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**Reaching for the Stars**

For Sarah Valentina Hernandez Solache (SO-**LA-**CHAY), the colorful city of Zitácuaro (ZEE-**TA**-QUARO) in the highlands of Mexico — where millions of Monarch butterflies bathe the fields and forests in a sea of orange during their annual migration — was, and always will be, home. But, despite its beauty, Valentina readily admits that it simply wasn’t a safe environment for her.

“I had an amazing childhood there,” said Valentina, who was raised Presbyterian in her local church. “Mexico is beautiful, with the best climate and the best food ever. But it is also a really dangerous country.”

The ongoing violence against young girls that terrorized her community while she was growing up was one of the primary reasons her parents decided to send her, like her older sister before her, to pursue her education in the U.S. at the Presbyterian Pan American School in Kingsville, Texas. Established in 1911, the school is an international, college-preparatory, boarding school related to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that motivates and equips young people for lives of Christian leadership in the global community.

“We met the school thanks to our church, which has a relationship with Pan Am,” Valentina said, referring to her alma mater by its common nickname. “They send scholarship award letters to people all over Mexico.”

The experience was life-changing and transformative. Both sisters are now distinguished graduates of Pan Am. Valentina is a pre-med student on a full scholarship at Schreiner University in Kerrville, Texas, and her sister is a Houston-based architect.

“Coming to Pan Am and to this Christian community is where I actually found myself and my faith, and where I knew that I loved God,” she said. “I found my blessing here.”

Gifts to the Christmas Joy Offering help Presbyterian-related schools and colleges equipping communities of color, like Pan Am, prepare young people to become leaders in the Church and the world.

“The generous people who give to Christmas Joy give us scholarships and the opportunity to continue our education in the United States,” she said. “I will always be grateful for that. But beyond that, they have also given us a lot of hope. All of the things I always dreamed about, thanks to them, they are making me feel like it can actually happen.”

The president of Pan Am, Dr. Gordon A. Govens, states, “Through the sharing of the Christmas Joy Offering — and prayers — every student receives the gift of reaching his or her full potential.” In other words, with our gifts to this offering, hope turns into dreams. Dreams turn into reality. And all of a sudden, those stars are within reach.

Please give generously. When we all do a little, it can add up to a lot.

***Let us pray:***

*Through your Son, you open to us a door. As we cross the threshold into relationship with God and with one another, we rejoice and give thanks for opportunities to live as your people.* ***Amen****.*