

Ahead With Education (AWE) History



Ahead With Education (AWE) began as an insatiable desire to provide realistic opportunities for the overwhelmingly economically challenged youth of Rio Bravo, Mexico. Getting an education beyond the sixth grade in this area is extremely difficult and rarely accomplished. Bringing hope to a very hard place is at the core of the AWE scholarship program. Larry Acton, retired UMC Pastor, Oklahoma VIM Director, and founder of AWE, envisioned one way for the young people of Rio Bravo to overcome the impoverished conditions was to receive an education.

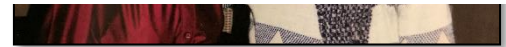
In the past, Larry organized and led hundreds of mission teams around the world creating friendships and Christian ministry partners everywhere he served. Two such friends, Mable Clare and Elizabeth Davis, were visionaries of hope just like Larry and his wife Rose. They were sisters and US citizens ministering to the citizens of Neuvo Progreso, a town close to the US border and not far from Rio Bravo.

Mable and Elizabeth sought to minister to those that were hungry, uneducated, and the poorest of the poor. These loving, generous women dreamed of building a medical clinic, giving educational scholarships, and feeding the hungry. Although AWE's path took a different route, the goal was the same—

- To equip young people to become assets to his/her people and
- To move the young person from the throes of economical poverty



Mable Clare and Elizabeth Davis



Rose & Larry Acton celebrate with a graduate and her mother.



From conversations between these humanitarian servants, the impetus for the ministry of AWE was birthed.

In the beginning, Rio Bravo family connections were made through the ministry Manos Juntas (Hands Together) Mexico (MJM), a certified charitable non-governmental organization that Larry initiated. Manos Juntas is a service ministry to the area for housing and medical needs of those living in abject poverty.

Many of the Manos Juntas Mexico missionaries wanted to make a positive difference in the lives of the children they came into contact with while building casitas or working in the MJM medical clinic.



Marie (far left), Marielena (center), Blanca (3rd from the right), David Jr. (2nd from right), and David Sr. (far right)

Following numerous discussions, Larry and his wife Rose felt led to provide educational assistance for a family who just received a new small house, a Casita. David, the father, Marielena the mother and their four children were the new homeowners. The home consisted of a small 12 x 13 mason block structure. A castle compared to the very small, dirt floored, wooden shed previously occupied.

Informally in 2000, three of the four children, Marie, David and Blanca became the first to receive educational scholarships.

The Acton's knew that their good friends Eduardo and Norma, residents of Rio Bravo, shared the same concerns of the educational challenges these children, youth and young adults faced each day. Norma Linañ de Montelongo, a local school teacher at that time, was asked to consider monitoring Marie, David and Blanca. She graciously agreed to manage the distribution of the scholarships and to make sure that all three children were attending school and passing their studies.

The challenge to assist with more students grew. Larry and Rose had their adult children visit Rio Bravo and each child accepted the opportunity to provide one or more scholarships for academically sound students who needed the hope and support a scholarship would provide.

The opportunity to provide scholarships was mentioned at the next Manos Juntas mission. Many of the missionaries from that team expressed their desire to be a difference maker. A helping hand in the life of a student from the unimaginable poverty in which they lived.



Norma Linañ de Montelongo (background) visits with a scholarship students' family.



The Segundo Family (2005)

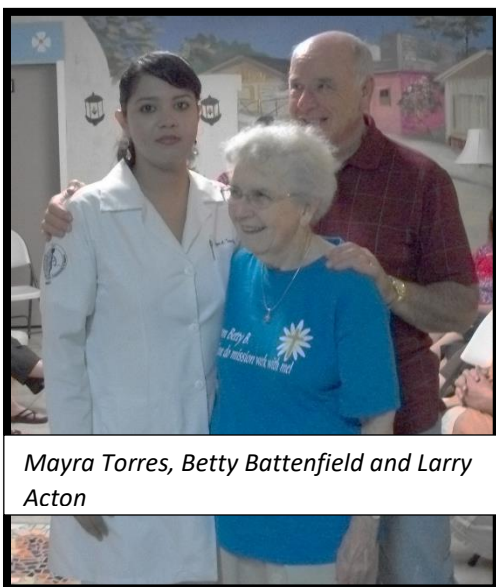


In 2005, a Casita was built in honor of Mrs. Ruby Findley. It was for the Segundo family, a family with five girls and one boy. This family of eight lived in a dirt floored hut sharing a very small space to sleep and eat. The father Manuel Segundo, provided support for the girls to finish their education, an uncommon effort within their culture. The Casita building team believed they could support Anna in Jr. High, with the understanding that they would begin support for Carmen when she finished elementary school.

An interesting story about the funding for the Segundo girls' scholarship is tied to Mrs. Findley's automobile. Ruth Findley died in 2006 one year after the Segundo Casita was built. The Acton's had previously sold a car to Mrs. Findley and after her death the family did not want it. The car was returned to Larry and Rose. They

sold the car a second time and the money was used to fund Anna Segundo's scholarship. From an impossible situation for these young ladies, the selling of a car led them to high school and later college diplomas.

Three years later the Northwest Arkansas United Methodist Women sought out Norma Linañ to find a student in need. Norma had that very special someone. They were introduced to Mayra Torres a pre-med student. After meeting her, they immediately accepted her as a scholarship student with the promise to support her through college and med school. They made a monumental decision to sponsor Mayra in her pre-med studies as well as medical school.



Mayra Torres, Betty Battenfield and Larry Acton

The United Methodist Women kept their commitment. Mayra finished her studies and residency. Today, she serves as a surgeon with a highly respected team of surgeons in Mexico City.

Mayra is one of the most notable students but since that time, AWE has witnessed several college graduates in the fields of medicine, teaching, engineering, business and law.

From there, the program quickly grew in the number of students as did financial sponsorship. All along the way, the work load of managing the informal organization grew exponentially. Norma, who was still teaching continued to graciously minister with a generous loving spirit. By the end of the first full year of AWE, there were seven students

on scholarship, under the supervision of Norma Linañ. To this day, Norma continues to volunteer

her service. She serves as the Program Coordinator with gifts of administration and encouragement to students, pushing them forward to excellence. She is highly respected by all.

Realizing that girls were at a big disadvantage for receiving an education due to cultural mindsets for the area, the focus for scholarship nominations, in the beginning, leaned toward girls who were finishing elementary school.

Jasper United Methodist Church opened an account solely for scholarship contributions and disbursement. As AWE experienced great support from individuals willing to provide a scholarship, the need for a provisional board to assist in the development of the association evolved.

A provisional board was formed in 2007 and guidelines established. These four guidelines remain in place:

- Keep the focus on the student
- Guarantee that 100% of each scholarship donation goes to the student
- Partner students with sponsors
- Hold students accountable for a C+ grade average

The provisional board members included Norma Linañ, Norma Casad, Betty Battenfield, Art Mires, Edra Edwards, Larry Acton and Emily Joliff.

Other families in need of assistance were identified and matched with financial sponsors. Within a few short years a difference could be seen in many lives and in the community of Rio Bravo.

Fortunately, the association continues to increase in numbers for students and sponsors. In February of each year, an adult mission team serves in Rio Bravo. During the mission, a banquet is given to celebrate the students and to provide an opportunity for AWE sponsors to visit with their students and their students' families.

Throughout the years, many student testimonies are heard at the banquet of how the support from AWE changed their lives and the lives of their families. These students became assets to their community instead of liabilities.

At a recent banquet, a young female doctor testified she would not have been able to finish high school, much less college and medical school, had it not been for the encouragement of her family and the AWE scholarships she received

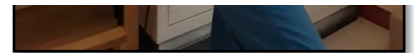
The provisional board slowly evolved into what is now the official Board of Trustees. In 2017 AWE received the US Federal regulation status of a 501c3 charity association. A reason for celebration arose in each person whose life has been touched and changed through these efforts.

In 2019, we provided 48 scholarships to students from kindergarten through college diploma. AWE has approximately 75 Donors at present. The scholarships cover most of the financial burden for school attendance, such as administrative fees, books and supplies. The family and student are expected to contribute to the cost of their education. It is AWE's belief that charitable gifts alone do not create pride of accomplishment in the student. Therefore, AWE partners with them to support them prayerfully and financially. AWE proudly proclaims 100% of Donor scholarship contributions are applied to student scholarships. Organizational support is provided by Volunteers only.

Creating self-worth, confidence and a positive outlook for young people who are drowning in economic challenges is priceless.



Beatriz Melchor Jimenez, 2020 AWE scholarship graduate celebrating her first day as a Dentist in Rio Bravo



Ida points to herself as a little girl in elementary school and then celebrating with her Mother her High School graduation.

May the story of changed lives continue...