

# Chiapas Connection

Spring 2022

## Sister Connie Celebrates 40 Years of Profession

Sister Consuelo (Connie) Arana is lovingly regarded by the Sisters and the people of Palenque as one of the “founding mothers” of our presence in Palenque. She has been part of the Parish pastoral team for more than 30 years and has served as the local minister of the Sisters in Palenque.



A member of St. Francis Province of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity based in Redwood City, California, Sister Connie professed her first vows as a Franciscan Sister on August 8, 1982. However, it was in 1991 that she would begin to leave her indelible mark on Palenque when she, along with Sisters Marilyn Archer (Holy Name Province) and Antonia Anthony (Sacred Heart Province) were sent by the leadership of the three United States provinces to search for a location for a future mission in Mexico.

By 1992, they settled in Palenque and began their ministry of religious education, including the preparation of catechists, education for adults, and the preparation for religious ceremonies which continues to be the main focus of their ministry today. This was not and is not a simple task as the indigenous peoples of the area are Mayan and include four, distinct native language groups. Spanish, the official language of Mexico, is foreign to the indigenous.

The Franciscan sisters, deeply trusted and admired by the indigenous women, soon were asked for help with learning Spanish as a second language and organizing co-operatives for baking bread, growing chili, and raising chickens and rabbits. When young indigenous women, attracted to religious life as it was lived out by the sisters, asked to be part of this life of prayer and service, our sisters responded with the wisdom of Magdalen Damen, the foundress of the order, “Let us try to serve the good God together.”

Among our sisters in Palenque, Leticia (Leti) Perez Hernández was the first indigenous woman under Sr. Connie’s guidance to make final vows in February 2005. She was later joined by Micaela (Mika) Mendez Vasquez and Candida (Candi) Gonzales Jimenez. After making her first profession in 2014, Sister Ilce Lopez Gomez is preparing for her final vows this autumn.

Over the years, Sister Connie has worn many hats beyond that of formation director and general coordinator of the Palenque community. She facilitates liturgy education, prepares coordinators to teach Confirmation, offers pastoral care and community retreats to families and advocates for patients. She has witnessed the blossoming leadership capabilities of the sisters in her care. Leti, Candi and Ilce are trained in nursing, which will be useful in the growth of the medical clinic. With this in mind, Sister Candi also obtained a degree in Business Administration. Meanwhile Sister Mika has a degree in Theology and continues her vast pastoral work with 34 village communities.



(L-R) Sisters Leti, Connie, Mika, Candi and Ilce)

**Go Where the Spirit is Sending You!**

## Clínica Familiar Lak Ña Clara Update

Over the years, the sisters have been able to identify and respond to a variety of community needs; one leading to the start of the biannual medical mission in 1996. The missions that have been on “pause” for two years due to COVID-19 may possibly resume in autumn of 2022.

When Sister Connie first arrived in Palenque in 1991, she would never have imagined the installation of 11 Clinic-In-A-Can (CIAC) pre-assembled containers that have now formed Clínica Familiar Lak Ña Clara, a permanent medical facility on the sisters’ Palenque property. The containers arrived in December 2020, and house a laboratory, x-ray room, advanced mother-infant unit, four consultation rooms, and a double surgical suite with two surgery rooms, recovery room, and pre-op section with a dressing room, bathroom, shower area, and lockers.

Sister Connie had left Palenque for California in early 2020 and, because of the pandemic, wasn’t able to return until February 2021. Even though she was only able to stay for two weeks, she left encouraged by the leadership shown by the young sisters. Returning to Palenque in December 2021, she was no doubt astounded by all that had been accomplished. The permaculture project and greenhouse to grow vegetables, fruit, and medicinal plants were complete. A small lake made up of two natural springs now provides fresh water. Walkways, lighting and parking for an ambulance are complete. The legal work of establishing the business, non-profit and corporation parameters has been finished, and a board of directors is in place with Associate Lourdes Caracoza from



the St. Francis Province in California serving as chairperson. Key administrative positions have been filled and the sisters have established collaborative relationships with the local hospital and other health care providers. Nearing completion is the renovation of the old dispensary building that will house the administrative offices.

The final inspection by the Department of Health will clear the way for a soft opening of the clinic this spring. Even so, there are still some formidable obstacles to overcome. While the CIAC containers were waiting for customs clearance in a Houston shipyard, they sustained damage from tropical storm Cristobal and the surgical unit flooring still needs to be replaced. Furthermore, Mexican customs denied entry of 13 pieces of medical equipment. Interim Administrator, Claudia Sierra, is working with various agencies to finish this work.

Understanding the wise words of Mexican Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, “We are each called to be faithful to God in our time and place in history,” the Sisters of St. Francis responded enthusiastically knowing that change is created only with understanding. Their presence with the indigenous people of Chiapas was their answer to the call to “Go where the Spirit is sending you!” And now, as Sister Connie prepares to celebrate her 40th Jubilee, she

can look back at her early journey to plant a seed of Franciscan ministry in Mexico and witness its growth from the tender care provided by the Franciscan Sisters. Indeed, it has been a harvest far greater than one could imagine!



### Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity Chiapas Medical Mission

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