

South Florida nonprofit helps feed poor in Latin America and the Caribbean

By Miraisy Rodriguez



ALLISON DIAZ / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Painter Rachel J. Henriques poses by her art during the Food For The Poor Art Exhibition at the Mayfair Hotel and Spa in Coconut Grove on Wednesday, Oct. 5, 2011. The exhibit featured artwork from local and international artists as well as drawings from the children that Food for the Poor serves in Latin America. A silent auction of the artwork, raffle ticket sales and donations will help fund Food For The Poor programs.

Jamaican-born artist Rachel J. Henriques wiped a tear from her eye as she spoke of watching her mother help the less fortunate in Kingston, thanks to a Broward-based organization that supports various initiatives throughout Latin America and Caribbean.

Food for the Poor, headquartered in Coconut Creek, is one of the largest U.S.-based relief and development organizations. The nonprofit says it has spread about \$8.2 billion in aid to 17 countries since its inception in 1982.

"Although we started by giving people food, our name has become a misnomer," said Angel Aloma, the organization's executive director for seven years. "We help people in most Latin American countries and many Caribbean islands with housing, education, water and self-sufficiency."

The Fresh Start prison ministry program in Jamaica is an example of a self-sufficiency initiative. Co-founded in 2003 by Sandra Ramsey, Henriques' mother, the program helps newly released prisoners find out what their talents are and provide them the tools they need to fend for themselves.

"What we give those released from prison depends on an interview where we determine what they can and like to do," Ramsey said in an interview last week. "We might give them chickens and teach them to run chicken farms, or we might give them equipment so they can start landscaping businesses."

With World Food Day approaching on Sunday, Food for the Poor is putting on programs to raise awareness of world hunger as well as fund-raise for their projects. The organization reported last year that more than 96 percent of donations went directly to aid programs.

The current fundraiser is the Hart Exhibition, also known as "Art Embracing Hope." The exhibit, which opened last week at the Mayfair Hotel in Coconut Grove, featured works by Henriques and 19 other artists. Proceeds from art sales at the Mayfair and similar events upcoming in Fort

Lauderdale and Delray Beach benefit the nonprofit's work.

"It's synchronicity at its best," said Henriques, whose studio is in Fort Lauderdale. "For the past eight years, I've seen my mother walk through Jamaican prisons with Food for the Poor. Then I get an email about their Hart Exhibition. I applied and invited my mom to come to the reception before my work was even accepted."

Liora Davis, another featured artist, has been a donor since 1986 and was glad to attend the Hart opening in Coconut Grove. "I'm a humanitarian; I like to support organizations that get the most bang for their buck," she said.

Artists aren't the only ones trying to help Food for the Poor. Students at the University of Miami and Florida International University will be hosting their own All Nighters for the Poor on Friday, Nov. 18. The initiative asks college students to organize night-long fundraising events that their friends and community members can attend. .

"Food for the Poor tells us how much specific projects will cost, and we select what project we want to raise funds for," said senior Zahra Arbabi Aski, who is helping plan the FIU All Nighter. "Our goal this year is to raise \$5,000 to build a pangasius [species of catfish] pond in Haiti."

Follow-through in the countries it serves is important to Food for the Poor.

Aloma, the nonprofit's executive director, recalls asking a Haitian child who was watching his brother eat why he was not eating:

"The boy said it was not his turn to eat. This type of poverty destroys dreams."