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# Build a Miracle: Building Homes and Building Relationships – A Community Perspective

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# **Build A Miracle: Building Homes and Building Relationships – A Community Perspective**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

**Katie North**

**April 21, 2017**

Build a Miracle: Building Homes and Building Relationships – A Community Perspective

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Loyola Marymount University

### **Acknowledgments**

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Susan McDaniel, for her enthusiastic and continuous support of my research. I would also like to thank Chris North, Julianne North and Adolfo Noguez for the work that they do with BAM and for supporting me in my communication with the community. Finally, I am extremely grateful to the eleven women that participated in my interviews for their vulnerability, insight and invaluable assistance that made this thesis possible.

### Abstract

The purpose of this research was to look at how community support can facilitate the transformation of an impoverished neighborhood, through the case study of the nonprofit Build A Miracle (BAM) in the community of El Florido in Tijuana, Mexico. Mexico is a country that has long struggled with income inequality and high poverty rates (Martínez, 2003). There are many organizations that are involved with charitable work in Mexico, each with its own goals and approaches (e.g. Habitat for Humanity Mexico; Christian Base Communities – CBCs). BAM is a San Diego-based nonprofit organization that has built over 270 homes and provided dozens of educational scholarships for people living in poverty in Tijuana. Through the narrative of eleven women from El Florido, I examined the impact that BAM has had on an economically struggling community. This involved interviewing female community leaders about their experiences working with BAM and their outlook on how their lives and community have changed since BAM's arrival. This investigation brought to light that one of the integral components of BAM's model is the fostering of relationships between the American volunteers and the Mexican families in addition to traditional monetary support. The data also suggest that the strong Mexican female leaders have played a crucial role in the operation of the organization.

### Build a Miracle: Building Homes and Building Relationships – A Community Perspective

“Each Build A Miracle family is given a dignified home with stucco, insulation and drywall. In return, they are asked to do 500 hours of community service to help others in their community, but most families do so much more. Community clean up days, build days, and volunteering at the community center are some ways that they can earn their hours. Every build day you will see people who have lived in their homes for 10-15 years still helping their neighbors...Through the years, we have come to believe that the community center changes lives even more than the homes. With the homes, you can see the difference in people's lives almost instantly from one day to the next. The center, on the other hand, provides a remarkable transformation that develops more gradually over time and is often quite profound. At the center we see people become self-sufficient, get educated and go to college and learn to become strong leaders. It is a place where people from our homes and from the community gather to learn about being better parents and better spouses. Teens take classes that encourage them to stay in school, help others, stay off drugs and be the best they can be. It is where the community comes together, gets to know one another, develops relationships and then cares for one another.” -Julianne North

Build A Miracle (BAM) is a San Diego-based nonprofit founded in 2001 that builds homes and provides educational scholarships and vocational training in impoverished communities in Tijuana, Mexico. Two to three times a month, BAM takes a group of volunteers from the United States to a small neighborhood called El Florido in Tijuana to build homes and build relationships with community members. The words of Julianne North, a co-founder of Build A Miracle, highlight both the monetary support that BAM provides as well as the impact that the BAM community center has had on the personal growth of the community members. This statement may cause one to wonder how the El Florido community members themselves characterize the impact of BAM and the change that has occurred in their lives and community. To that end, utilizing thematic content analysis of individual interviews, this project explored perceptions of how this process has influenced the lives of eleven female community leaders.

## Literature Review

### Economic and cultural environment of Mexico

**Poverty and inequality.** Mexico is a country that has historically struggled with income inequality and high poverty rates. This inequality can be seen within the city of Tijuana itself if

one drives the short distance from one of the beautiful residential areas in the *Playas de Tijuana* to any of the overcrowded neighborhoods made of makeshift homes scattered throughout the city. The government recognizes that there are over 40 million economically poor in Mexico and other sources believe that number to be closer to 60 million (Martínez, 2003). A 2012 estimate states that of the population of 123,166,749, 52.3% lives below the poverty line according to the food-based definition of poverty and 47% according to the asset-based definition (The World Factbook: MEXICO). Although Mexico ranks sixteenth in the world with regards to economic production according to the World Bank, if the gross national product per capita is taken into account, then Mexico falls to eighty-first place (Martínez, 2003).

The housing need in Mexico is also immense. The 2016 Habitat for Humanity Country Profile for Mexico states that more than 59.8 million Mexicans do not have adequate housing. Over seven million homes in Mexico are built from sheet metal or adobe, over one million homes are built from cardboard, plastic or other recycled material and over five hundred and fifty thousand homes are in overcrowding situations (Habitat for Humanity Mexico Country Profile). According to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, the estimated unemployment rate in 2016 was 4.4 percent, but underemployment may be as high as 25 percent. Of those that are employed, an estimated seven million earn less than minimum wage and ten million make less than two minimum wages in a day. Therefore, over half of the employed population makes only \$30 per month or less (Habitat for Humanity Mexico Country Profile).

**Traditional familial roles in Mexico.** Mexican culture is traditionally associated with very distinct roles for men and women, known as “machismo” and “marianismo,” which dictate certain behavioral expectations for members of that community. The primary role emphasized for women in Mexican tradition is that of mother instead of wife. The cultural construct of

"familismo" is defined as an emphasis on family relationships and a strong value placed on childbearing as an integral part of family life and the feminine gender role. This leads women to define themselves through their family and children instead of independently or as part of a couple. Family is considered the most important value in Mexican culture, and the woman is the essential unifying element within the family (Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative, 2005).

The structure of families in Mexico brings generations together and transmits identity to the family members through a complex network of social interactions (Digirolamo, 2008). Thus, "families give a unifying meaning to the world, nurturing the life and actions of their members. 'Within the family, women play the most significant role as socialization agent and caregiver'" (Digirolamo, 2008, p. 516).

**Women as agents for social change.** Even within Mexico's borders, the role of women changes throughout different regions. Dr. Michelle Téllez (2008), an interdisciplinary scholar trained in Community Studies, Sociology and Chicana/o Studies, argues in her article "Community of struggle: Gender, violence and resistance on the U.S./Mexico border," that "the physical U.S./Mexico border is a site for change and agency and not merely a site of passage" (Téllez, 2008, p. 546). She expands this to express that "the unique sociopolitical experience of the border region creates the necessary conditions for the emergence of a woman-centered subjectivity that incites action" (Téllez, 2008, p. 547).

Mondros (1995) argues that poor women can be effective leaders for many reasons. They typically play a mother's role, which gives them valuable insight into the environment surrounding their families. They also tend to create effective and advantageous connections with other women. Women are oftentimes spiritually oriented and are the link between their families and a faith tradition, giving them strong values to incorporate into social change models. Finally,



women generally do not embrace authoritarian ways of leading, but instead tend to possess skills in consensus building and motivating people based on commonalities (Mondros 1995).

### **Organizations in Mexico**

**Habitat for Humanity.** Habitat for Humanity, founded in 1976, is a well-known example of an organization that provides foreign aid to impoverished or disaster-stricken communities. Millard Fuller, the former president and founder of Habitat for Humanity International, said at a house-building celebration: “We must all begin to say that it is unacceptable – religiously and socially and politically – for people to be living in subhuman conditions...we don’t have shacks because there's not enough money. We have shacks because there are not enough people who care enough to make it an unacceptable condition” (Giri, 2002, p. 45). Habitat for Humanity Mexico was established in 1989 and has served 57,000 families and hosted more than 6,800 volunteers; 2,941 families were served in 2016 alone (Habitat for Humanity in Mexico). Habitat builds homes for low-income families and promotes community development as well as organizes construction brigades for international volunteers to be a part of their work. One of their programs, called “Women Moving the World,” specifically seeks to support women who are the heads of households by assisting with housing needs and creating women’s groups (Habitat for Humanity in Mexico).

**Christian Base Communities (CBCs).** In the article “Women’s Leadership in Mexico: Education for social change at the grassroots,” Socorro Martínez (2003) looks at the unique capability that women living in poverty have to create social change when given the opportunity. Martínez focuses on Christian Base Communities (CBCs) in Mexico and believes that they can provide that opportunity for women through education, training and facilitating the

creation of useful relationships. The Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture (2008) defines Christian Base Communities as:

Small groups within a parish who meet regularly for Bible study, led by a priest, nun, or lay member; who elect their own leaders; and who decide democratically with what other activities the community should be concerned. At their inception...the goal was to bring the laity into the life of the church, to bring the church into dialogue with the world, and to teach that the church is a community of equals before God in which everyone has obligations to each other and responsibilities to share. CBCs reflect a rupture with the past, when the church was allied with wealth and power, and demonstrate a new commitment to a "preferential option for the poor" (para. 1)

There are 5,000 registered CBCs throughout Mexico and they are often described as the "University of the Poor" due to the learning, self-confidence building and skill development that take place there (Martínez, 2003). Women constitute 70% of the population involved in CBCs and tend to be appointed as the animators, or small group leaders of CBCs (Martínez, 2003). These groups can be a powerful tool in providing transformative education for women in areas such as human rights, public policy, health and micro-finance. Further, many CBCs have outstanding training centers and effectively assist in the development of self-confidence; these are, however, not centralized and many are lacking in certain areas (Martínez, 2003).

**Build A Miracle (BAM).** BAM is a 501c3 San Diego-based nonprofit that was founded in 2001 by Chris and Julianne North. After Chris and Julianne lived and worked in a boy's orphanage in Tecate, Mexico for 6 months, they felt called to go out into the communities of Tijuana and work directly with struggling families. They began in 1999 with a goal to build one house per year for families living in poverty and a few years later created the official nonprofit Build A Miracle. Since then, BAM has grown and evolved immensely and now builds homes at a rate of around 30 per year; at the end of 2016, BAM had completed the construction of 270 houses. The last 225 homes as well as a community center have been built in or in close

proximity to a community called El Florido in the municipality of Tijuana (J. North, personal communication, October 15, 2016).

In addition to the mission to build safe, comfortable and dignified homes, BAM is dedicated to promoting and providing educational opportunities meant to break the cycle of poverty. Every family who receives a home is asked to keep their children in school and BAM provides educational scholarships for high school and college students. In addition to the dozens of high school students who have received BAM scholarships, there are currently 26 students from the El Florido community in college on BAM scholarships and 8 students have graduated from college, with one going on to receive her Master's degree. Furthermore, BAM has an Accredited Adult Education school where adults can receive their elementary, middle and high school degrees. Over 450 children and adults attend weekly classes on various subjects taught by the college students and other volunteers from the community. The BAM community center also has several trade school courses offered in cosmetology, sewing, baking, welding and construction. BAM has helped several families who have received homes with the startup of small business, such as a barber's shop, a beauty salon, a sewing business, a churro cart, a taco shop, a convenience store, and swap meet businesses (C. North, personal communication, October 15, 2016).

Two to four times a month, BAM takes a group of 50-150 volunteers from the U.S. to participate in construction projects. On a typical "build day," members of the El Florido community and volunteers from the U.S. work together to build part of a home. After the construction project is completed, volunteers and community members gather in the community center to share a meal together and interact with one another through various activities, such as playing soccer and other games. Many volunteers from the U.S. visit the community several

times a year and many sponsors enjoy a long-term relationship with the family for whom they financed a home.

### **Research Questions**

The needs in Mexico are vast and many organizations and communities are attempting to respond to this need. The literature review reveals that poor women are in a good position to be effective leaders in their communities, partly because of their tendency to develop connections and build consensus (Mondros, 1995). In order to discern the community's perspective on the impact of BAM and the role that women play in the organization and the El Florido community, the following questions guided this research:

RQ 1: What are the community members' perspectives on how their community has been transformed and how the BAM model has helped facilitate that?

RQ 2: What role does relationship building play in community and individual development, particularly in the El Florido community?

RQ 3: What role can women play in the development of an economically struggling community?

### **Method**

Following IRB approval, I conducted interviews at the BAM community center on two different days in the fall of 2016 (see Appendices A through F for complete interview protocol). The interview subjects were eleven women that live in Tijuana in or near the El Florido community and each participant was interviewed separately. For this study, I decided to focus solely on the women of El Florido because the Mexican BAM leadership team is comprised

almost entirely of women and women play the most active roles in the community center. All of the women that I interviewed except for one have received and lived in a BAM home and they are all actively involved in the community center in some way. With permission, after gathering basic demographic information, I tape recorded the interviews and asked questions about each woman's experiences with working alongside BAM volunteers and their perceptions of *how* and *why* their community has changed. The interviews lasted from ten minutes to fifty minutes, depending on how much each woman shared.

On the first interview day, I interviewed the main leaders of the community center and on the second day I interviewed women who teach or participate in the BAM vocational training programs. The women's ages ranged from twenty-eight to fifty-six. One of the women does not have children and ten of them do have children ranging from the age of nine months to thirty years old. Two of the women have received BAM scholarships to attend college and one went on to receive her Master's degree. They all speak Spanish as their native language and, thus, I conducted all of the interviews in that language. For the purposes of this study, I translated all of their responses to English. I recognize that there are some methodological issues with this and some of the meaning may be lost in translation, but the essence of what the women said was captured.

BAM was started by my parents, Chris and Julianne North, and I have been very involved in the organization since I was four years old. I have gotten to know the eleven women that I interviewed very well through my long-term involvement with BAM. This has created a certain privilege for me as a researcher and I was able to approach the community as more of an insider and trusted friend. Because a level of comfort was already established, I felt as if the women were able to open up to me and share personal struggles and stories in the short time that

we had together. However, because of my personal connections with BAM, I recognize that the women may have felt uncomfortable sharing negative things about the organization with me or may have altered their responses in some way. Thus, this is an additional methodological issue to consider.

After completing all of the interviews, and transcribing the responses, a thematic content analysis revealed common themes and categories in each woman's story. Results of the analysis follows; all participant names have been changed for the purpose of confidentiality.

### **Analysis**

When reviewing the data, I encountered four major themes woven throughout all of the interviews. The women spoke of the *physical changes* in their homes and community, the *impact* and importance *of education*, the *close relationships* they have formed through their involvement with BAM and, finally, the *personal change and empowerment* that they have experienced as a result of working with BAM. All of the themes were very interconnected and the first three themes seemed to point towards the final theme of women's empowerment.

### **Physical Changes**

**Physical change of house.** One of the most integral parts of BAM's mission is to build homes for families that live in material poverty and do not have the means to build a dignified home of their own. The women spoke of the physical differences between their old house and their BAM house, which is perhaps the most tangible change that they have experienced through working with BAM. Through tears, "Juana", who is 40 years old and lives with her husband, two of her three kids and her mom, explained to me the condition of the house she lived in before BAM came into her life and her disbelief when she was told she would receive a home.

This helped us a lot when they came for us, because...I was working and I had asked for a loan from my work to be able to extend the little room that we had, but there was not

much that we ourselves could do. The room where we lived got wet, everything got wet. The ceiling didn't get wet, but everything under it got wet...and when there was rainy weather, my kids could not play on the floor; they had to be up on the bed all the time because if they got down, they would get wet...and we were living like this for a long time, because we were paying for the land we couldn't afford to build [a house] ...and when BAM arrived, they told us "we can help you to build a house" and I said "no, well, how are they going to help us build a house? How are they going to give us a house as a gift? How could these people come without knowing us to help us?" We couldn't believe it. Mr. Adolfo showed us the plans of the house and we still couldn't believe it until they came and started construction on the floor. (Transcript I4, lines 30-47)

This passage gives a small insight into what it could be like to live in material poverty.

The data suggest that "Juana's" family did not have the means to build the house that they wanted on their own. "Juana's" comments, "because we were paying for the land we couldn't afford to build [a house]" and "I had asked for a loan from my work...but there was not much that we ourselves could do," reveal a feeling of hopelessness and indicate that she had a lack of control over the situation despite her efforts. Her disbelief when BAM said that they could build her a house may indicate that she never expected something like this to happen in her life.

"Alejandra" is a woman of 35 years who lives with her partner, Eduardo, and their nineteen-year-old son. She is from Jalapa Vera Cruz, but moved to Tijuana about fifteen years ago with her partner. Before I asked her any questions, she began expressing her gratitude towards BAM and speaking about the change that occurred in her life upon receiving a home. In the following narrative, she explains the hardships of living in a shack and the blessing of receiving a BAM home.

I lived in a house built of scrap wood, it was falling down. I was cold, rains came, we got sick a lot with the flu and coughs from the dust. My house was completely in the street and people could see inside it, they could see everything. I put sheets up so that not the air nor the cold nor anything could enter. When it rained, well, it stopped raining outside and droplets kept falling inside. The kitchen would sink down along with the bed where my son, husband and I slept. We all got wet and everything got wet and we put trash bags on our feet so that we wouldn't get wet. It was very sad; it is very sad to live through that Katie, honestly. I lived it, I suffered through it. When someone receives a BAM house, it is a blessing, it is a huge blessing because it changes your life...you don't get sick

anymore, you don't get rained on or spend your time being cold. You aren't constantly worried that the rain is going to come into your house or that the air and dust will come in. None of that, it is really beautiful. (Transcript I7, lines 11-25)

“Alejandra” calls a BAM house “a huge blessing” simply because “you aren't constantly worried that the rain is going to come into your house.” The data suggest that for women like “Alejandra,” who have lived for their entire lives in makeshift houses, simply having a home that is sturdy enough to keep the rain, wind and dust outside is life changing. I mentioned earlier that Mexican culture is traditionally associated with distinct roles for men and women and women tend to define themselves through their family and children (Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative, 2005). In addition to the physical discomfort, I imagine that there is a level of emotional hardship that comes with living in a home like “Alejandra's,” especially for a woman who feels it is her responsibility to maintain a dignified home for her family. The data also suggest that receiving a BAM home can improve general health; “Alejandra” claims that “you don't get sick anymore” when you live in a sturdy house.

**From house to community.** As exemplified by the community of El Florido, constructing dignified homes in a neighborhood can cause that area to change in other ways. For example, if nice houses are built in a neighborhood, the members of that community may be motivated to take extra care of it, resulting in an improved community at large. A few of the women spoke of ways that their community changed beyond the physical structures after the construction of several BAM houses. “Olivia,” a forty-year-old woman with three kids mentioned the responsibility that she feels to take good care of her house because it is beautiful and it is something they could never have achieved on their own.

I think that if my husband had worked for twenty more years, even if both of us worked, because we always took turns working, we still never would have had such a beautiful house. Therefore, we take really good care of our house. We live, we are immensely happy. (Transcript I8, lines 64-67)



As she talked about her home, she showed me pictures of the house she used to have as well as of her new home; she glowed with pride as she showed me the different areas of her house and explained where she keeps her belongings and how she and her husband now have their own room separate from their children. The data suggest that this sense of pride that she gained in her new house has carried over into an overarching feeling of pride in her neighborhood at large. She later mentioned that one of the changes that has occurred in her neighborhood since BAM started building houses has been that the community members now put a lot of effort into keeping it clean.

In the community we put a lot of effort into keeping our community clean, making sure there is harmony, and checking up on the adolescents and talking to them when we see that they are misbehaving, the kids as well. In my community, [BAM] is now constructing houses there, everyone tries to help everyone else. (Interview I8, lines 42-46)

I believe that this effort to create a clean space and to make sure the young people in the neighborhood behave derives from a sense of ownership that the people have gained in their community. Having a dignified house appears to translate into wanting to create a dignified neighborhood. Another community leader who lives in a different zone talked about how her neighbors take turns coming to clean the BAM community center and have taken responsibility for their own space.

In addition to promoting a cleaner neighborhood, another way that adequate physical homes can change a community is by making it easier for kids to complete their schoolwork and focus on school in general. “Samantha,” whose family received a BAM house ten years ago, was the first student to graduate from college on a BAM scholarship. She went on to get her Master’s degree and now works as a psychologist in the community center. In the following narrative, she discusses how having a dignified home ties into education.

When I arrived here as a young girl, I was identified as being very quiet, very worried, because I didn't have a house. My house got wet, there weren't paved roads; I had to go through the mud to get to high school because I was in high school. It was quite difficult because you can't focus in school if you have a lot of problems with the house, or also a lot of emotional problems. So when BAM made my house I felt a well-being for myself and for my parents, I felt like I no longer had an excuse to continue being worried that the house would get wet or that I would be cold at night, but rather could worry about studying. I saw this and it changed me, and in the community as well I have noticed the change, that many young people feel hopeful. Those who have houses can be at peace and can leave to study and can grow more. (Transcript I9, lines 17-26)

A house is not only a place to live, it is a place to study. A house that has no electricity or running water and that gets wet when it rains, freezing in the winter and scorching in the summer is not an ideal study place. "Samantha's" claim that "you can't focus in school if you have a lot of problems with the house" is something that may seem obvious, but can be overlooked as a negative consequence of not having a livable home. In this passage, "Samantha" expresses the shift she experienced from being concerned about her house getting wet and being cold at night to being able to focus on studying. Her responses suggest that the improved ability to study and be dedicated to school was not only something that "Samantha" experienced, but something that affected many people in her community. She says that she noticed this change in her community and a change in the young people who have a BAM house and feel hopeful and are able to go study and learn more. This benefit of living in a dignified home that "Samantha" talks about ties in with the next theme: education.

## **Education**

**School.** All eleven of the women that I spoke with brought up the subject of education, which also happens to be a central focus of BAM. As "Alejandra" pointed out, Adolfo Noguez, one of the co-directors of BAM, always says "if there is no education, there is no future." In addition to providing a home where kids can study more efficiently, BAM offers scholarships for high school and higher education as well as collects and distributes backpacks, school supplies,

school uniforms and other academic necessities. The data suggest that the women and community have embraced this idea and now place a high value on education. The passage below from my interview with Andrea, typifies this new-found belief:

BAM is based on this: housing and education, something that is also very important because education gives a family the means to move forward and fortifies it against hardships. It is not only the house, but also giving a scholarship to a young person, which is one more young person or student that will rise above, that will break the cycle of poverty. And they are an inspiration for the other kids and neighbors...the students who have achieved and finished what they have chosen to study, this is such a beautiful example in the community, this is an example for the kids. (Transcript I1, lines 131-136)

She claims that “education gives a family the means to move forward.” The data indicate that a student going to school not only benefits him/herself and family, but also other kids from the neighborhood who gain positive examples to follow. Another woman, “Emilia,” mentioned the academic transformation that has occurred in the community with the support of BAM. She praised the way that BAM “encourages the kids to study, to dream, and then helps make their dreams a reality; not just to stay in their community and never leave” (Transcript I11, lines 45-46). “Emilia” hints at the idea that kids in the community have the expectation that they will remain both in poverty and in a poor community throughout their lives. She seems to be suggesting that BAM reverses both expectations; by infusing hope into the community in general, encouraging individuals to develop dreams and equipping them with the tools they need to chase them. As “Andrea” says in the above passage, giving a scholarship to a young person creates another “student that will rise above, that will break the cycle of poverty.”

In the following account, “Laura,” a college graduate, explains the impact that education has had on her professional life.

Why did I want to go to college? Because no one in my family had gone to college; my brother couldn't finish because he couldn't pay. My sponsor, Jack, paid for all of college for me. I finished my degree and Jack said, “Don't you want to study something else?” “Well, yes I like to design,” so I began studying graphic design. Now I make designs on

the internet and sell them. I make web pages and work with small companies. I like it because I don't have to be in an office, I create things online, send them, and they pay me. (Transcript I5, lines 24-31)

In a community where most of the adults have not graduated from middle or high school, let alone college, the courage that this woman had to pursue a degree is, in a way, revolutionary. Growing up in San Diego, there was always a general expectation that I would go to college. For “Laura,” growing up in Tijuana, the opposite was true. There was a general expectation that she would *not* go to college, or perhaps the idea of college didn't even cross anyone's mind. The data propose that her professional life is better because of her education; she has a job that she enjoys and that allows her to be creative and make money without going to an office. It is not hard to imagine that her life would have been very different had she not gone to college.

To conclude the discussion of the impact of traditional education as expressed by the participants, the following account shows the dreams that a mother, “Alejandra,” has for her nineteen-year-old son as well as for herself with regards to education.

I finished elementary school [in the accredited adult school at the community center] and middle school. Now I am still trying to finish high school here, I want to continue studying. My son says that I am too old, but here there isn't an age limit for learning. I tell my son, I have a right to study and learn and I am proud to be an example for you. Even though I am older, I want to continue studying and be a better person. You need to continue studying while you are young. (Transcript I7, lines 119-124)

“Alejandra” mentioned earlier in her interview that she had a very difficult childhood and was a different person before she became involved at the community center. She spent most of her life thinking that she was not capable of anything or good at anything. When talking about her academic endeavors, she spoke with such pride and determination and with a drastically different tone than when she spoke of her painful upbringing. Her body language alone indicated the change that her education in the community center had caused within her. Her commentary suggests that schooling is not only a way to empower the young people in the community, but

also the adults. Furthermore, an education is something that the community members have achieved that cannot be taken away; even if BAM were to disappear and their home were to be destroyed, they could hold onto their education as a source of empowerment and use it to better their situation.

**Vocational Education.** BAM does not only seek to provide traditional schooling for the community members, but also vocational training through various classes and programs offered at the community center. “Andrea” is one of the main leaders in the community and her house is used as part of the community center. In the following passage, she describes a few of the vocational training programs that have been implemented in the community throughout the years as well as some of the benefits of these programs.

There are many families who benefit in different ways from each of the classes...for the sewing class, many people learn and can get a better job. For example, in a factory, a person is paid better if they know how to use a sewing machine. Or someone can set up their own sewing business, or simply in their house, there are also many families that in their own house are able to make the curtains or something for the beds. Or they can put a sign outside their house that says I repair pants and things like that...that is money that now enters the household and can help the families more. In baking, well, many people have learned to do a lot of things and now can make their own little businesses. Cakes, bread, now they can sell in their house. For people like myself who didn't have much of an education, but now they have a trade; a trade through which they can help their family so that the whole family is better because perhaps the salary of the husband is not enough. (Transcript I1, lines 47-62)

Even after a family receives a home, they may still struggle financially and find it difficult to pay for food, household objects and other necessary items. Families who receive BAM homes typically earn around \$70-\$100 a week, which does not change just because their housing situation changes (J. North, personal communication, October 15, 2016). The vocational training offered through BAM is a way to address that reality. For example, with regard to the sewing classes, the data demonstrate that a person can make more money at a factory knowing how to sew or can make their own items to sell or can save money by making things for

themselves and fixing their own clothes. This demonstrates another way that BAM goes beyond providing homes and looks at the whole picture of what a family may need.

“Alejandra” has been very involved at the community center and has completed several vocational programs; she narrates her personal experience below.

Here they taught me cosmetology...I didn't know anything about cutting hair or tinting, none of that, however, now I have these skills that is like a profession, that is dying hair, cutting hair, braiding hair. I didn't know anything about that stuff and look now at what I have learned here in the community center, thanks to all of your support. This community center is like a treasure...I always say to other people, make the most of it because the classes are completely free, you don't even pay a cent and you learn so much. In sewing too, I graduated from the sewing class and believe me that, when I am with the sewing women and I see all the work that they do, I say “wow.” Today I made an apron and a bag, because we make stuff like that, and I thought, it isn't possible that I made this. I start crying because it is a thing that, my God, I would not be capable of making these things if it weren't for the support that there is here from the women, from the community, from the sponsors, from the Americans. (Transcript I7, lines 45-59)

The data clearly indicate that “Alejandra” has taken advantage of what the community center offers and has benefited from the vocational classes. Not only on a practical level, but on a personal level as well. She could not believe that she was capable of making an apron and bag like the ones she made and was brought to tears thinking about how it would not be possible without the support of so many people.

**Additional educational opportunities.** Apart from the vocational classes, there are many other weekly classes and tutoring offered at the community center. The classes are free and everyone is encouraged to participate (J. North, personal communication, October 15, 2016).

“Emilia” explains her and her family's involvement with BAM classes: “We now live for BAM; we spend almost every day here [in the community center]. My kids come to the classes. [My daughter] comes to piano, math, English, computer and dance” (Transcript I11, lines 50-51). She later explains that she has also taken a lot of classes – computer, English, cosmetology, nutrition – and that “in the nutrition class, the teacher teaches us about different foods and that we can

make in our houses for the kids and how to cook with soy” (Transcript I11, lines 105-108). And finally, she explains that she and her sixteen-year-old son meet with the community psychologist because he began experimenting a little bit with drugs. She claims that in her sessions she has been learning how to set boundaries with her kids and how to demand things from them when necessary. She said that the community center has also helped set her son up to do therapy with a specialist in addictions “to help him not stray from the good path set before him” (Transcript I11, line 96).

“Emilia’s” involvement at the community center demonstrates the wide variety of services offered. At the community center, the kids and adults are learning something else; rather than focusing on the day to day necessities and on not getting wet when it rains, they are getting not only a school education, but a more wholesome education. The following passage is

“Emilia’s” description of her old home:

My house was very bad, it had a lot of holes in the roof and water came through them and also through the bottom. So, during cold weather, we were very cold and during hot weather, very hot. We had our bathroom outside on the corner of our land and if it was nighttime or if it was raining, we had to go out there to go to the bathroom...if it rained, we got up to move the furniture and cover our things so they didn’t get ruined.  
(Transcript I11, lines 19-22; 38-39)

She and her family went from spending time moving around furniture and covering things up inside their house when it rained to spending time with their neighbors learning how to dance, how to use computers, and how to speak English. The data suggest that not having the basic necessities can hinder one’s growth as a whole person. After the basic necessity of a shelter was met for “Emilia” and her family, they began to expand their horizons and explore and develop other aspects of their lives. The kids and adults involved in the community center are experiencing an education that goes beyond the classroom and beyond what they learn at home.

To conclude the topic of education, “Lucía’s” words give an idea of the great variety of educational opportunities offered by the community center.

[I am] very happy and very grateful to all of you; I am happy that you made my daughter’s dream a reality; she now has a degree in graphic design. When I came here to BAM, my life changed entirely, because I wanted to do something good in my life and here I achieved that thanks to you guys. You have served me a lot and not just with this, but I also finished middle school here, I received my stylist certification, and now I am learning hairstyles and in a nutrition class as well where I learn how to make different foods. I am very happy and want to learn more and want to share with everyone in the world that there is something good here in the community...I have a grandson who comes to soccer, computer classes, English classes and robotics. My life has changed and that of my kids, and now that of my grandkid, the third generation. (Transcript I6, lines 22-29; 79-80)

This passage demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the education that the people who choose to get involved in the community center receive. “Lucia” completed middle school through the adult school and received vocational training as a stylist, her daughter received a college scholarship, and how her grandson is involved in many different classes. The data indicate that people of all ages and from all generations are able to receive a relatively wholesome education through the community center. The data also reveal that the education is life changing by allowing people to create more meaningful lives. “Lucía” says, “my life changed entirely, because I wanted to do something good in my life and here I achieved that.” The community members in Tijuana reveal the numerous benefits that they and their children have received by furthering their education. Apart from the tangible benefits, education can also be a form of empowerment by improving one’s self-determination and self-confidence, something that I will discuss in the final section.

## **Relationships**

**Relationships with volunteers.** Building relationships across the border has been at the heart of the BAM mission since its creation. Chris and Julianne North wanted the organization to



be relatively small in order for them to be able to personally know the families that they built homes for. Although the organization has grown immensely and in many unexpected ways since its humble beginnings, the relationships between the Mexican families and American volunteers have remained an integral part of its operation. Julianne organizes build trips two to four times each month in order to help facilitate relationships, especially those between the Mexican families and the sponsors of their homes as well as between the scholarship students and their sponsors (J. North, personal communication, October 15, 2016). When I asked each of the women to talk about the relationships they had with the Americans, their response was overwhelmingly positive. One woman exclaimed,

It's not even a relationship, it is a family! You guys are part of my family, Katie. I don't see you as friends anymore, I see you as siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. I love you all so much that I no longer see you as strangers, no, on the contrary, the doors of my house will always be open for all of you and I love you. (Transcript I7, lines 135-138)

Or, as another woman put it, "you are our family despite the fact that there is a border between us" (Transcript I3, line 124).

In the following narrative, "Samantha," the first student to graduate from college on a BAM scholarship, describes her relationship with Jack, the man who sponsored her studies.

Jack is my dad...I believe that Jack sees me as that older daughter that he never had and I have been told that I even look like him physically. I think that if I am like a daughter to him I sometimes wish that I could spend more time with him...but I think that I am his daughter not only because he has supported me, but because he loves me and is concerned about me. I love him a lot and don't know what I would do without him; I have never pictured my life without him. Sometimes I don't have the words to explain it to him because I can't completely express myself, but he knows that I love him and I tell him and hug him. He is the person I feel closest to emotionally apart from my husband and parents. When I have an important decision, I consult him and when I am going through difficult times, I ask him things and he responds with wisdom. (Transcript I9, lines 73; 98-109)

The data suggest that the relationship between a sponsor and the student receiving a scholarship can be very special. "Samantha" expresses her inability to fully articulate her

gratitude to Jack for all that he has done for her. Their relationship appears to be similar to a familial bond. “Samantha” believes that Jack sees her like a daughter and says that she goes to him when she has a difficult decision to make or is going through a difficult time. We can infer from the data that this is a beneficial relationship for both Jack and “Samantha.” Jack has come to view “Samantha” as the “daughter that he never had” and the connection she has with Jack has helped “Samantha” through tough times in her life. The data suggest that she would have had a different college experience if she didn’t have the chance to meet and get to know her sponsor. As the first woman in her community to go to college, I can imagine that it would have been difficult for “Samantha” to persevere, but I believe that this relationship, made possible by the weekend volunteer visits, helped her to complete her education and motivated her to do her best.

In the following passage, “Olivia”, who has lived in her BAM house for just a year and half, but plays a very active role in the community, animatedly discusses her experience working with the American volunteers.

I am 40 and I never imagined something like this happening in my life. I never imagined finding such good people, so loving who, along with making us feel good, make us feel loved. They give us everything without condition. The Americans approach us as if they knew us their whole lives. Sometimes we can’t talk to each other, but we look for ways to communicate. I have many American friends; many friends who leave and come back and look for me...they always have to leave, but they go and they think of us over there...it is something so beautiful. Sometimes we don’t even receive these acts of kindness that you do for us even from our own family. I know that God is very big and God for some reason he put me here; he put me in your path or you in my path.  
(Transcript I8, lines 22-28; 30-33)

“Olivia’s” words reflect a very positive relationship between the Americans and the community members. She refers to them as “friends” and says that they “approach us as if they knew us their whole lives.” Despite the language barrier, they find a way to communicate. BAM does not just give money, but organizes consistent volunteer trips to Mexico, allowing for long-

term bonds to be made between people from both sides of the border. According to the data, this has had a positive impact on the community.

In the following account, “Alejandra” talks about the volunteers as being teachers and positive examples for the community members.

You guys have taught us so many things. About wanting to help others to get ahead, to follow their dreams, to be in better health and be better people. You have taught us many things, as people, as human beings. To be better, more humble; humble, but with a big heart. To give without wanting to receive anything in return...You are a huge example, you are all examples for our kids. You graduate from college and say that you want to graduate and the kids see that and want to do the same thing. Here there is a lot of drug addiction, alcohol, this is a bad example. But you have supported us and come here and our kids see you as examples to follow. (Transcript I7, lines 30-34; 128-132)

This woman reveals that the community members have learned about being better people from their relationships with the volunteers. She also claims that the children in the community have gained positive examples through interacting with the Americans. I also believe that they have gained positive examples in community members, such as “Samantha,” who have beaten all odds and graduated from college. It no longer seems to be a community where people are stuck where they are, in a cycle of poverty and forced to focus only on the basic necessities.

The words from all these women demonstrate how important relationships are to BAM. The community members in Tijuana reveal that a positive relationship exists between themselves and the volunteers. They speak of the volunteers as family and as people who make them feel loved and who are examples to follow. “Olivia” also mentioned, “I believe that, perhaps, just as they have changed our lives, we have left a mark on them” (Transcript I8, lines 131-132). I can say from personal experience that these women have indeed been examples and sources of support and inspiration to me and to many other people from the United States. I believe that these relationships have helped to make BAM more successful in motivating the community members to make the most of the resources at the community center and in

empowering them as individuals, allowing them to become agents of change in their community, a topic that I will discuss at length later.

**Relationships with neighbors.** The women also reveal that the relationships among the community members themselves have changed since the arrival of BAM. Many of the women disclosed experiencing feelings of loneliness and isolation before becoming involved with BAM and then talked about the positive nature of their current relationships with their neighbors.

“Juana’s” view on how an individual and their relationships change through involvement at the community center is depicted below.

For me the community center is like a magic box...because you arrive at the community center and you change. Your way of thinking changes, your way of seeing things, your way of being with people. You meet more people, you socialize more, you aren’t afraid to get closer to people. (Transcript I4, lines 322-325)

“Juana” suggests that there used to be a feeling of fear when it came to approaching and getting to know other people. Perhaps there was a level of distrust among the neighbors of El Florido when people were more focused on their own survival and that of their immediate families.

“Andrea” also reveals a shift in the mindset of the community members with regard to their neighborhood.

You no longer say “this is my neighborhood.” No, it is your community. It is not the same thing to say it is your neighborhood as it is to say it’s your community because in your community, you feel something. It is a place where everyone knows each other, everyone helps each other and everyone is there for each other, you feel like there is someone who cares about you. (Transcript I1, lines 80-83)

This quote is a beautiful expression of how the social environment in this area has changed and how it has switched from being just a *neighborhood* to being a *community*. There appears to be more collaboration and unity amongst neighbors. “Andrea’s” words also connote a feeling of pride in her community.

In the following narrative, “Olivia” also talks about the change that has occurred in her personal life and in the mentality of her fellow community members.

Before, honestly, I felt very alone and I felt very sad because I always worked, the house, my kids, it was my routine. I never had anyone to talk to, if we had a problem we didn’t have anyone, because we did not know our neighbors. I lived here for ten years, but was always working...but after [BAM] arrived here, it was just the opposite, it’s like having my big family. I know that at the time that I come and whatever I need, there will be someone there to help...We are no longer thinking only about our own kids, but about the kids of the community. And all of this is thanks to BAM because maybe we had an interest in helping, but we didn’t do it, and now that we see that there are many people helping it motivates us to do the same. (Transcript I8, lines 34-39; 48-51)

This story depicts a radical change. “Olivia” lived in the same place for ten years without knowing her neighbors and without feeling supported. Now, with the assistance of BAM, she has gotten to know her neighbors and has a family that she can always count on. Her feelings of loneliness and sadness have translated into feeling accepted and cared for. She demonstrates the shift in her community by saying, “We are no longer thinking only about our own kids, but about the kids of the community.” The phrase “it takes a village to raise a child” seems very appropriate here; with the whole community supporting the children and playing an active role in their development, they will hopefully have a better upbringing and better chance of success in life.

When I asked “Laura”, a college graduate, if her relationships with her neighbors have changed since BAM’s arrival, she responded with the following anecdote.

Yes, yes, a lot! I am a bit reserved, but my mom is very expressive. Before, we would go out and everyone would say “hello” to her and I was like “mom, come on, let’s go.” Then, after some time, my mom asked me “have you realized?” [And I said] “What?” [And my mom said] “Now we go somewhere and you say ‘hi’ to everyone and everyone talks to you and everyone knows you.” Yes, it’s true, if I go anywhere, I hear, “Teacher Laura, Hi!!!” It is very beautiful when they greet you and recognize what you do. (Transcript I5, lines 34-39)

The data show that this woman, who tends to be more reserved and to keep to herself, has been able to form relationships with many different people from the community. Her involvement with BAM has helped to bring her out of her shell and she does work in the community that other people recognize and appreciate.

The participants reveal feelings of acceptance and empowerment that have come from the newfound, supportive relationships with their neighbors. The data illustrate that more trust and collaboration have developed among the people of the community. “Emilia” claims, “we have now developed into a family, BAM is a family; a very big family and every day it grows more” (Transcript I11, lines 47-48). She later adds, “I feel loved by so many people...Everyone here has supported me so much when I needed it, they have given me advice, they have supported my children” (Transcript I11, lines 67-69). Throughout the stories of these women, there seems to be a theme of not knowing their neighbors for many years and of being forced to focus on their own survival. As the data highlight, the development of relationships with the volunteers and their neighbors has given the women encouragement and strength. I believe that this, along with receiving a dignified home and furthering their education, has led to the empowerment of these women.

### **Women’s Empowerment**

**Personal change and empowerment.** One of the most beautiful things that the women spoke about was how being a part of BAM has affected their feelings of self-confidence and self-worth. Through the following accounts, they indirectly reveal the personal empowerment that they have gained through working with BAM. For example, “Catalina” speaks of the change she has experienced on a personal level in the following passage.

[BAM] changed my life so much that it gave me new expectations, new hopes, new goals. Now, in my life, I have goals that I had previously thrown away because the love

that the group of Americans brings to our community is so much that it inspires us to want to be better. When BAM came to my house, they changed completely, well first of all my house, my house was only one room and my family and I lived in there and now I have a house and my kids grow well in it...Now I have the ability to go to college and I want to enter law school. I want to start in January. This is something I never in my life thought of doing and even less with three kids, but when someone is a part of this community, the opportunities are very big and expansive. (Transcript I3, lines 18-23; 31-34)

It is clear that “Catalina’s” life did not just change in a tangible, physical way when she received her BAM home; it also gave her a new sense of hope and purpose. She speaks of creating new goals for herself, including the goal to return to school and continue studying. BAM started with her house and she was able to blossom from there.

Through tears, “Andrea,” confesses how she felt about herself and her life before BAM came to El Florido.

“Before I didn’t have any sense of self-worth, I said, it was like I felt really insignificant; I said I couldn’t do anything in life, since I didn’t study. I didn’t like school, I always did a bit poorly in school, I suffered from a lot of bullying in school...so I only made it to fifth grade, but...I suffered from bullying and this is a secret I have never shared...I didn’t go to school and I think because of this I would say that I was never going to be anything, or I was never going to learn anything, because, well, I didn’t want to. I settled for what I had and worked in a factory and said, well, this is going to be my life: working in a factory. And my husband too, and there wasn’t, there wasn’t anything to do to be able to get ahead, I didn’t have dreams like that of getting ahead or saying I can study this or that. And maybe if you asked me, “do you want to study something?” [I would have responded,] “Me? No. No, I don’t want to study anything, I don’t want to learn anything.” (Transcript I1, lines 11-22)

She spoke quietly with her head down and her hands folded in her lap. She went on to describe when BAM came to her community and Mr. Adolfo asked her if she wanted to do something with her life. She said not really, but she might want to learn cosmetology, even though she didn’t know anything about it. He said that they would look into installing a beauty shop on her property and finding someone to teach her. About a year later, they did it; she began

learning and liked it and was fascinated by it. She then went on to talk about the change in her role in her community:

Before BAM arrived, we had been living here in the community for like five or six years, but we only knew one family. We have about twenty families on this street and I only knew one...Now we are 256 families that are a part of BAM. Now we go to the store and everyone is like, “Hi Andrea, hi Andrea, hi Andrea.” Now people ask me, “what are you the president or something because the whole world knows you?!” (Transcript I1, lines 68-70; 72-74)

This woman went from feeling like she would never achieve anything or become anything to becoming a leader of her community. She helps to run the community center and hosts all of the groups of volunteers in her home. Many of the other women spoke about her in their interviews as being an example of how to love and receive people with open arms. Having known “Andrea” for the past ten years, I was shocked to discover that she once felt so worthless. She has the beautiful ability of making everyone that she meets feel special and loved; she radiates joy and her smile is one of the biggest I have ever seen. The personal transformation that she has gone through is incredible and was made very clear throughout her interview.

“Alejandra” tells a similar story of feeling shy and unconfident before becoming involved at the community center and discovering her self-worth.

Believe me, Katie, here in the community center, I didn’t talk at all, I didn’t speak with people, I was afraid to talk to people. I was a person with a lot of fear, I was terrified to talk to my neighbors, to the man at the store, I didn’t go out. I didn’t leave my house for anything. I was always, like, intimidated, like, I don’t know. And I began to come here to the community center to the classes... bit by bit, I began to integrate into the community here at the community center. I began coming to the nutrition classes and began the computer class...And I came to the personal development classes and there I began to see the way that a woman is valuable as a person, as a human being, and I began to see life in a different way and that a woman has worth, or in other words, has value as a wife, as a mother. (Transcript I7, lines 34-45)

The data suggest that she found her voice at the community center. In the beginning of her interview, “Alejandra” told me about her childhood and how she ended up in Tijuana. Her



dad died when she was eight of alcoholism and her mom was an alcoholic as well. Her mom worked very hard to support her, but also hit her a lot and did not want her to have friends or go outside and play when she was a child. She comes from an abusive household and ended up falling in love and running away when she was just twelve years old with a twenty-two-year-old man who turned out to be abusive as well. He is very possessive and always wants her to be closed up inside the house. She got pregnant at the age of fourteen and says that she feels like her partner robbed her of her childhood. I share her story because it makes her words even more powerful. Given her history, it makes sense that she felt a lot of fear and did not speak with her neighbors. By slowly becoming more and more involved in the community center, she began to discover her worth as a woman. “I began to see the way that a woman is valuable as a person, as a human being, and I began to see life in a different way” (Transcript I7, lines 43-44). The data illustrate that she had never been taught or shown that she mattered as a human being until she became involved at the community center. Her words suggest that the community center can be a place of healing and growth.

These narratives reveal the sense of empowerment that these women have come to feel through their involvement with BAM. BAM did not come to the community with the specific intention of empowering women, but it seems to be a significant side effect of the actions of the organization. The data suggest that many different factors have led to this empowerment. The women received a dignified home and embraced the opportunity for them and their children to become educated and they have worked to create meaningful relationships with the volunteers and their neighbors. All of these things have played a role in their personal development and the growth of the community. Empowerment is not something that is placed upon a person; these women have made the conscious decision to seek better lives for their families and they work

very hard with BAM in their community. In doing so, they have been able to empower themselves and those around them.

**Empowerment through the work that they do.** The empowerment that I spoke about in the previous section is further demonstrated by the work that the women do in El Florido. Many of the women I interviewed are now a part of the BAM leadership team and are involved in coming up with ideas as well as in the decision making processes to improve their community. The data demonstrate that their work is empowering to themselves and to those around them: to those they inspire and to those they help. When I asked the women about their role in the community, they responded with descriptions of the various tasks and jobs that they do working with BAM. “Catalina,” who took it upon herself to start a second community center at her house for people who live far from the original one, describes her work below.

I work as a community advisor – going and meeting families that are in conditions of, we are going to call it extreme poverty, that can’t make a home for their kids to live in dignified way, listening to families that come to my house. They express their needs to us, that is first of all the housing, and through the housing need, through getting to know the families, we see that they have educational needs, and needs for many different kinds of support. (Transcript I3, lines 7-12)

She went from living in poverty herself to helping others break the cycle of poverty. She listens to the needs of other families and sees what BAM can do to help them. This is an incredible example of what I will call a “ripple of empowerment;” she is now using the gifts and confidence that she has gained to help others.

In the following passage, “Andrea” describes the role she plays in BAM and in her community.

I am in charge of when the groups come...on top of the schedules, how many people are coming? how much food we need? where are we going to work? I gather people from the community to work. I am also one of the people who goes to meet the new families; I love talking to the new families, asking about their lives--how many kids do you have? questions about their land, are your kids in school? how long have you lived here?...What

I like doing is listening to people--lots of people come and ask me questions and tell me their problems and I think of what I can do for them. (Transcript I1, lines 172-177; 189-190)

These words were spoken by the same woman who said, "Before I didn't have any sense of self-worth, I said, it was like I felt really insignificant; I said I couldn't do anything in life" (Transcript I1, lines 11-12). Now she is in charge of organizing visits for hundreds of people on the weekends as well as meeting new families and helping to decide who will qualify for a BAM house. People come to her for advice and support and she loves to welcome and listen to them. The data indicate that her work has contributed to her personal development and has helped build up her community.

The following two narratives demonstrate the love that two different women have for the work that they do with BAM. "Juana" expresses her contentment below.

And now, well, I am working for the community. It delights me; it is what I love. I honestly love it when they tell us to go visit families, to go search for homes to look for families. We will walk – it doesn't matter – to wherever we need to go...I want to be in all of the houses even if it isn't my duty to be there because it is my life, it is what I love, and I enjoy it. I give thanks to BAM for giving me the opportunity to be here, to be able to serve and to be able to see many families have their dreams fulfilled just like mine was...in my opinion BAM is perfect. I like to learn, I like to help, I like to serve. I love all of this and don't want to leave it, I really like being here. (Transcript I4, lines 91-94; 150-154; 426-427)

For anyone in the world, finding work that you are passionate about can be difficult and rare. The data display how much this woman loves her job. She says that her work is her life and she really likes being with BAM. She likes to serve others and see families achieve their dreams, just as she was able to achieve hers.

"Olivia" expresses a similar sentiment about her job as she describes what she does in the following passage.

I work in the community. I come here, I support the community center, we do like a type of social work, more or less...In my community, I organize people and people come to

my house when something happens...The neighbors know that they can count on me for whatever they need and I will always be there. I say, if you need me at night time, call me, and I will get up....We are humble, we are from a modest family, but in spite of having these conditions, we have always tried to support others...I think that God put me on this path; this is something that I have always wanted to do and now I have the opportunity to live it out and be in contact with the community...I am thankful to you all for giving us the opportunity to be here, to be able to give support and feel useful in something, and in what we like, because, from the bottom of my heart, I like being here. And now I am telling Gloria that I am going to study, I am going to study and I know that I am older, but I am going to study and I am going to serve my community a bit more if God allows. (Transcript I8, lines 72-78; 12-15; 138-141)

The determination and servant's heart of this woman is inspiring. She seems to make herself available to those who need her no matter the cost. The data indicate that social work like she does now is something she has always wanted to do and now she has been given that opportunity. She says, "this is something that I have always wanted to do and now I have the opportunity to live it out and be in contact with the community." She thanks BAM for allowing her to "feel useful in something" and in something that she likes. Feeling useful is an empowering feeling and it seems to have motivated "Olivia" to go back to school in order to be able to serve her community more. Both "Juana" and "Olivia" seem to be genuinely grateful to be working with BAM, saying, "I give thanks to BAM for giving me the opportunity to be here" and "I am thankful to you all for giving us the opportunity to be here."

Finally, "Camila," who teaches baking classes at the community center, says, "The service that I do here is helping to give baking classes and teaching. I feel very proud that several women here from BAM now know how to make empanadas and sell them" (Transcript I2, lines 19-21). She expresses her pride in her work and demonstrates how she has helped others by teaching them a skill. Like "Camila," the women all spoke with humility when they talked about their work, but with a certain amount of pride. They are now in a position where they can help other people and they do it daily. They have lived through similar moments and in similar

housing situations as their neighbors and understand what the people of the community need.

BAM has simply provided an opportunity, the women are the ones who took it upon themselves to step up and get involved. BAM places much of the power in the hands of the community members and I believe that this has allowed them to grow and to create change in a way that the community truly needs.

As a final note, the following quote demonstrates how becoming empowered has allowed the women I interviewed to, in turn, help and empower others. “Lucía” has taken many classes at the community center and now teaches a group of young girls how to style hair. She expresses her desire to pay what she has received forward, below.

I have so much I want to learn and I want to stay here, God willing, in BAM. I want to continue giving what they have taught me, all of the support I have received, to be able to share it. Here they have given so much to me and I don't want to keep this inside. I want for other people to also learn so much more and for them to come join here, together with us. (Transcript I6, lines 61-66)

It is almost like what she has learned and what she carries inside her is too big and wonderful not to share with others. She wants as many people as possible to learn more and join the community center she wants to be a part of their learning and create an open, welcoming environment for all.

### **Conclusions**

All of the themes that the women spoke of – the physical changes in their homes and communities, the impact and importance of education, the close relationships they have formed with volunteers and fellow community members, and the personal change and empowerment that they have experienced as a result of working with BAM – are interconnected and have each played a part in the transformation that has occurred in the El Florido community. The data reveal that the dignified homes have allowed the community members to focus on things that go

beyond basic necessities, such as pursuing an education. Participating in educational and vocational classes at the community center helps people to form relationships with their neighbors. The physical process of working together to build the homes also helps the community members to create relationships. Meaningful relationships with fellow community members and volunteers may encourage people to join more community center classes and give them motivation to work harder in school. Furthermore, having a dignified home allows a student to have a safe place to study and focus more on school. I believe that all of these elements connect and converge to lead to the women's empowerment that was demonstrated in the previous section; having a home to be proud of, receiving an education and creating meaningful and supportive relationships are all factors that can bring about empowerment.

Many people talk about the cyclical nature of *poverty*. Several of the women I interviewed inadvertently referred to the cycle of poverty through their comments about their seemingly stagnant economic situation: "I think that if my husband had worked for twenty more years, even if both of us worked, because we always took turns working, we still never would have had such a beautiful house" (Transcript I8, lines 64-66), and "I settled for what I had and worked in a factory and said, well, this is going to be my life: working in a factory. And my husband too, and there wasn't, there wasn't anything to do to be able to get ahead" (Transcript I1, lines 19-21). However, through this research and listening to the stories of these women, I have been able to witness the cyclical nature of *empowerment*. As demonstrated in the above section and the work that the women do in their community, becoming empowered has allowed these women to, in turn, empower others; in other words, empowerment begets empowerment. The data suggest that the women in the community support each other, love each other, encourage each other, and have played a big role in the change that has occurred in their

neighborhood. I believe that the support of BAM and the dedication of the community women have helped to diminish the cycle of poverty that many people in Tijuana seem to be stuck in and instead have created a cycle of empowerment.

Finally, seven out of the eleven women that I interviewed thanked me for interviewing them; one woman said, “I want to thank you for being here with us and that you took us into account in something that is so important in your schooling. It’s something that we want to help you with and we do so with a lot of love” (Transcript I1, lines 195-197) and another said, “thank you, Katie, for this. I feel very fortunate that you have chosen me for this” (Transcript I10, line 41); and yet another, “Thank you for choosing me to share something about myself” (Transcript I2, line 60). Their words and unexpected gratitude indicate that perhaps, in the very act of doing my thesis, I am carrying out one of the BAM values to build confidence and make a space for people to be heard.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions - Spanish

- 1) ¿Cómo te llamas?
- 2) ¿Cuántos años tienes?
- 3) ¿Con quién vives? ¿Cuántos hijos tienes?
- 4) ¿Por cuántos años has vivido en tu casa de BAM? ¿Qué numero?
- 5) ¿Qué trabajo haces en la comunidad?
- 6) ¿Me puedes explicar un poco sobre el cambio que ocurrió en tu vida después de recibir una casa o después de empezar a trabajar con BAM?
- 7) ¿Has visto un cambio en tu comunidad después de que llegara BAM?
- 8) ¿Ha cambiado tu relación con tus vecinos o con tu propia familia?
- 9) ¿Cómo son las relaciones que tienes con los Americanos? ¿Estas relaciones han cambiado tu vida de alguna manera?
- 10) ¿Crees que tú has cambiado la vida o has inspirada a un Americano o un voluntario? ¿Y cómo te sientes acerca de saber que has tocado el corazón de otra persona?
- 11) ¿Qué crees que es tu rol en la comunidad?
- 12) ¿Crees que BAM respeta y toma en cuenta las necesidades de la comunidad?
- 13) ¿Cómo crees que podríamos mejorar la organización de BAM

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions - English

- 1) What is your name?
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) Who do you live with? How many kids do you have?
- 4) For how many years have you lived in your BAM house? What number?
- 5) What work do you do in the community?
- 6) Can you explain to me a little bit about the change that occurred in your life after receiving a house or after starting to work with BAM?
- 7) Have you seen a change in your community since BAM arrived?
- 8) Have your relationships with your neighbors or with your own family changed?
- 9) How are the relationships that you have with the Americans? Have those relationships changed your life in some way?
- 10) Do you think that you have changed the life of or inspired a volunteer? And how do you feel knowing that you have touched the heart of another person?
- 11) What do you think your role is in the community?
- 12) Do you think that BAM respects and takes into account the needs of the community?
- 13) How do you think that we could improve the BAM organization?

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form – Spanish

#### Consentimiento por Escrito

Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

#### Loyola Marymount University

- 1) Yo doy permiso a Katie incluirme en su investigación:  
Build A Miracle: construyendo casas y construyendo relaciones--la perspectiva de una comunidad.
- 2) Me ha pedido participar en una entrevista para hablar de BAM que va a durar más o menos 30 minutos.
- 3) Me ha explicado que soy parte de esta investigación porque soy miembro de la comunidad de El Florido.
- 4) Entiendo que voy a compartir parte de mi historia con Katie y ella me hará preguntas. Katie me ha explicado lo que voy a hacer.
- 5) Entiendo que ella va a grabar mi voz y sacar fotos. Me explicó que va a usar las grabaciones sólo para la investigación y no va a revelar mi identidad. Ella va a destruir las grabaciones después de la investigación. Tengo derecho a escuchar a las grabaciones y decidir si ella las puede usar.
- 6) Entiendo que me puedo sentir emocional o avergonzada durante la investigación.
- 7) También entiendo que esta investigación puede ser beneficioso porque mi historia puede ayudar a los demás.
- 8) Entiendo que el correo de Susie, la profesora de Katie, es Susan.McDaniel@lmu.edu y puedo hablar con ella si tengo preguntas o dudas.
- 9) Si la investigación cambia de alguna manera, Katie me va a avisar y voy a dar mi consentimiento otra vez.
- 10) Entiendo que tengo el derecho de negar de participar en la investigación sin consecuencia.
- 11) Entiendo que la investigadora puede dejar de utilizarme para la investigación antes del final de ella.
- 13) Entiendo que tengo el derecho de negar de contestar a cualquier pregunta que no quiero contestar.

Firma \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

Firma del Testigo \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form – English

Date of Preparation \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Loyola Marymount University**

- 1) I hereby authorize Katie to include me in the following research study:  
Build A Miracle: Building homes and building relationships--a community perspective.
- 2) I have been asked to participate in an interview to talk about Build A Miracle which will last for approximately 30 minutes.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am a member of the El Florido community.
- 4) I understand that if I am a subject, I will share my story with Katie.  
Katie will ask me some questions.  
These procedures have been explained to me by Katie, the primary investigator
- 5) I understand that I will be audiotaped and photographed in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.
- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: I may feel emotional about my story and it may trigger a painful memory; I may be embarrassed to share my story.
- 7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are that my story will help others by offering my point of view.
- 8) I understand that Susie, Katie's advisor who can be reached at Susan.McDaniel@lmu.edu, will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 9) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.
- 10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice.
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.

Subject's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights – Spanish

#### Declaración de Derechos

De acuerdo con “California Health and Safety Code §24172,” entiendo que tengo los siguientes derechos como participante en una investigación:

- 1) Voy a ser informado de la naturaleza y del propósito de la investigación
- 2) Voy a recibir una explicación de los riesgos e incomodidades que pueden ser parte de la investigación.
- 3) Voy a recibir una explicación de los beneficios que puedo esperar de participar en la investigación.
- 4) Voy a tener la oportunidad de hacer preguntas sobre la investigación o el procedimiento de ella.
- 5) Voy a recibir confirmación de que tengo el derecho de negar de participar en la investigación en cualquier momento sin perjuicio ni consecuencia.
- 6) Voy a recibir una copia del documento de consentimiento con firma y fechas.
- 7) Tendré el derecho de consentir o de no consentir sin perjuicio ni consecuencias.

## Appendix F

### Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights – English

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

- 1) I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.
- 2) I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.
- 3) I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study.
- 4) I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.
- 5) I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.
- 6) I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.
- 7) I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without prejudice or consequences.