

# True Friends co-op growing in Philippines

■ **Local woman brings hand-sewn items to Choctaw County for her ministry in Montalban**

By **Dee Ann Campbell**  
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — “People ask me how I can go and live there, with no hot water and all of that,” she says. “But those people have been good to me, and they need me.”

Since her first trip to their poverty-stricken area of Montalban, Philippines, Carolanne Corbett has felt drawn to the people there, and she has been determined to do whatever she could to make a difference in their lives. For four years now, she has been the driving force behind an effort to give them a sense of self-sufficiency that will carry on through the generations.

Working through a Catholic ministry project called ‘He Cares’, Corbett has been spending several months each year offering her assistance to an area of the Philippines that is fraught with problems. In a country with a 40% poverty rate, the Philippine Islands are home to a large population of people with very little to call their own. Among the neediest are the poverty-stricken families in a town called Montalban, a remote area about 30 miles from Manila.

“They are far away from any jobs, and they can’t travel to the city to work,” Corbett told the Sun in an interview last year. “They have almost no way to make a living.”

But Corbett’s mission is about more than just offering charity and providing for their needs. It is about teaching them to provide for their own. Through the He Cares ministry, Corbett has set up her own ministry to teach the people usable skills that can be marketed to the public.

Corbett first traveled to the Philippines to visit her brother Michael Corbett, who works for the U.S. Department of State as a security officer at the American embassy. It was during a visit with her brother that she became involved with the He Cares project in Montalban.

“My sister-in-law Judy is a nurse practitioner who also works at the embassy,” explained Corbett, “and she invited me to volunteer with her one Saturday.”

A talented seamstress, Corbett soon began her first efforts to teach the young mothers in Montalban a new skill that would help them to provide for their families. Beginning with only four women, she began to teach sewing in hopes that they could produce items to sell in order to provide for their families. The cooperative effort has now grown to more than 20 people.

Corbett’s efforts to help the people of Mon-



Submitted photos  
Carolanne Corbett, seated in chair, is pictured in the Philippines during a gathering in one of the block homes in Montalban last year.



A young Filipino girl admires a Barbie® dressed in clothing made by members of the co-op.



One of two quilts made by co-op members that was sold in Butler recently.



This quilt brought in some much-needed income for the women of Montalban. Because it sold quickly in Choctaw County, the women are now working on more quilts as part of their co-op projects.

talban meant that she herself would be living in their area. With no hot water, no modern conven-

iences, and little resources, she has lived alongside the Filipino women and garnered what help she could for her sewing projects.

“At first, I used my own sewing machine,”

she said. “And there was one already there. Then a friend from California gave us \$200 to buy five more machines, and a visitor from Canada donated 12 more. It was amazing to see it grow.”

Over the past year, the women have become proficient in making such items as Barbie® clothes, Rosary beads and bags, jewelry, quilted purses, and, more recently quilts.

“We’ve formed our own co-op,” Corbett says. “It’s called True Friends. Now there are 24 members in the co-op — five ladies are making jewelry, 15 are sewing, and some are doing other specialty crafts. Some of them are the same ones we started with, and some are new members.”

In addition to the ladies in the co-op, Corbett says that she also has one local man who joined the effort.

“Years ago, the husband of one of the ladies in the group had taken up tailoring,” Corbett explains. “But he wasn’t doing anything with it. Now his wife is involved in making uniforms for school children, and he is sewing, too.”

Although they now have the skills to do the job, materials for their business are not often readily available. Much of their materials comes from donations through the He Cares Foundation.

“We take big t-shirts that have been donated and make lots of little shirts and shorts out of them,” Corbett explains.

“Or they can take old clothes and use them to make other things.”

Of the many items now being produced by the co-op, perhaps the most successful item has been the unique, hand-made doll clothes. Although they had struggled with the task at first, Corbett says they have now taken the job and ran with it.

“I just give them a ball of yarn and they do it,” she says with pride. “They can create some of the most amazing things with just a simple ball of yarn.”

Despite their hard work, Corbett says that life for the Montalban families is still a struggle.

“Some of them work all night,” she says. “But even if they do, they might make 50 bucks, if they are lucky.”

Because of the lack of income for the families, Corbett is now trying to set up more opportunities for them to sell their products, both in the Philippines and in the United States.

In September, Corbett returned to the United States, spending much of her time at home with relatives in Choctaw County. But while she has been home, her ministry has continued.

Bringing with her many of the items made in the Philippines, she has attended local festivals and craft shows in an effort to market the items to send the money back to her students in Montalban.

Among the items Corbett brought with her to Choctaw County were two hand-made quilts, the first of what could now become money-making items for the Philippine women.

“They used to not think too much about making quilts because there is just not much of a need for them where they live,” she explains. “But they were amazed that I got so much money for the ones I brought with me. A lady at the Butler Senior Center bought both of them. Now I’ve got orders for more, and they are working on them now.”

Corbett says that since she has been working with the group, they have grown increasingly creative in the design of their hand-sewn items.

“They are now doing embroidery on Western shirts,” Corbett says, holding up one their intricately-decorated shirts. “These did not sell well here for some reason, but I think they will eventually.”

While she has been back in the United States, her students in Montalban have continued to work and are now coming up with items to create on their own.

“They just sent me a box of some of the things they are making now,” Corbett says with pride. “They are getting so creative in what they are making.”

“I’m sending them a box of things,” she adds. “I’m putting in things like material, shoes, clothes, and Barbies® for them to use for measuring. I haven’t gotten it nearly 1/2 full yet, but I’m working on it.”

With her ministry in the Philippines growing into what could one day be a thriving enterprise for an ultra-poor area, Corbett remains determined to offer them that opportunity. It is, she says, a way to move them from poverty to self-sufficiency. For as long as it takes, she says, she plans to be a part of that effort.

“I’m going back there in March,” says Corbett. “I’m going to get a year’s VISA this time. I feel like these are my people, my friends. That’s why we call our co-op ‘True Friends.’”

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