

'I see Christ in the faces of these kids'

Catholic school graduate provides educational support for children in El Salvador

By Peggy Weber

EASTHAMPTON – Victoria Cavanaugh's life changed dramatically after watching a video in seventh grade at the former Notre Dame-Immaculate Conception School, here.

She didn't realize at the time that the movie, "Roses in December," the story of three nuns and a lay volunteer who were murdered in El Salvador in 1980, would impact her life so much. However, the fact that she is living and working in El Salvador today is a testament to the impact of the film and, she said, to her Catholic school education.

"I remember being so moved by the example of Jean Donovan, the lay volunteer. She said the kids kept her there and she felt her life was more valuable in El Salvador. In the back of my head I wondered what it would be like to have those kinds of feelings," said Cavanaugh in an interview with *The Catholic Observer*.

The 22-year-old was home for the holidays and said she wanted to get more help for her work in El Salvador. Cavanaugh added that she also wanted to credit the influence of her education in Catholic schools.

A 2003 graduate of Holyoke Catholic High School, Cavanaugh said she saw the movie "Roses in December" at least once a year while in high school. She credits her religion teachers Erick Ranstrom and the late Claire O'Neill for getting her involved in social justice.

"At Boston College we were trained to be men and women for others – men and women of excel-

lence. We were asked why we were studying and what will we use it for," she said.

While at Boston College, Cavanaugh spent her junior year in El Salvador. She was supposed to spend her first semester there and her second semester in Africa but she stayed the whole year in Central America – even moving into an orphanage the second semester to work with the children.

"I fell in love with the country," she said with a smile.

During her senior year she returned two more times to work in El Salvador. Following her graduation in May 2007, she began her plan to establish *Nuestro Ahora*, a scholarship program in memory of the four women martyred in El Salvador.

Nuestro ahora translates into English as "our time," according to Cavanaugh.

"I chose this name because it means today – taking control of this time," she said.

She noted that her program provides a university education and assistance to disadvantaged young people in El Salvador.

"It's not just academics. It's values, life skills and communication skills," she said.

Right now, Cavanaugh is organizing and pretty much funding the entire operation.

She is working at an international school in San Salvador and teaching English at a technical school at night. She uses her salaries from those jobs to help three scholarship students get a university education.

"Also, the international school gave me a house and I wrote a pro-



MAKING A DIFFERENCE – Victoria Cavanaugh (center) sits among some of the children at the Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero (COAR) Orphanage in El Salvador. A graduate of Holyoke Catholic High School, Cavanaugh is donating her time, savings, salary and even her home, to help young people further their education in El Salvador. She is the founder of *Nuestro Ahora*, a scholarship program dedicated to this cause. (Photos courtesy of Victoria Cavanaugh)

posal that allowed the scholarship students to live with me," said Cavanaugh.

The young woman has opened her home and her wallet to provide an education to students who were once at the COAR (Comunidad Oscar Arnulfo Romero) orphanage where she lived during her junior year in college.

"Right now I am using my salary and savings from my summer job at Upward Bound at Northfield Mount Hermon to fund this effort," she said. She added that she has received some donations but wants to raise more funds so she can help more young people.

"At the orphanage (COAR) there has been one adoption in 28 years. There are second generation children at the orphanage. It's a cycle that can be broken but it's hard to do. I want to help some of these students and then they can go back and become role models for the others," she said.

Graduates of *Nuestro Ahora* must visit the orphanage and do community service as part of the program.

She noted that 200,000 El Salvadoran children enter kindergarten each year but only 18,000 make it to high school. She would like to expand the *Nuestro Ahora* program and give more young people a chance for an education.

She estimated that it costs about \$3,300 a year to feed, house and educate a student.

She said she is grateful to her

parents, Mary Kate and John, for the Catholic education and example of faith they provided for her.

"I just look at all I had, especially in terms of education, and it's my wish that the kids, in any way, can have that," she said.

Cavanaugh said that she would like to expand *Nuestro Ahora* so that a high school program can be offered.

"I do this work because I see Christ in the faces of these kids,"

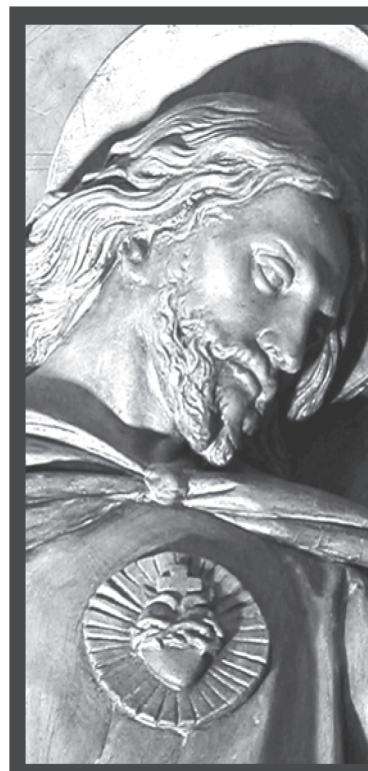
she said. "I am hopeful because I see how much can be done. It's an incredible gift to be here. And any way people can respond to the need here would be great."

For more information about Cavanaugh's work, log on to www.nuestroahora.blogspot.com

Donations may be sent to *Nuestro Ahora* c/o 192 Park St., Easthampton, MA 01027 or online via Paypal to the program Web site.



A HELPING HAND – Victoria Cavanaugh (right) shares a smile with Magda, one of the first to benefit from the *Nuestro Ahora* program. Magda grew up in an orphanage but was able to graduate from high school. She was given an award for Excellence in Academics and is now at the Universidad Nacional because of the scholarship and aid provided by Cavanaugh's initiative.



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SPIRITUAL TALKS

4 p.m., Sunday,

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14 Beach Road

Tyringham, MA

Tel. 413-243-3995

All are invited.

Sung vespers follow the talks.