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DeWitt resident's orphanage continues to grow

Shinsky's lifelong dream celebrates first anniversary

By *KEN PALMER*
kpalmer@lsj.com

DeWITT - John Shinsky realized his lifelong dream of opening his own orphanage last fall, when City of the Children opened its doors in Matamoros, Mexico.

Now, the former Michigan State University football standout is focused on making it grow.

"We now have 38 kids," said Shinsky, 58, of DeWitt, who still teaches at Grand Valley State University. "We can house up to 45. Eventually, we want to add enough buildings to have up to 120 children."

Eighteen orphans from Matamoros came to the Lansing area this month as part of the first anniversary celebration for Shinsky's orphanage.

The children, ages 12-19, performed traditional Mexican folk music and dance at a fundraiser at a Lansing golf club and made appearances at schools in St. Johns, Lansing and Springport.

They concluded their visit by riding in the MSU Homecoming parade.

"I'm feeling exceptionally good about it," Shinsky said of the orphanage. "With the grace of God, everything just came together."

Opening an orphanage had long been a dream for Shinsky, who spent time in an orphanage in Cleveland, Ohio.

While starring as a defensive tackle at MSU during the early 1970s, he made a vow to one day open an orphanage.

The opportunity finally came last year, after he and former MSU teammates Eljay Bowron and Joe DeLamielleure staged an 18-day, 2,000-mile bike ride to Mexico, raising \$175,000 for the orphanage.

The City of the Children opened its doors in September 2009 with nine children. The orphanage is being run under contract by Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (Our Little Brothers and Sisters,) a network of Catholic Charities in nine Latin American countries.

When they turn 18, children are required to give a year of service to the orphanage, Shinsky said. If they stay for two years, their college education will be paid for, he said.

"My ultimate dream is really to see those children step into our shoes and take a leadership role in making a difference in their communities," he said. "Then I'll know that I've really accomplished something."

The 18 Mexican children who visited the Lansing area were from NPH because the children at his orphanage are not yet ready, he said.

Shinsky spent nearly three decades in the Lansing Public School system, including 20 years as

director of special education. He is now a professor and department chair at Grand Valley.

Shinsky's wife, Cindy, is an assistant superintendent for the Clinton County Regional Education Service Agency. She partnered with him in opening the orphanage.

Shinsky said he makes regular visits to the orphanage.

The reality of what he's doing hit home during one of his trips to the orphanage, when one of the children insisted on giving him one of his coveted marbles, Shinsky said.

"He only had four marbles," he said. "I told him to keep it, but he insisted that I take it. It's a moment like that when you just say, 'Oh, my gosh, this is everything to that kid.' Already they are saying, 'I really appreciate what you're doing.'"

