



Adventist Wholistic Wellness Center

Photo courtesy of Adventist Wholistic Wellness Center.

# Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana (Adventist Wholistic Wellness Center)

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## BENJAMÍN SUNIAGA

Benjamín Suniaga, B.A. in theology (Venezuela Adventist Theological Seminary), M.A. in pastoral theology with emphasis on mission, has worked as district pastor, Evangelism, Personal Ministries, and Publishing Ministry's director, Ministerial secretary. He is currently (2020) East Venezuela Conference executive secretary. He is married to Andreina Loreto, and they have two sons.

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Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana (Adventist Wholistic Wellness Center) is the first Seventh-day Adventist health center in Venezuela. It is located at Calle Principal de Quebrada Grande, Parroquia Teresén, Municipio Caripe, Estado Monagas, Venezuela. It is a dream come true, which is linked to the origins of East Venezuela Union Mission. The magnificent two-story building, located on a high hill, rises like a flag representing the power

and miracles of God since it was built when the country was going through a crisis and construction material was scarce. “It was the only construction in the region that had enough cement to complete the building.”<sup>1</sup>

## Development

The need to have an institution that would allow to create vision and value awareness of the health principles given by God to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the East Venezuela Union Mission was one of the reasons that encouraged the establishment of the health center.<sup>2</sup> It promotes, among Venezuela’s Adventist members, the health philosophy taught in the Bible and Ellen G. White’s writings.

In the first place, with the hope placed in God and with such available resources as water, sun, exercise, air, nutrition, temperance, and rest, the center encourages healthy living through natural principles as the basis to prevent sickness, as well as an alternative to face diseases that could be treated and/or reversed. Another objective is to attract the people of Venezuela to be interested in the gospel through a healthier lifestyle. Fortunately, Dr. Argenis Mayz, health director at the time, visited a health center in Argentina, which gave him some good ideas to start the project.

On January 25, 2011, a meeting of East Venezuela Union Mission board was held in Maracay, and a vote was taken to ask all Adventist churches in the territory to give a 2011 gratitude offering on behalf of the project, which had been agreed upon by all churches in the union’s territory.<sup>3</sup> The offering was crucial in the execution of the project; it not only offered financial support, but was also an advertising and informative tool to unite all Venezuela’s Adventists in purpose, motivation, and prayer. Although the gratitude offering was of great help to the construction of the *Centro Integral Adventista Vida Sana*, Josney Rodríguez, East Venezuela Union Mission president at the time and main project plan organizer, had also managed to get donations that contributed in a substantial way to the construction.

God was touching hearts inside and outside the church, and the project would become a reality. During more than two decades the dream was in the heart of Venezuelan Adventists, especially in Central Venezuela Conference, but a place that would fulfill the necessary conditions for an institution with those characteristics was impossible to find. Around that time a commission was named that would be in charge to find an appropriate place for the construction of the project. The commission consisted of Pablo Carreño, Benirde Almérida, Héctor Aguana, Elvis Moreno, and Francisco Ruiz.<sup>4</sup>

## Foundation

On September 16, 2012, the groundbreaking ceremony was held, but it was not until January 14, 2014, that the construction of the main building started, “in the place where for several years there was a dairy farm.”<sup>5</sup> Juan Lara was in charge of the construction from beginning to end, and, with loyalty and commitment, dealt with

many difficulties until the project was completed.

On February 26, 2015, the opening ceremony was held, under the name of Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana (CIAVS). Attending the ceremony were Israel Leito, Inter-American Division president; Josney Rodríguez, East Venezuela Union Mission president; Benirde Almería, union secretary; Pablo Carreño, union treasurer; Argenis Mayz, union health director; and many local field administrators.

In June 2015, services to the public began, offering hydrotherapy, geotherapy, phytotherapy, and nutrition tailored to each individual person. "The first patient was a man from Barcelona named Fidel, who had respiratory conditions.<sup>6</sup> The institution's voted personnel are committed to serve patients that go to the center looking for help.

## History

In 2010 God placed in the minds of East Venezuela Union Mission leaders and visionary church members the desire and determination to create a health center in Venezuela. The group, directed by Josney Rodríguez, Benirde Armerida, Luis Astudillo, Nelson Guedez, and Argenis Mayz, were praying and searching for land that would fulfill the characteristics they wanted, but were not successful, so at the beginning of the next year they were frustrated.

Seventy years earlier José Antonio Urrestarazu, a Spanish doctor who had dedicated his service to the community, together with his family, founded a farm, planted pine trees, and built a small building. Later the Acevedo family acquired the property, and then Sandra Yaneth Suarez Hernández, who dedicated it to breeding cattle and raising chickens.<sup>7</sup> In 2011 Sandra Suarez decided to sell the farm, but could not find a buyer. She learned that Adventists were interested in purchasing land to build a health center, so she contacted them. "Doctor Argenis Mayz, along with Sister Paula Hamana, went to take a look at the farm. They were impressed and gave a good report to the East Venezuela Union Mission leaders.<sup>8</sup> All the necessary arrangements were made, and the farmland at Los Pinos was bought for the glory of God.<sup>9</sup>

Leodán Sánchez, a native of the Quebrada Grande community and an employee of the former farm owners, was the project's first person under contract. On January 18, 2013, the Ruiz Otahola family moved to the property to take care of the land and establish ties with the community. Later Arelis Huérfano, a retired Seventh-day Adventist pastor, was hired to handle all legal matters of the construction and foundation.

In 2013 an important meeting was held in the East Venezuela Union Mission headquarters in Maracay to discuss whether to continue with the construction of the project, Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana, or sell the land since the government agency's Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Ambiente, had not approved the first ambitious urban project presented by the union. The vision and courage to continue was motivated mainly by conference presidents and other members of the board, who decided to continue building on the part of the

land that had already been approved by the Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Ambiente.

Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana has gone through an extreme political and economic crisis, which was a real challenge to the project from the beginning. God's powerful hand guided every step; even with the lack of construction material and the money devaluation, the objective was reached. With four years of history, it is a prestigious Adventist institution.

## Vision

One of the greatest hopes of the vision of Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana is the desire to direct those who suffer from illnesses to the Great Physician, Jesus Christ. There is a need to have health centers committed to healing and teaching healthy lifestyle so patients will take care of their bodies, minds, and spirits. The center's mission perspective is to "promote means, resources, and knowledge of natural and spiritual ways in which God works, in order for every person to find physical health, mental peace, and spiritual strength."<sup>10</sup> The wellness center's main emphasis is to promote a healthy lifestyle in every patient, and to help heal the sick by using natural resources and their emotional and spiritual strength in order to enjoy better quality of life.

## List of Significant People

Sara Otahola de Ruiz, Luis Gilberto Ruiz, Arelis Huérfano, Elsa Luz Alba de Huérfano, Leodan Sánchez Caripe, Juan Bautista Lara, María Belén Asprilla, José M. Zerpa, Olga Cuesta de Romero, Cruz M. Morocoima, Elsa Contreras.

## List of Leaders and Administrators

Sara Otahola, medical director, January 2013 to present; José Zerpa, administrator, June 2016 to July 2017; Olga Cuesta, administrator, August 2017 to present.

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### SOURCES

Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana, land ownership documents. East Venezuela Union Mission archives, Maracay, Edo. Aragua, Venezuela.

East Venezuela Union Mission minutes. East Venezuela Union Mission archives, Maracay, Edo. Aragua, Venezuela.

Rodríguez, Josney. Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana. Opening ceremony. February 15, 2015. East Venezuela Union Mission archives, Maracay, Edo. Aragua, Venezuela.

## NOTES

1. Josney Rodríguez, Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana's opening ceremony, February 15, 2015.
2. Josney Rodríguez, interview by author, September 10, 2019.
3. East Venezuela Union Mission minutes, Num. 1, Vote 2, January 25, 2011.
4. East Venezuela Union Mission minutes, Num. 1, Vote 3, January 25, 2011.
5. Arelis Huérfano, interview by author, September 25, 2019.
6. Sara Otahola, medical director CIAVS, interview by author, September 14, 2019.
7. Leodán Sánchez, interview by author, September 25, 2019.
8. Paula Hamana, interview by author, September 24, 2019.
9. East Venezuela Union Mission Archives (Centro Integral Adventista de Vida Sana, land ownership documents), accessed September 25, 2019.
10. Olga Cuesta, interview by author, September 25, 2019.

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