

# Natural Family Planning

## Diocesan Activity Report

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### NFP PIONEERS: The Story of The Family of the Americas

The daughter of a Guatemalan father and an American mother, Mercedes Wilson, founder of The Family of the Americas, grew up in Guatemala. Although Mrs. Wilson has spent the past twenty years in the United States, she is no stranger to other lands. She also lived in such diverse places as the Middle East, England, and even Australia. This international spirit has contributed to the unique character of the Family of the Americas, a non-profit organization dedicated to the service of the family through NFP education and other fertility appreciation programs.

In 1968, while living in Australia, Mercedes Wilson first learned about the natural signs of fertility. Having read an article in the local paper about a new natural method of family planning, she visited a center where the Ovulation

Method was being taught by Dr. Evelyn Billings. To her amazement, in less than half an hour, she learned this simple and safe method that enables a woman to postpone pregnancy without endangering her physical and emotional health with chemical agents or dangerous devices.

After learning the basic information, Mrs. Wilson wondered why such vital facts had not been brought to the attention of all women. She wanted to share this well kept secret with other couples.

In the beginning Mrs. Wilson worked with the originators of the Ovulation Method during its develop-

mental stages in the 1970's. She was especially interested in simplifying the teaching technique so that it would be easily understood by people of different cultures, especially those in the developing countries. With this in mind, Mrs. Wilson began to design a client record-



Mercedes Wilson, founder of the Family of The Americas.

keeping system which is now used all over the world. These efforts and her continued interest and enthusiasm led her to establish an organization through which she could share her knowledge.

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*we have the second in our series on the history of the various NFP providers in the country. We also feature a column on NFP outreach to Catholic immigrants which we hope will spark a discussion on this important need.*

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Family of the Americas Foundation (FAF) was that organization.

Incorporated in 1977, FAF is guided by a Board of Directors, a Board of Trustees, and an Advisory Board. What started as a small, local teaching center

has now developed into an international organization with offices in Maryland, Louisiana, and Guatemala. FAF has a staff of seven full-time, four part-time and several volunteer workers who have extensive experience in carrying out client services,

teacher training, and educational programs in over 100 countries. The FAF office/teaching headquarters is a 3,000 square foot facility located on 20 acres of land in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. Besides offices and conference rooms, the Foundation has a complete audio/visual production facility, comprising 525 square feet, which utilizes broadcast quality color video equipment.

FAF offers various programs, many of which encourage parents to meet their mutual responsibilities to each other and to their children. Fundamental to the purposes of FAF are educational programs on the responsibilities of sexuality and parenting. FAF's education programs have been developed with the input of expert educational consultants and evaluators, and implemented by faculty who are world-renowned for their knowledge and expertise in the fields of pediatrics, genetics, psychiatry, psychology, family and child development, economics/population studies, and natural family planning.

NFP programs have been the Foundation's principal emphasis, with training and materials being offered on a worldwide basis. FAF entered into a Cooperative Agreement with the United

States Agency for International Development (USAID) for \$1.8 million in 1984. FAF has been responsible for preparing over 2,400 teacher trainers in the Ovulation Method from 44 developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Since then, courses have been taught in English, Spanish, French, and Chinese. Materials are also being distributed in Portuguese, Italian, German, Korean, Japanese, Swahili, and Arabic. Three other translations have just been completed and are in the

process of being published in Slovakian, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian.

The Foundation's major goal in providing OM training programs has been to maintain the simplicity of the Ovulation Method while providing teachers with the technical knowledge, the scientific background, and the practical experience necessary for teaching in a standardized simple manner. The training is offered by the finest experts in the Ovulation Method in the U.S. Training programs are held in FAF's Maryland headquarters twice annually. The next training program is scheduled for August 23-28, 1992. This training program is also available as a correspondence course complete with 8 hours of video and a comprehensive manual with teaching slides and posters.

Most recently, the strength of the FAF training program has been evidenced by extremely favorable data from a three-year research study of the effectiveness of the Ovulation Method conducted in Shanghai, the People's Republic of China. Chinese medical personnel who received training from FAF faculty participated in the clinical study. Instruction in OM was received by nearly 700 couples, who were monitored for at least three years. The study reported an

effectiveness rate for OM of 98.9% and a continuation rate of 87.9%.

Family of the Americas has also done special work among adolescents through its "Fertility Appreciation for Families" program, funded by a \$1.2 million dollar grant from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) from 1983 to 1987 under the Adolescent Family Life Act. This program for parents and adolescents promoted family-centered sexuality education, helping parents to assume their role as the principal educators of their children in matters of human sexuality. By the end of the program nearly 2,500 adult participants and over 3,500 adolescents had been reached. Significantly, this program was able to drastically reduce the incidence of pregnancies among unwed teenagers, ages 15-19, to around 5 pregnancies per thousand. This was substantiated by an independent report of two University of New Orleans researchers who compared similar statistics from other sources for the same group and time period. Their report indicated that in similar study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute approximately 96 pregnancies per thousand was typical while a Planned Parenthood program with teens incurred around 113 pregnancies per thousand. This is a clear indication that FAF has an overwhelmingly successful parenting program that helps teens become responsible while lowering out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

FAF has also sponsored International Congresses for the Family to raise awareness of social issues affecting the family. Sixteen such Congresses have been held in various major cities worldwide with thousands of participants of each Congress. Honored guests and participants at the Congresses included the wife of the Prime Minister of France, the Queen of Spain, the King, Queen and Princess of Belgium, Members of Royalty of Austria, Minister of Health in Germany, Princess Diana of England and on several occasions Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

For further information on materials, teacher training sessions, etc., contact: FAF, P.O. Box 1170, Dunkirk, MD 20754; 301-627-3346; FAX 301-741-6019. ■

