



If I had a Hammer

Building a better future in Ciudad Juárez

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Home to Fort Bliss and a massive contingent of U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers, El Paso, Texas, ranks among America's safest cities. Including the surrounding county, it saw just 18 murders in 2009, all but four of which have been solved.

Just a stone's throw—or perhaps a pistol shot—away, lies Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the murder capital of the world. In 2009, 2,600 people were murdered in the city, some in drive-by shootings, some in raging turf battles between competing drug lords, some in the ongoing war between drug cartels and the Mexican army. Nearly all the murders remain unsolved.

So why does Eagle Scout Justin Churchman travel regularly from El Paso to Juárez? One simple reason, seven familiar words: "to help other people at all times."

Although he's only 17, Justin has helped build more than a dozen houses for impoverished Juárez families with El Paso-based charity Casas por Cristos (literally "Houses Because of Christ"). "The first time I saw someone cry because their family now had a house, I knew I had to go back," Justin wrote in an *El Paso Times* op-ed piece. "The first time I saw someone realize their children would stay warm and dry that night, I knew I had to go back."

And go back he has. In snow, in rain, and in blazing heat, he has built houses for people who previously lived in shacks cobbled together from shipping pallets, cardboard, scrap lumber, and even cast-off hubcaps and tabletops. Recently, in fact, he worked on his fourteenth Casas house.

“I’ve done a couple of builds with him, and it isn’t easy,” said his mother, Laurie Paternoster. “To think that he would rather spend a three-day weekend doing that than hanging out with his friends is amazing.”

Paternoster said the violence that has scared off other volunteers has only made Justin more committed to Casas’ mission. “He felt like if nobody else was going to come because of the fear that he had a moral responsibility to do his part,” she said. “So he built more in the last two years than he had before.”

A proud but still cautious mom, Paternoster pointed out that Casas does everything possible to minimize the risk to its volunteers and staff. “They go over just the outskirts bridges, and they only build out in the desert,” she said. “If they’re coming back across the border at night, they always leave the site by 4 o’clock so they’re coming back in the daytime.”

Meanwhile, Justin is less concerned. “I’m very spiritual, and I believe that God wouldn’t let me go over or he would let something cancel a build if there was any danger,” he said.

Justin discovered his house-building passion quite by accident in 2005, when his seventh-grade class from St. Clement’s Parish School traveled to Juárez to build a house. Watching the new homeowner pound in the ceremonial last nail, Justin was hooked. “I can’t really explain it other than it was life-changing for me and made me realize that I would want to come back every chance I got,” he said. “All the people who had their hearts in what they were doing actually came out with a bigger reward than the family that got the house.”

When it came time to choose an Eagle Scout service project the next year, there was little doubt what Justin would do, although both his parents and his Scout leaders pointed out the challenges he would face. “He had to raise the money, he had to recruit the team, he had to do all the paperwork, he had to get the vehicles and arrange food for three days, he had to make sure they had all the proper equipment and parent permissions,” Paternoster said.

What’s more, the leaders of Troop 82 wanted to make sure Scouts who couldn’t travel to Juárez were still able to participate. So Justin added a school-supplies drive to his project. In the end, he raised \$6,000, recruited 30 volunteers, and built a three-room house in three days. His older sister, Megan, worked alongside him, leading parts of the project in order to complete her Gold Award in Girl Scouting.

“He was great,” said Amy Lowrey, Casas’ director of programming and scheduling. “He would call us on the phone, and he would have a list of questions. The thing that was helpful was that he actually read all our materials. He was super well prepared.”

Since completing that house, Justin has become Casas’ first and only junior intern. (Regular interns have to be at least 20 years old.) In that role, Justin has an open invitation to join building teams whenever he’s free. Casas attracts church, school, and business groups from around the country, and when a team needs an extra hand, Justin joins them. “He has an open-door policy to come with any of our staff and join a group and be with us for the week,” Lowrey said.

In March, Justin joined an all-adult team from Fairfield, Texas, that Lowrey was working with. “I sent him up on the roof, and he actually taught them to do the roof,” she said. “I didn’t even have to explain it. He led that whole project. It was neat to see a teenager take charge and lead adults.”

Not surprisingly, the adults—all of whom were in their 40s or older—were impressed. “They just took to him immediately; it was as if he’d known them forever,” Lowrey said. “Most of them said, ‘We wish our children were more like you,’ and one man said, ‘I wish my grandchildren were more like you.’”

After graduating from Coronado High School this year, Justin will soon leave for college. (He hopes to attend the U.S. Naval Academy.) That doesn’t mean he’s built his last house for Casas, however. In fact, he dreams of serving in the Marine Corps and then starting his own business so he can donate his military pension to Casas.

In the meantime, there’s little doubt where you’ll find Justin on long weekends and holiday breaks. Last year, when he was about to turn 16, his mom offered to throw a special party—a tradition in south Texas. “He said, ‘You know, I can’t think of a better thing for my birthday than to give a gift to someone else, so I’m going to go build,’” Paternoster recalled. “I was already a proud mom, but that pretty much brought me to tears.”

On March 13, gunmen in Juárez killed three people associated with the American consulate, including a man and his pregnant wife who were shot to death in front of their one-year-old baby. Two days later, Justin crossed the border to begin work on his fourteenth Casas house, more determined than ever to build a better future for his Mexican neighbors.

About Casas por Cristos (sidebar)

Founded in 1993, Casas por Cristos has built nearly 4,000 houses in Juárez and Acuña (across the border from Del Rio, Texas). Each house is built and paid for by a team of volunteers from a church, college, business, or other organization. Casas has attracted teams from across the United States and Canada, and this summer is hosting its first team from England.

A team of 12-18 volunteers can build a “single”—a two-room house for a family of five or less members—in three days. The cost is \$4,100 in Juárez and \$4,500 in Acuña, although some teams pay an extra \$300 to order a concrete truck. (Otherwise, they mix concrete by hand.) Larger teams with larger budgets build “doubles,” which have three rooms and space for families of six or more.

The wood-framed, stucco houses feature a concrete foundation, doors and windows, insulation, drywall, and a ceiling fan. There’s no plumbing because most families have an existing outhouse and don’t have access to sewage systems.

“These houses aren’t mansions, but they’re good for the land these families own,” Lowrey said.

For more information, visit www.casasporcristo.org.