IN THIS EDITION

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Unbound is an inclusive community of children, youth, elders, families, sponsors, volunteers and staff. We recognize in our diversity strength, beauty and a path into a future of promise.

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Yenifer has come a long way in the Unbound community and she’s not finished yet. Her work with elders will soon take her on an exciting trek far from home.

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Rosemary Lane is a sponsor with Unbound and a partner in an exciting book project. On a recent trip to Colombia, she gained new insight from an encounter with an elderly woman.

ON THE COVER

Sponsored child Charan, 11, walks to school with his mother, Ramana, and sisters Nithyasree (left) and Yasahasree (right). They live in south-central India. Charan has been challenged with health problems and learning disabilities, but with his family’s care and the support of his Unbound sponsorship, he’s doing well. On the back, Yasahasree, Nithyasree and Charan hunker down to do their homework.

CREDITS

PRESIDENT/CEO
Scott Wasserman

MANAGING EDITOR
Loretta Shea Kline

EDITORS
Gustavo Aybar
Jordan Kimbrell
Larry Livingston

DESIGNERS
April Befort-Neumann
Sarah Burns

CONTRIBUTORS
Tristan John Cabrera, Philippines
Henry Flores, Colombia
Daniel Pérez, El Salvador
Oscar Tuch, Guatemala
Ranjeeth Gill Kuppala, India

TRANSLATORS
Dora E. Tiznado
Claudia Vázquez-Puebla

PRODUCTION MANAGERS
Alexandra Stonestreet
Xander Jobe

Unbound is an international nonprofit founded by lay Catholics and grounded in the Gospel call to put the needs of the vulnerable first.

We build relationships of mutual respect that bridge cultural, religious and economic divides. We invite all people of goodwill to join us.
When sponsored elder Vilma in Costa Rica met John and Judy Weber, she’d been sponsored by them only a few months. Barely enough time had passed for their first letters of introduction to each other to arrive.

But for Vilma, that didn’t matter.

She welcomed the Webers with open arms, inviting them into her home and seating them around her dinner table to break bread with her. Vilma, who is 64 and the same age as Judy, said that since they had met in person, they were sisters. She also said that John and Judy were more than her sponsors.

They were family.
Unbound is a community of people who welcome each other as family, even if they’ve never met.

It’s sponsors who open their hearts when they choose to send financial assistance for their sponsored friend each month. It’s children who draw pictures for sponsors half a world away. It’s youth who write letters filled with their educational dreams, who help tutor the younger, and older, members of their community in reading and writing. And it’s elders who share their wisdom and are still eager to learn something new.

In this issue of Living Unbound, we focus on how the diversity of the people we
serve makes our community special. And diversity isn’t just about location or culture. Our diversity encompasses age, since we serve children, youth, elders and families.

In our previous issue, we shared that we were conducting a survey to better understand the impact of our program with elders.

The analysis is in, and you’ll find the encouraging results in these pages. In Colombia, 22-year-old Yenifer started her journey with Unbound as a child and is now continuing on to places she never thought possible.

Unbound sponsor Rosemary Lane shares her experience visiting an elder home in Colombia and the love and wisdom she encountered.

For a community to thrive, you have to put people first, especially the most vulnerable and those pushed to the margins. Unbound strives to make sure that the people of our community are at the forefront of everything we do. 🌍
Meet Dea

ten years old

Dea, 10, loves school and wants to be a teacher when she grows up. Every night she practices by teaching her little brother what she learned in school that day. Dea lives with her parents and two brothers on the island of Panay in the central Philippines. Their bamboo house is just a few steps away from the ocean, where Dea’s father earns a living as a fisherman. She’s sponsored by the Lawrence family in New South Wales, Australia.
Meet Leonel

thirteen years old

Leonel arrives at the river where he and his family get their daily water. It takes him a half-hour to walk there from his home in rural El Salvador, and another to return with his filled jug. Leonel, 13, is the second oldest of the four children of Maria and Manuel, who are farmers. His sponsorship by Richard in Michigan provides support for Leonel’s schooling and helps stretch the family’s resources.
Meet Juana

thirteen years old

Juana holds up a straw mat she helped her mother, Paulina, make. Juana is 13 years old and lives in Guatemala. She’s sponsored by the Pearce family in Georgia. Juana is learning to weave mats from her mother, who learned the art of weaving from her parents when she was a child. With money her mother earns from selling mats, and Unbound sponsorship, Juana is able to continue her education.
Meet Sergio

twenty-two years old

Twenty-two-year-old Sergio from Madagascar has been sponsored since the age of 6 by Paul and Christina from Michigan. Sergio’s parents separated when he was 2; he now lives with his aunt. Sponsorship benefits, plus scholarship funds, offset costs of his studies to be an electronics mechanic. Sergio uses money he earns as an artist to cover other expenses.
Three days a week, Yenifer rides her motorbike from Tarso, where she lives, to the town of La Pintada. She works with sponsored children and elders in both communities. The trip is an hour each way.

a gifted young woman on an unexpected JOURNEY
The distance from Medellín to Rome is a little more than 5,800 miles. By air, it takes about 16 hours. But when 22-year-old Yenifer made the trip in October, it was the culmination of a much longer journey.

In Rome, Yenifer represented Unbound on a major stage at the debut of a book featuring stories from elders around the world. The book was commissioned by Pope Francis in 2017 to draw attention to the global community of elders who are too often overlooked and forgotten. It features stories and interviews from elders around the world, including many sponsored through Unbound, as well as the pope’s reflections.

Yenifer was present at the book launch with the pope and other well-known figures like Martin Scorsese. For a young woman from a small town in Colombia, it was an honor as improbable as it was fitting.

Given up when only weeks old by her mother, Yenifer was raised by her great-aunt. Looking back, she believes her mother made the right choice and, today, enjoys a good relationship with her.

The family, which included Yenifer’s four cousins, struggled to get by. But in 2006, a few days before her 10th birthday, she became sponsored by the Reilly family in Indiana.

“We were listening to the radio from the town and they announced the news of who was becoming sponsored,” she said. “When I heard my name I started saying, ‘Auntie, I’m sponsored!’ That was a beautiful thing. I can’t forget it.”
Upper left, Yenifer makes a record of the vouchers distributed to sponsored elders at their monthly meeting in Tarso. The elders use the vouchers to buy food, medicine and personal care items. Above, a sponsored elder signs the benefit log sheet.
With sponsorship, life improved. A promising student, Yenifer graduated from high school in 2013 and began administrative coursework at a local university.

**COMING BACK TO SERVE**

In 2014, Yenifer was asked to fill in for an Unbound staff member who was recovering from an accident.

She handled the responsibility so well that the next year she was offered a full-time position at the Unbound office in Tarso, her hometown.

Mónica Gómez Arias, the coordinator of Unbound’s program in that part of Colombia, was well-acquainted with her abilities. “In spite of her young age she is strong and structured,” Gómez Arias said.

“Her own life realities had forced her to be mature and responsible, to fight for her dreams and be better in what she does,” she said. “When she talks about her childhood and the place that sponsorship had in her life, her face shines. One can see a very shy sign of gratitude in it.”

Today, Yenifer travels to local Unbound communities where she works closely with sponsored children and elders. She delivers benefits and visits with them. She finds her contact with the elders especially gratifying.

“My [great-aunt] raised me. She passed away about 10 years ago. For me, working with [elders] is remembering my life. It’s to remember the person who I owe everything to. Working with them fills me with joy because my childhood was very happy.”

Gómez Arias recognizes the importance of the intergenerational contact that Yenifer and other staff members work to foster.

“Part of the richness of Unbound is the possibility to work with groups of people from different ages,” she said. “This allows us to listen to them and learn by interacting with them. We have the privilege to see this in every activity we have with the community.”

“For me, working with [elders] is remembering my life. It’s to remember the person who I owe everything to.”
Yenifer visits with sponsored elder Olga in Olga’s home in Tarso. Olga’s husband died several years ago and she lives alone. Friends and neighbors look in on her to make sure her needs are being met. Olga’s Unbound sponsorship is her sole means of financial support.
“Our own identity is not the ID card that we have, but it’s all about our roots. Listening to the elderly we find our roots.”

— Pope Francis, in response to a question from Unbound staffer Yenifer Valencia Morales, at the Oct. 23 book launch event for “Sharing the Wisdom of Time.”

Yenifer receives a copy of “Sharing the Wisdom of Time” from Pope Francis and presents him with a gift from the community in Tarso, Colombia. The gift is a notebook with a wooden cover, with an image of Tarso church burned into the wood and messages from sponsored elders, Unbound staff and others from the community filling its pages.
MAKING AN IMPRESSION

In May 2017, members of the Loyola Press editorial team traveled to Colombia to see firsthand Unbound’s work with elders. Loyola Press is the Chicago-based publishing company that was tasked with creating the elder book that Pope Francis had conceived. They knew that Unbound, as the only major sponsorship organization to work with the elderly in the developing world, was uniquely qualified to help them with the project.

Yenifer was assigned to travel with the Loyola team while they were in Colombia, and introduce them to some of the elders she served. The visitors were impressed by the bright young woman and decided to interview her as a member of her generation who could clearly articulate respect for elders.

When the guests had returned to the U.S., Yenifer assumed her role in the project was over. But one morning, several months after the Loyola team’s visit, she received a call from Gómez Arias asking her to come to Medellín. At that meeting she found out she’d been chosen to travel to Rome.

“Luckily I was sitting,” Yenifer said. “I was just very shocked, but I said ‘Yes, I do want to!’”

In Rome, she represented Unbound’s dedicated young staff, many of whom, like Yenifer herself, were sponsored as children. Their interaction with the multiple generations that form the Unbound community is a hallmark of the organization’s program, and one Unbound is pleased to be able to share with the world through the book. ✨
Elders in Unbound experience less loneliness and social isolation, a lower incidence of hunger and greater access to health care, a survey of close to 600 sponsored and non-sponsored older adults in Latin America, Asia and Africa found.

Unbound staff surveyed nearly 300 elders sponsored at least two years and 300 who are on the waiting list to be sponsored. All were selected at random. Results showed sponsored elders have more favorable outcomes overall, despite experiencing the same kinds of challenges as those on the waiting list.

A key finding was that participating in the sponsorship program lessens loneliness and social isolation. Sponsored elders experience a lower sense of emptiness, less frequent feelings of rejection and fewer moments of missing people being around.

“Loneliness is an emotional aspect,” Becky Findley, international evaluation manager at Unbound, said. “For it to get that deep, it really speaks to the quality of life beyond basic needs.”

Findley and evaluation specialists Nimisha Poudyal and Tania Cabezas analyzed data collected by local teams, relying on tools used in the evaluation field to measure loneliness, prevalence of social networks and food insecurity. In addition, questions developed internally measured access to medicines and medical care. Since the Unbound program is personalized, elders choose benefits that address their particular needs. Benefits are delivered through deposits to individual bank accounts, vouchers or purchases by staff.

Food is a major sponsorship benefit for elders. The survey looked at three levels of food insecurity: mild, moderate and severe. Sponsored elders worry less about having enough food and have greater choice in what they eat compared with those in the non-sponsored group.

“You can eat rice day, after day, after day, but are you getting enough variety to sustain nutrition at that stage of life?” Poudyal said. While sponsorship didn’t eliminate all aspects of food insecurity, she added, sponsored elders overall are eating better.

Regarding health care, 66 percent of sponsored elders said they receive the medical care they need, compared with 40 percent of respondents on the waiting list. Fifty-nine percent of sponsored elders report getting the medicines they need, compared with 32 percent on the waiting list.

“Fewer sponsored elders are having to compromise when it comes to medicine and medical care,” Findley said. “They’re less likely to delay getting care and less likely to seek alternative medicines.”
Study reveals effects on loneliness, hunger and health care for elders

“Loneliness is an emotional aspect. For it to get that deep, it really speaks to the quality of life beyond basic needs.”

— Becky Findley, international evaluation manager
Elders in Unbound number 31,000 and account for 10 percent of sponsored members. They’re eligible for the program at 60 years old, but many enter at a later age. Their average length of sponsorship is 9.27 years, similar to the average for a child. A majority of sponsored elders, 65 percent, will participate in the program for the remainder of their lives.

Because of poverty, abandonment and isolation, “elders are some of the most marginalized members of our human family,” Unbound’s president and CEO, Scott Wasserman, said. “Unbound sponsorship manifests the inherent dignity of elders. Our sponsorship program brings them from the margins into the center, as full partners in a community of compassion.”

Unbound is the only major U.S.-based organization to sponsor elders, a population that’s growing more rapidly in developing regions than in other areas. The U.N. projected that by 2050, 80 percent of the world’s senior population — an estimated 1.7 billion people 60 and older — will live in less developed regions.

“Unbound sponsorship manifests the inherent dignity of elders. Our sponsorship program brings them from the margins into the center, as full partners in a community of compassion.”

— Scott Wasserman, president and CEO

**AVAILABLE MEDICAL CARE**

66% of sponsored elders said they receive needed medical care, compared to 40% on the waiting list.

**ACCESS TO MEDICINE**

59% of sponsored elders report getting needed medicine, compared with 32% on the waiting list.

**BELONGING TO A CARING COMMUNITY**

Besides financial support and gaining a friend to correspond with, elders benefit from being part of a local Unbound community of sponsored members, their families and staff. Social workers in particular play a vital role in accompanying elders through challenges related to health, isolation and neglect.
Older adults often lack documentation needed to access medical care. Social workers help them navigate paperwork and bureaucracy. In some cultures, it’s considered taboo to be vocal about vulnerabilities. Social workers also help break down those barriers.

“Bringing in those social workers brings in that personalization aspect,” Cabezas said. “So it’s a very personalized experience.”

Elders in Unbound give back. They visit peers who are homebound or ill to check on them. In the Philippines, elders in Quezon City tend a garden that provides food for the community. Sponsored elders in the Manila program share the wisdom of their life experiences with family members through activities like retreats with their grandchildren.

Elders in Unbound have fun, too. In landlocked Medellín, Colombia, a group of elders recently visited the ocean for the first time, hosted by their peers in the coastal city of Cartagena. In Santa Ana, El Salvador, elders stay fit through a dance group and keep their cultural traditions alive.

“It’s a missed opportunity if we don’t have elders at their fullest potential,” Findley said. “It’s a missed opportunity to harness that wisdom and experience.” 🌟
In April of 2016, I spent a week in the back of a red Jeep, bumping along mountain roads and dusty city streets in Colombia. I was interviewing elders in the Unbound community for a book that Pope Francis had requested. The pope has long preached about the vanishing role of elders, how they have been hidden away in nursing homes and pushed to the margins. He hoped that this book, published by Loyola Press, the Jesuit publishing company I work for, could shine a light on this overlooked population, giving voice to the voiceless and encouraging intergenerational dialogue so wisdom could be passed on and shared.

Unbound had generously offered to help gather stories for the book from all over the world. They even invited me to Colombia, where I found myself at a little nursing home in Medellín.

Hogar Place is an open-air, mural-filled facility on the outskirts of the city. A doctor there told us that many residents’ family members were unable to continue paying for their housing, and even more had stopped visiting over time.

Even so, there was joy. In the lunchroom, elders sipping coffee greeted us warmly, grasping our hands and kissing our cheeks. At one table, a woman with a severe disability reached for my hand and held it, nuzzling her head against my cheek. I felt her hunch over and press her lips against my cheek. “She can’t speak, but this is how she expresses herself,” a woman nearby said.

Tears fell down my cheeks, and I held her, taking in this simple gesture of love. We didn’t speak, but I could feel everything she wanted to say.

Leaving Hogar hours later, it hit me. This is who Pope Francis is calling us to: the elders hidden behind closed doors, invisible to the outside world and without a voice; the elders who can teach us more about wisdom in a quiet act of love than words ever could.

We may not all be able to journey to Colombia to receive their wisdom firsthand, but as sponsors, we have the blessed opportunity to accompany them. May we continue to respond to Pope Francis’ invitation and lift up the lives of those on the margins, knowing it’s there that we’ll find all we really need. ♦

“Sharing the Wisdom of Time” by Pope Francis and Friends is available to members of the Unbound community for 25% off, plus shipping and handling. Go to LoyolaPress.com and use promo code 5015. Offer expires Jan. 14, 2019.
Shining a light on quiet love and wisdom
by Rosemary Lane, sponsor

Although she’s losing her eyesight, widowed mother of six Maria from Guatemala shares that the secret to a long life is to walk and work outdoors.

There’s always room at our table.

See our insert or visit unbound.org/RoomforMore to support the Unbound community with a general donation.