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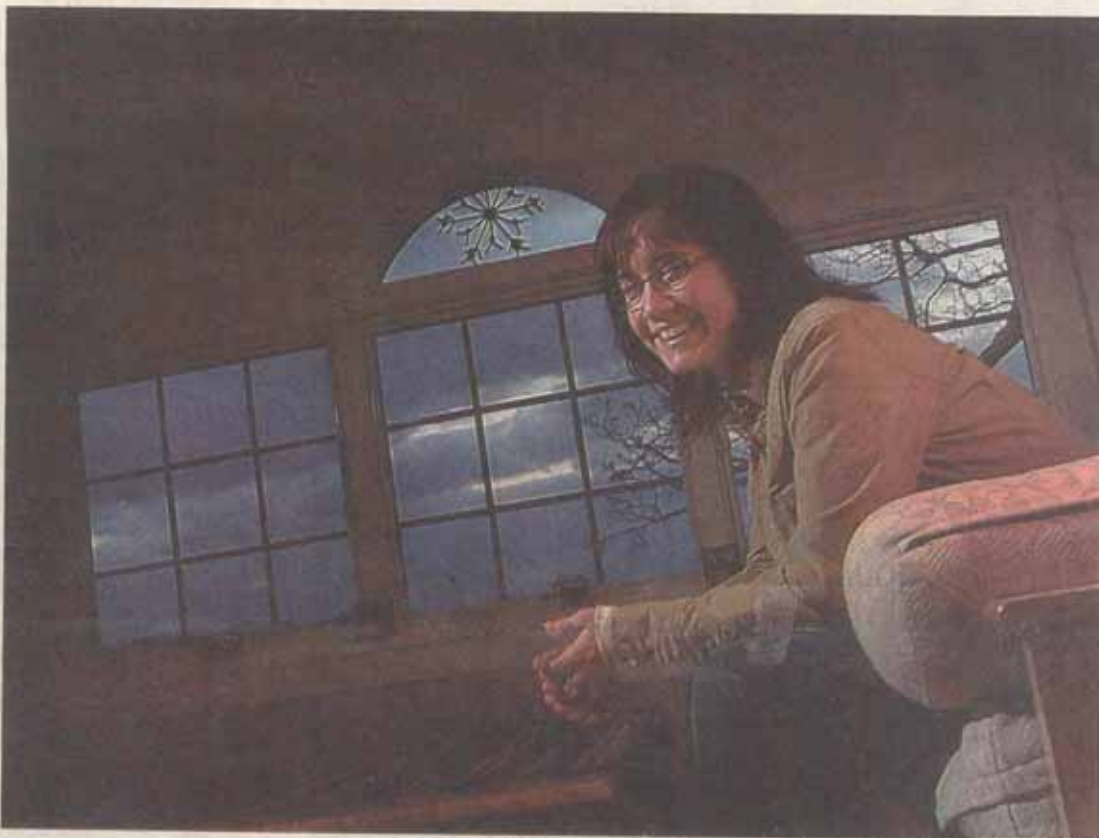
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NORWALK

'I felt I was at home'



Paul Desmarais/Staff photo

Norwalk native Julie Coyne has returned to the area to raise funds for her Education and Hope foundation, which sends more than 150 poor Guatemalan children to private schools.

Norwalk native finds her calling in Guatemala

By John Nickerson
Staff Writer

NORWALK — Digging latrines and building brick cook stoves doesn't ordinarily lead someone to their life's work.

But in the 10 years since Norwalk native Julie Coyne has moved to Guatemala, where she

set up an educational foundation that now sends more than 150 poor kids to private schools, she has fallen in love with the Guatemalan people.

"The longer I worked with those people on the projects, it was the people in those communi-
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Brandon Racancoj, Noemi Montenegro, Julie Miranda and Julio Ixcay graduate recently from kindergarten. The Guatemalan children received scholarships from the Education and Hope foundation.

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Guatemala

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ties that made me want to stay," said Coyne, who came back to Norwalk a little over a month ago to launch a new Web site for her nonprofit Education and Hope foundation and prepare its yearly appeal letter. "It just seemed right from the very beginning. There is something about Guatemala; there is something about the people. I felt I was home. I fell in love with the place."

But Coyne, 37, a 1985 Norwalk High School graduate, says her foundation is way behind last year in fund raising and is looking for help.

Coyne's unlikely path began when she went to Guatemala in 1994 for an immersion course in Spanish.

Fresh out of Wake Forest University, she thought she was headed for a master's degree in teaching or social work.

But when, as part of the Spanish school's community service program, she began building brick stoves for people who were cooking on open fires inside their dirt-floor homes and digging latrines, Coyne saw she could improve people's lives.

As she worked with local residents, she noticed kids milling around when they ought to be in school.

She found out that either the parents couldn't afford to send the kids to public schools — where they are required to pay for all school materials as well as relatively high registration and tuition fees — or put them to work to support their families.

With her savings spent on living and educational expenses after 10 months in Quetzaltenango, the country's second-largest city 7,200 feet high in the western highlands, Coyne returned to Norwalk.

She went back to her church, St. Jerome in Cranbury, to see whether she could find money to support her volunteer work.

"I raised some money, and that was the beginning of it all. With the money, I was supporting myself and a few kids whose families were unable to send them to school," Coyne said.

From there, Coyne formed her nonprofit foundation in 1997 and last year had a budget of \$175,000, which is paying for the shoes, transportation and school expenses of 153 elementary and secondary students in Quetzaltenango.

St. Jerome's priest, the Rev. David Blanchfield, who met Coyne when she returned to the congregation in late 1994, said he was struck by her devotion to the children of Guatemala.

"It's just extraordinary. She has a genuine vocation from God to do this. She comes back here every year and talks to our congregation and tells everyone about the kids and what's been

going on down there," Blanchfield said.

Blanchfield also applauded Coyne's ability to keep administration costs down to ensure that most every dollar goes where it was intended.

"It is really unusual to be able to give to something where you know the people who are providing the services and you can actually see the results. That doesn't happen very often. We often give to organizations, but you don't feel a personal involvement with them," Blanchfield said.

Not only are educational expenses paid, but because many students come from broken homes where the mothers and children have been abused, the Education and Hope foundation also employs a psychologist two afternoons per week.

Coyne also employs 10 after-school teachers who offer tutoring programs for more than 50 students five afternoons per week.

But Coyne said she is \$35,000 behind where she was last year and is considering further cuts to an already trim budget.

"(Money) has always managed to come through just when we need it. Suffice to say,

that isn't the case now," Coyne said, adding that she can't remember being so nervous about the foundation's finances.

If she has to trim costs, Coyne said the school tuition and registration expenses will be the last to go.

"I would do anything for that not to happen," she said, thinking that she might have to cut medical costs and possibly lose the newly hired psychologist. "Everything is so necessary."

Coyne said she is willing to tell anyone about the foundation and is happy to speak to any group before she leaves.

On Christmas Eve, with the help of Osprey Communications of Greenwich, Coyne launched a Web site at www.educationandhope.com and finished her appeals letter, which she will send out to 600 people.

"I realize you can't save the world, but you can make a difference in someone's life," Coyne said. "And if you can do that, you know you can do something in life and can get involved."

— For more information, write to: Education and Hope, P.O. Box 486 Norwalk, CT 06856 or e-mail esperanza@xela.net