Michelle Adams ('03)

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"Honestly, I don’t view myself as ‘distinguished’ or different than anyone else who is doing what they were called to after college, so it was hard for me to accept this award,” says Michelle Adams (’03), the recipient of the 2019 Distinguished Alumni Award. Adams has served the disability community in Nicaragua since she graduated from Dordt with a special education and elementary education double major in 2003.

Adams’ passion for special education began as she watched her cousin, Katie, who is diagnosed with Williams Syndrome, grow up. Katie and her family faced challenges throughout her elementary school education, and they were profoundly blessed by the work of ELIM Christian Services in Palos Heights, Illinois, during her high school years. When it came time to choose a college and a major, Adams says Dordt was an easy choice: Dordt offered a good special education program and a nice financial aid package. Plus, her Aunt Pam—emeritus professor of education—and Uncle Charlie Adams—a former professor of engineering who passed away in 2017—taught at Dordt at the time.

“At Dordt, I learned to be a little bolder and more willing to take a step into the unknown,” says Adams. “I remember Syd Hielema, and others, challenging us in chapel and GIFT. On one occasion, I was so positively challenged that it gave me the courage to call the pastor in Coney Island where I had been on a PLIA trip to see if they needed help for the summer. I ended up spending the summer between my junior and senior years with that church in Coney Island and learning much about ministry where life is not so easy or safe.”
After graduation, Adams moved 3,000 miles south to Managua, Nicaragua, to help Nicaragua Christian Academy develop a program for children with special needs. As a teacher there, Adams began to dream of a school for Nicaraguan children with disabilities, one that would serve this underserved community.

“Meeting with some friends about it and mapping out a vision, we named this dream school ‘Tesoros de Dios,’ which means ‘God’s Treasures,’” says Adams. “We connected the name with 2 Corinthians 4, having treasures in jars of clay. Later, this chapter had even more meaning to me as I reread the first verse, ‘Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.’”

Through her work at Nicaragua Christian Academy, Adams met Lorena Mántica, the mother of one of Adams’ students who needed extra classroom support. In 2004, Mántica started a pilot horse therapy project on her horse farm. She called her center “Rahamin,” which means “Mercy of God.” Within a few months the center was serving 20 children. “Since it was a passion of mine to work with kids with disabilities, I volunteered periodically with the program and was blessed to watch it grow. More kids were involved every time I visited,” says Adams.

In 2006, as her three-year contract with Nicaragua Christian Academy ended, Adams became a full-time volunteer with Rahamin.

“I decided to volunteer full-time with Rahamin as a step of faith to help children with disabilities in Nicaragua,” says Adams. “I did not know what would come of it, or if this dream school ‘Tesoros de Dios’ might eventually take form or not. I only knew that I could offer education and love to the children who were attending Rahamin, and I could learn more Spanish and more about the culture. Little did I know that, within a few months’ time, Lorena would resign, and I would be asked to become director of this program.”

Shortly after, the organization was renamed Tesoros de Dios.

By God’s grace, I have seen a definite shift in the perception of disability in Nicaragua, particularly in Managua.

— Michelle Adams, Distinguished Alumni Award recipient

There are a few institutions and therapy programs in Nicaragua offering services to children with disabilities, which were in operation many years before Tesoros de Dios came into being. Los Pipitos, for example, has various sites around the country. They are a semi-private institution that charges families for their services. There are also public hospitals with therapy programs and public special education schools located in a few of the departments that they are not alone in the challenges they face as they raise their child.

“We believe the child’s well-being depends heavily on the caregiver’s wellbeing, so we have a family counselor who provides Bible studies for moms and family members who attend, as well as counseling, if needed,” says Adams.

Staff members also work with the families to create an individualized plan for each child and then work together towards reaching established goals.

“Families find another home and family in Tesoros de Dios; they learn principles and values for life, discipline and the need for consistency in therapy, and trust. They know they can go to staff with questions or concerns and receive the support they need. We accompany families—sometimes even to the end of their child’s life. Families see they are receiving quality services at no charge, and this is a gift from God for them.”

Tesoros de Dios currently serves 130 children—with more than 100 children on the waiting list. The organization has become known across Nicaragua, but most of the children it serves come from Managua and the surrounding communities, in part, because it is too costly for families who live far away to...
come to Managua regularly. In an effort to meet the need for disability services of more people with disabilities across the country—and even in neighboring countries—Tesoros de Dios partners with organizations, churches, families, and teachers to share advice on how to best include and serve people with disabilities.

"By God’s grace, I have seen a definite shift in the perception of disability in Nicaragua, particularly in Managua," says Adams. "Around 2012, an inclusion law passed requiring schools to accept children with disabilities. Before this law was passed, we battled with schools to accept our kids. When the law was passed, however, suddenly schools were not only opening doors to our children, but also coming to us asking for help and training in how to include children with disabilities."

Adams has also observed that parents are now a little quicker to accept their child’s disability. “They can now see their child as someone with abilities and gifts and not just a victim with a curse or incapable of doing anything.” She believes this happens more easily when society is more accepting of people with disabilities; families don’t feel as condemned and fearful of negative comments.

In the future, Adams hopes for continued restoration in Nicaragua. She hopes Nicaragua becomes a place “where families know and share in the love of God, a place where all kids have the opportunity for a good education.” She hopes Tesoros de Dios continues to be a light and a refuge for people with disabilities and their families.

The Dordt community shares Adams’ vision. “As a new graduate, she relied on the support of her former professors at Dordt to help her develop the special education program at Nicaragua Christian Academy,” says Kris Hancock, a former teacher and board member of Tesoros de Dios.

Dordt Associate Professor of Education Dr. Kathleen VanTol learned about Tesoros de Dios 10 years ago, when Wendy Gomez (’12) left her home in Nicaragua to study special education at Dordt. Gomez, who is now a program manager at Tesoros de Dios, came to Dordt to learn to work with children with disabilities. After taking a special education course taught by VanTol, Gomez asked VanTol to help support Tesoros de Dios. When VanTol visited Tesoros de Dios for the first time in 2011, she was inspired by the work Adams and others were doing in Nicaragua.

Michelle is leading change in Nicaragua for persons with disabilities,” says VanTol.

“Since then, Dr. VanTol has come back to do workshops with us for the schools we’re working with here. She’s been a vital part of the work we do here. We’re very thankful,” says Adams.

Though Adams has not done much teaching herself in recent years, she has found the skills she learned at Dordt useful as she has partnered with teachers like VanTol and has mentored teachers at Tesoros de Dios. "I think the education program as a whole does an exceptional job of preparing teachers, particularly the importance of classroom management, lesson planning, and goal writing," says Adams. "Even if I don’t know exactly how to teach what is needed, I at least have an idea of what needs to be taught and am able to communicate that need to professionals like Dr. VanTol, who can do the actual teaching. I would give credit to my education at Dordt for much of that."

In 2018, Adams had the opportunity to mentor a Dordt student who is now a special education teacher. Jessie Walvoort ('18) has been familiar with Adams’ work at Tesoros de Dios for most of her life—she grew up in Adams’ hometown of Oostburg, Wisconsin, and her church there supports Tesoros de Dios.

“In high school, I really enjoyed Spanish and wanted to do something with special needs,” says Walvoort. “Ever since then, it’s been a dream to go down to Nicaragua. In my sophomore year of college, I learned that Dr. VanTol was connected to Tesoros de Dios and does work with the school.”

With the help of VanTol, Walvoort spent part of her semester of student teaching at Tesoros de Dios in 2018. "What I appreciate about Tesoros de Dios is the love that is showered on the students that attend," says Walvoort. "The staff all have a huge heart for the kiddos. I appreciate Michelle’s passion for her work and her dedication to Tesoros de Dios. I admire all that she has done in service of the Lord."

Those involved in awarding this year’s Distinguished Alumni Award believe that Adams and Tesoros de Dios clearly illustrate what it means to seek Christ-centered renewal for one’s community and that it acknowledges God’s work and God’s faithfulness to Adams and Tesoros de Dios. Viewed this way, Adams feels more comfortable accepting the honor. “As I have prayed and talked with some others about receiving the Distinguished Alumni Award, I have come to the conclusion that this is an opportunity to give God glory for what he has done and is doing in my life,” says Adams. “I am humbled and thankful for this opportunity and hope that others are encouraged to follow God’s call for their lives, no matter what the challenges may be.”

LYDIA MARCUS ('17)