

Girl's return to Peru sparks effort to help orphans

(CNN) -- Ana Dodson was 11 years old when she returned to her native Peru for the first time since she was adopted as an infant.

According to the Dodson's, the girls at the orphanage are flourishing; they love to show off their favorite books and read aloud.

She and her mother, Judi Dodson, were overwhelmed by what they found at an orphanage near where Ana was born: tattered clothing, a lack of resources, bleak conditions -- and the unexpected response of the girls they met.

"[They] streamed out smiling and laughing. Once we went inside, they sang and danced for us," Judi Dodson said. "We thought they did this for all their visitors, but soon we discovered we were the only visitors the children ever had."

In Peru, 3.8 million people live in extreme poverty, on less than \$1 a day -- 2.1 million of them children, according to UNICEF.

Worried that Ana would be upset by the poverty she saw, her mother took the advice of their tour guides and packed teddy bears and books to hand out when they arrived at orphanages they planned to visit. "I thought it would help her to have a job to do," Dodson said.

Ana wanted to see an orphanage in the hills of Cuzco where she was born. There, she distributed the books and stuffed animals, hoping they might provide comfort.

"There was this one girl, Gloria, who came up to me, and she said, 'Ana, I know that you'll never forget me. And I know that one day you'll help us.'

"Seeing the children that day and listening to what Gloria said really moved me," Ana said. "I knew I had to do something to make her wish come true."

With the help of her parents, she turned her conviction into a nonprofit organization called **Peruvian Hearts** <http://www.peruvianhearts.org/> to support the small orphanage they had visited, Hogar de Mercedes de Jesus Molina.

"When we asked the orphanage who was aiding them financially, they said no one," Judi Dodson said.

In three years, Peruvian Hearts has raised close to \$40,000 to support the orphanage, sending vitamins, books and clothes, providing three meals a day and paying for a tutor.

The organization also sends a monthly stipend for fuel and wood, and is in the process of helping the orphanage build a new kitchen. It secured a guard and security dog to protect the girls, and sometimes sends money for chickens and cows.

According to the Dodson's, the girls at Hogar de Mercedes are flourishing. They love to show off their favorite books and read aloud. They are clean, well-fed and healthy.

One girl is expected to attend college next year with the help of a scholarship fund Ana set up with prize money she received for community service. Ana has named the fund Maria's Gift, after her birth mother, who had no education.

"There are 19 children right now," Ana said. "The change that I've seen in them is amazing. One girl said, 'We are now getting fat because of the vitamins.'

"This orphanage is to the point where these girls can dream."

When not packing up books and toys for shipment, Ana, now 15, travels to towns and cities across the United States, spreading the word about the status of orphanages in Peru.

She has been invited to speak at the United Nations in September as part of the Stop Child Poverty campaign, and Peruvian Hearts is looking for additional orphanages to support.

Grateful for her opportunities in the United States, Ana promises to keep working to gain opportunity and education for the Peruvian children most in need.

"If my parents hadn't adopted me, I would have probably either been on the streets or in an orphanage," Ana said. "I could have been one of [those] girls. I am so lucky to be here.