



Pfcs. Patrick Butterfield, left, and Michael DeJohn watch as 7-year-old Manuel chases a fellow Soldier around the yard at Dame La Mano Friday.

Pfc. Michael DeJohn feeds one of the youngest residents of the shelter before the group of BOSS and A Battery, 1st AMD Battalion, 44th ADA Regiment volunteers began to paint rooms Friday.

BOSS, 1-44 AMD Soldiers continue work at crisis center

MELISSA HOUSE

Monitor Staff

Members of Fort Bliss Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers group rallied more members of their platoon, both single and married, to return to the Dame La Mano Crisis Pregnancy Center Friday to do some interior painting. The center, now in its 10th year, has provided thousands of women and children with a safe place to stay during crises.

The original "center" was the Arellano family home, said Rosa Arellano, the executive director. Arellano's mother, also named Rosa, would open the doors of their home to women and children in need, and still does.

"We're a crisis center where women can come from anywhere for twenty-four hours to two years," Arellano said. "We help them get on their feet and get to a point where they have enough money for a deposit on their own apartment."

The center also offers free pregnancy testing for women in the neighborhood – El Paso's "Segundo Barrio." There, officials from the city's Health Department make regular visits, educating the women about sexually transmitted diseases, she said. And the center has been home to women from New York, Houston and Washington state as well. Some have been minors whose parents were deported, and some arrive with fresh bruises.

"It's a place they can call home," Arellano said. "It's better than living on the streets or in a car. The women don't just sleep and eat here. They work or go to school. They learn by getting their GED or the tools they need to help



PHOTOS BY MELISSA HOUSE

Pfcs. Tim Szika, left, and Jorge Escoto, Soldiers assigned to A Battery, 1st Air and Missile Defense Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery, look at a model of the addition the founders of Dame La Mano hope to be able to build to house more women and children.

themselves."

Arellano took the Soldiers on a tour of the center, showing the commercial kitchen where some of the women work in the catering program, the small rooms upstairs and the communal area packed with bunk beds.

Zulema and her four children share one of the sets of bunks in a corner of the room. She works in the free market, selling Mexican foods and earning money that helps pay some of the center's operating costs.

"I've been here ten months," Zulema said. I came pregnant and my baby is now six months old." The center's youngest resident is just shy of three weeks old, born prematurely to a young woman who did not want to have the baby.

And the center has a waiting list, Arellano said.

"We're rejecting three ladies every day," she said, "and my mother will still take some of them to our home. Our dream is to expand the house and provide more services for more women because we love this area."

And the center, which is "barely surviving," continues outreach into the neighborhood in the form of food baskets and diapers. A large number of donations come in at Christmastime, Arellano said, but the center is open year round.

Within minutes of the end of the tour, while his fellow Soldiers were gathering up the paint and supplies for the project, Pfc. Tim Szika, a Patriot operator assigned to 1st Air and Missile Defense Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery, was on the phone to his bank in Florida.

"I'm trying to get information on setting up some sort of charity [account for

Dame La Mano] that people can donate through," Szika said. "This is the first time I've been here – I've either been in the field or on another project."

Not long after that, Szika and the others were making plans to return with a video camera and get the footage they need to submit the center for the ABC program, Extreme Makeover Home Edition.

"The house needs a lot of work, Szika said. "I'm glad I came out today."

Pfc. Michael DeJohn tried to coax one of the babies to finish a bottle of formula, but the baby seemed more interested in looking at De John, whose wife and daughters are preparing to move to El Paso.

"I've done a lot of similar volunteer work when I worked for Home Depot," De John said. "I had wanted to do this."

Once abandoned, the 1,700 square-foot center built in 1910 is now full of activity, especially in the summer when the children are not in school. On the table in the office is a model of what the proposed addition to the original building will look like. The plan calls for a new study, bedroom, bathroom and dining room able to hold 50 on the first floor. The second floor will have five bedrooms and a community bathroom with two tubs, three sinks and four toilets. Arellano hopes upcoming fundraisers will bring in enough money to help make that a reality. The first fundraiser brought \$45,000 – enough to pay off the mortgage.

"We're committed to our community," Arellano said. "We're staying right here."