family, a deep commitment that strengthens his determination to help poor children in Mexico.

While some police officers may resent the impact that illegal immigrants have on their service calls, Decker sees another

is no doubt where the money people have donated is going.



In time, a cardboard home (right) gives way to one made from cinder blocks.

"I often buy the groceries myself so I know the money was spent on real needs. And frankly, I never feel like I'm giving these people (who run the orphanage or are living in a cardboard shack) anything. I always feel like it's a partnership. I know that I get more from this partnership than they do. These people are inspiring"

He knows he can't do this by himself. One thing he did was to establish a website: <http://www.geocities.com/bobd1232000/KidHelp>.

And he stays proactive. Like many HPD Officers, Decker does volunteer work at his church. To demonstrate the need

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for help, Decker had his seventh grade class at St. Joseph's Catholic Church construct a cardboard house. The 'house' was placed near the altar at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, just a block or so from the HPOU Building.

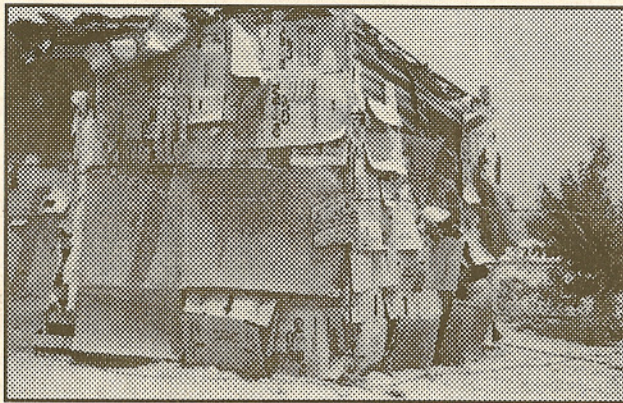
With the encouragement of the Jesuits at St. Joseph's, he has spoken to the congregation on several occasions, each time prompting members to donate money. One of them later sent him a \$1,000 check.

"I can't hammer a straight nail," Decker said, "and I can't speak the language, and I get lost everywhere I go. I am the least able person to be doing this." However, he was able to buy lumber and get a carpenter to construct four custom bunk beds at the orphanage. The money also covered the costs of mattresses. "Now they're not all jammed in three to a bed," he said.

Word of his mission has gotten around the Department and Decker admits that officers slip him money on a regular basis on the condition that he keeps their donations anonymous.

Some officers have offered to go on-site and use their construction abilities to make the flimsy homes sturdier and more comfortable for the children.

Decker is also starting a local youth group to do volunteer work in Houston and later go with him to Ciudad Acuna to see what it's really like on the other side of the border. They would have to bring their own bottled water (a necessity even for permanent residents) and food. They also would do their own cooking. But he predicts the teens will leave Mexico with more than they gave.



This 'mansion' could up more than 10 people.

He is thinking about setting up a non-profit organization in order to accept tax-deductible contributions. He is a man of God, whose instincts tell me that some less fortunate people need a helping hand.

Decker stresses that the adults in the cardboard houses near the orphanage are not "charity cases" but rather hard workers seeking to provide for their families one step at a time. They clear the land. They build a cardboard shack and they work hard to start saving pesos.

When they have enough saved, they buy cement and lay a foundation for their real home. Gradually they gain more money and buy some thin cinder blocks. Often, this process takes so long that they have electricity connected to the cardboard shacks. The lucky ones succeed and can late

purchase the small plot of land for about \$400.

Although he speaks very little Spanish, again Bob Decker's actions are all that's necessary to communicate. At times he has helped the locals with hard manual labor best done by three people instead of two or four instead of three.

Some of the people in the Colonias mistakenly think he is a priest.

"I'm no saint," Decker said. "I took it as a helluva compliment. Priests and cops always get a bad rap by the media. They can do 10,000 things right and when one does something wrong and it's big news.

"I guess it's not a coincidence that so many priests have police officers in their families. In fact, the previous pastor at St. Joseph's Church saw his father die as a result of injuries he received as a police officer."

Decker still believes what he does is not a big deal. He talks about Capt. Mark Curan and the hundreds of officers who do the bicycle rides for Leukemia and he knows dozens of police officers that are equally dedicated to real charity work.

"I'm just the guy that drives down to Mexico and helps a little with some kids and some people having a hard time."