

# Olga Sanchez's refuge of hope in the south

**Ms. Sanchez has cared for more than 2,500 migrants who have been injured on their journeys to the US.**

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**TAPACHULA, MEXICO** - Many have lost arms. Others have sacrificed legs and fingers to the "Beast," the infamous northbound train that travels from Arriaga, in Chiapas, northward through Mexico. It's one part of the long and dangerous trip for migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua to the US border.

For those who don't make the leap into the train cars or fall, due to the crush of other migrants, the tracks can be merciless, bringing an abrupt end to their journeys.

But while their hope of getting to the US has been lost, many are finding new-kindled inspiration in Olga Sanchez.

Ms. Sanchez started caring for injured Central American migrants in her modest home in the center of Tapachula nearly 20 years ago. But as the swell of migrants continues, her shelter has grown. She opened a new one more than two years ago that continues to expand.

On a recent visit, about two dozen migrants were at the shelter. Crutches and wheelchairs filled dormitories. They were making crafts to sell, studying English, attending mass. Some were shy, and covered their legs when visitors approached. Some have been there for years, others just long enough to recover.

"If it weren't for her, where would they go?" says Francisco Aceves, local coordinator of the government agency Grupos Beta, which brings migrants who have been injured on the train tracks to Sanchez.

Her work with migrants won her Mexico's National Prize for Human Rights in 2004.

Sanchez estimates that she has nursed more than 2,500 migrants since she opened the shelter. Among them is Edwin Pacay from Guatemala.

Mr. Pacay jumped on the train six months ago with all the confidence in the world of getting north. But dizzy from fatigue and hindered by the crush of migrants, he fell as it turned a corner and lost his left leg. Today, he stands proudly in his dormitory at the shelter, his English homework sprawled across his bed, crutches under his arms, with the same confidence that he will be moving onward, northward.

"In the past six months [Sanchez] has given me the chance to learn new things," he says. He sells beaded bracelets that he makes, too. "I didn't lose my head, it was my leg."

Sanchez says she draws inspiration from a near-death trauma of her own.

When Sanchez, the third of 11 children, was 7 years old, she says her intestine hemorrhaged and she spent three months in a coma. Doctors told her family to take her to their ranch to die. But when she arrived, she was craving a bean stew simmering on the stove. "I want to eat," she told her mother. Her mother replied, to no one in particular, "Oh, she is going to die, when they are going to die they want to eat."

Instead she woke up hungry, and ate. She says she believes the beans saved her life, but it was only the beginning of a lifetime of special diets and hospital visits.

During one such hospital stay 17 years ago, Sanchez met a couple from El Salvador that had fallen off a train in their attempt to get to the US: one had lost an arm, one a leg. It was impulsive, but she brought them to the home she shared with her husband and nursed back their wounds and spirits. Then she met more. Then she started scouring hospitals looking to bring amputees home. "I focused on migrants because they were all alone," she says. But they were also giving back to her, she says: giving her the courage to face her own health problems.

Her job, she says, is to instill in them the assurance that grew in her as a little girl, to show them that they can overcome their physical loss.

"They came to this country whole, I want them to go back whole," she says, dressed in all white in the pews of a church built on the shelter grounds. "Anything is possible, through faith and love of life."

Sanchez also relies on humor in her mission to make them feel useful. "Sometimes I tell them, 'run like a kangaroo,' " she says, laughing heartily, and then turns serious. "I think that legs and arms don't make us people. It's the heart."