

Sun, Sand and Cement

Helping a Women's Agricultural Cooperative

Guatemala 2003

It's late October, 40+ C and I'm sitting in the shade savouring ice cold jello out of a Styrofoam cup. Why? I've been working since before breakfast on a construction project in Los Bracitos, Guatemala, and this is my mid-morning break. Let me tell you, jello never tasted so good! This is my fourth time volunteering in Central America, three of them with World Accord, a Canadian non-government organization (NGO) which partners with local Central American organizations to work in communities that ask for help. People in Central America are eager to build better lives for their families by improving their economic, health and social conditions. The focus of the Canadian teams I have been part of had been constructing houses for families, but this time we were assisting a women's agricultural cooperative build a multi-purpose community centre where they could also store their produce.

Our first night in Guatemala was spent in Chimaltenango at the Mujeres en Accion (Women in Action) centre, the first World Accord/Mujeres in Acción project in this country. It is a very attractive two-story building with classrooms, offices, a dining room, showers/toilets and bedrooms where women can stay when they come in from the countryside for a training session. And where we stayed too.

Mujeres en Acción teaches improved agricultural and marketing practices to both members and non-members. It also provides micro-credit farm loans, basic literacy skills and education in the democratic method. Throughout Guatemala there are groups of women working cooperatively, each with its own name, but bound together in a national federation. We visited another in Quetzaltenango called La Asociación de Pensamiento y la Corazón de Mujeres, (Association of

the Mind and Heart of Women) where the focus is on growing, processing and selling natural and traditional medicines, which the people can afford.

We walked into the nearby town that first night and had some interesting encounters. We had trouble finding tea to buy. The small stores have a barrier of iron bars between the customer and the person serving them which is something we haven't seen in other Central American places. We watched a girls' soccer game for awhile, watched and listened as the bell-ringer in the church called people to mass, observed part of a simple wedding mass conducted by a woman (did the priest ever appear, I wonder?) and peeped in on an elaborate western-looking wedding reception complete with 5 piece band. As dusk fell, we walked back to the centre to a traditional Guatemalan Saturday supper of tamales and rice. An instructional game of Wizard was played. Wizard was to become our nightly ritual at Los Bracitos where we persuaded some of the family to play with us. It was a challenge for me to explain the game in Spanish.

Los Bracitos is a town of about 1200 people (282 families) four hours southwest of Guatemala City. It is located on the Pacific coastal plain; a rich and fertile agricultural area where the humidity is intense and the daytime temperatures reach 40 degrees C or more (nights cool down to the 30s!). The town has one school that offers grades 1-6, electricity and a water system. There is no bank or supermarket and one small eating place across from the work site. There is some commerce in the small tiendas (stores) that are scattered about the town. There are three family-owned diesel corn-grinding machines where families can take their soaked corn to be ground for making tortillas (50 centavos for a small bowl and 1 quetzale for a large one). Some women buy chickens, dress them and sell them. There is no market in town but trading like this goes on.

Our host family, Amanda and Alejandro Lopez, housed us and, with warmth and good humour, looked after us for the two weeks. Their son, Marlon is still at home and one of their daughters, Shení, a teacher in Guatemala City was home for a school holiday. Amanda and her helper, Olinda, fed us well, made sure our

laundry was done, introduced us to the women in the co-op and took us on a field trip to see their crops. Our hosts listened patiently to our constant refrain of "mucho calor!" (it's very hot!).



Olinda cooking for us

Alejandro was instrumental in the development of the cooperative and when he first returned to Los Bracitos after going to University and working in the city, he tried to interest the village men in the idea. When that was unsuccessful, he turned to the women and he and Amanda are the directors now of a 32 member cooperative, also called Mujeres en Accion.



Amanda is in the centre of the front row

At our first meeting with the women of the co-op, those that could come, Amanda made a speech and then invited some of the women to speak also. They told us how important it was for them that we women were working alongside the men and doing the same kind of work. One woman asked, "Who sent you?" They told us that God would reward us. Then some of us said a few words. Mine were, "It

was very important to me to be here. I believe in one world and you are my sisters." "Fui muy importante para mi estar aqui. Yo creo en uno mundo y ustedes son mis hermanas." There were young women and older women in the group, some brought their children and others did not. The next time we met, on the day before we left town, many more women and children came. On that day, two women came from another village, traveling several hours by bus. Their mission was to ask directly for help for the women in their village - 22 of them have formed an association. We, of course, can do nothing directly, and Alejandro spoke saying that it is the intention of the Los Bracitos co-op to extend their help to women in other communities; that the women need to be clear about what they need and go through the proper channels e.g. Mujeres in Accion and World Accord, although he didn't speak of them specifically.

The women of the co-op had dreamed for 5 years of having their own building. The men in authority in town wouldn't let them use the existing community space for their purposes so they metaphorically gave them the finger and determined to have their own. It will house an office for the co-op, a pharmacy (Amanda and Alejandro's daughter who is graduating from nursing in December, will come home to run it), a large meeting space, a storeroom for the produce and kitchen/washroom space. Long range plans include a second story where they will have classrooms for training computer operators and mechanics.

The cost of the building was borne by construction team members, by the cooperative and by donations from others. In 2005, it cost about \$10/sq. ft. to build, in contrast to building costs in Toronto of \$150 -\$200/sq. ft. The foreman is paid \$10/day and labourers \$5/day. All building materials were bought locally. This is both a practical consideration (most materials are heavy and expensive and difficult to transport) and an intentional development strategy to strengthen the local economy and support local jobs. When materials had to be stored to provide protection from the elements and theft, local families were paid for the use of the room in their home. This provided some cash income for people who

might not benefit directly from the building. The cooperative will continue work on the building until the next Canadian team arrives in January.

Each woman owns 1, 2 or 3 manzanas of land. One manzana is about an acre and a half. In May they plant the corn. In August when it is ripe, they bend the stalks over, leaving the corn on the stalk to dry and to provide some protection for the sesame seeds which they then plant between the rows of corn. In November, they harvest both the corn and the seeds. The sesame plants grow about 6 feet tall.



Wilma and her son with the sesame plants

When they are ready to harvest, they are cut down and left to dry for a couple of weeks. A plastic sheet is spread on the ground and the sheaves are shaken to shake loose the seeds. This phase of the harvesting has to be done between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., the hottest part of the day.

The women bring their harvest to the co-op and are reimbursed for their produce. If a woman obtained a loan from the co-op to buy seed, she will begin to repay that loan then. Banks charge 24% interest. The co-op charges 18%. But the bank would not loan money to the women who borrow from the co-op.

The corn and sesame seeds are sold to buyers in Mazatenango, a city about 2 hours away. When the corn is bagged they call two or three buyers and get the best price they can, make a deal and the company comes and collects the corn

from Los Bracitos. Similarly, when they have an adequate supply of sesame seeds, they call a middleman (Alejandro clearly said it was a middleman but I don't really understand the difference between a middleman and a buyer) in Mazatenango who collects the seeds and also pays the tax, a bonus and the cost of transportation. Again, they get the best price they can, and, because of the greater volume, it will be a better price than any one of them might get. Our team of Canadians (3 women, 4 men) arrived in Los Bracitos on October 26.



Amanda and the
Canadians

Because of the prolonged rainy season, the project was behind schedule and we found ourselves helping to dig and lay the foundation. The building is big: 98 feet by 33 feet, which means many, many hours of manual labor (there are no back hoes or cement mixers in Los Bracitos). Shovels and wire benders became our steady companions. The building will be earthquake resistant through the extensive use of rebar-reinforced concrete. We spent many hours on the details of rebar making, cutting, then bending the pieces of iron, then wiring them on to the long pieces of rebar. But before the rebar can be tied, many thousands of pieces of wire, 8 inches long, have to be cut. The foundation and walls are made of thousands of 25-pound cement blocks, each of which is handled and moved at least 3 times by the workers, in this case, us. We sifted gravel, moved sand and hauled water in preparation for making many piles of mortar and concrete. We dug trenches, back filled, and hauled gravel from the river and water from the slough when supplies ran low. Some of us carried 100 pound bags of cement and most of us periodically carried the rebar from its storage place to the work

site. Sacks were filled with rocks sifted out of the gravel for use in the foundation. The Guatemalan men just heaved them up onto their backs and moved them to where they were needed. On two separate days, women from the cooperative came to the site and worked alongside us. That doesn't usually happen and Amanda expressed hope that after we left, more would come to the site to work.



On the work site

There were only two large trees right on the work site, one of them inside the building, where it provided some morning shade. We could "do" rebar there. One day, it will have to go. The other tree had to have a branch cut off, high in the tree. "Get out the chain saw", you say. There isn't a chain saw in Los Bracitos! The trusty machete was brought out and its owner scrambled up the tree in his

bare feet and hacked away at the branch till it fell. Unfortunately, even with it tied to the truck to hold its direction of fall, it landed on one of the rebar columns, bending it badly out of shape. In North America it would have been scrapped. But not there. Patiently, the foreman worked away at straightening and reinforcing it until it looked as good as new.

But, it was not all work! We spent one wonderful afternoon at the beach enjoying the surf, fresh shrimp and Canada Dry.



And on the weekend we had a trip to Antigua, a well-preserved Spanish colonial city, now a UN World Heritage site. There we visited two markets, watched women weaving colourful Guatemalan fabrics and drank coffee in the courtyard restaurants of the old hotels. But the best part of Antigua was the temperature. It's high in the mountains and it was blessedly cool.



Fast food – Antigua style



Colonial arch



Weaving



Antigua architecture in stark contrast to Los Bracitos

Three afternoons a week, the cooperative holds literacy classes for the women, taught by the young local teacher when her school day is done. Regular school hours are from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. The women are divided into two groups, depending on their skill level. The women learning their letters and numbers are older. Some may never have gone to school, some may have attended for a

time. One woman said to me with great joy, "I'm learning to write my name!" She wanted to be able to sign the contract with the cooperative with something other than an "X". Another group, mostly younger women, probably attended school for some years, perhaps even completed the six years of school available in the village. They are improving their literacy skills with workbooks provided by Literacy Guatemala. I was very interested to see that the content matter of the workbooks included: sanitation, nutrition, breast-feeding, immunization, birth control. They are learning more than literacy skills.



Chatting with the women in my halting Spanish
They are very patient and helpful

In the Lopez house were stored six 50 poun. bags of powdered milk. I wondered what they were for! One day I saw mothers and children lining up outside the house. It turns out, an NGO sponsors a milk program in the village. People bring their children to Amanda to be registered. She weighs and measures them, and gives the family 2 lbs. of powdered milk a month. Her records are reported to the NGO.

On another occasion, a man from a human rights organization came to speak to a small group of co-op women about the democratic process and human rights. The last three days we were there the town water system failed! By the time we left, the pila (storage tank in the house) was bone dry. The first night, after coming back from the beach, a neighbour, who wasn't on the town supply and

had a well, offered to let us haul a couple of buckets of water home for "showers". Later that night, Sheni and I walked to Hilma's house with the material I had purchased in Antigua so she could measure me for a skirt. It was ready the following night.

The next day, the neighbour didn't want to let us use his well again, so Sheni, Hilma and Faviola took us to "the well", each of us armed with our towel, soap and shampoo. The well was close to a house but not owned by them. There were 3 large plastic tubs - one for each of us Canadian women. Each was filled and we stripped and bathed. I was reminded of the biblical stories of the women at the well. At some point, a young man rode by on a horse! Neither he nor any of us showed any interest or concern.

I had such a rich experience - a mosaic of new and different foods, climate, vistas, accommodation, transportation. There is nothing in the cities, the countryside or the villages that allows me for one minute to think I am at home. The warmth and graciousness of the people and the shy curiosity of the children add immeasurably to my memories of this expedition. It was especially meaningful for me to be working with and for women. It was good for my feminist soul to be there with women working against such odds to better their lives and the lives of their children. It ameliorates my sense of helplessness which surfaces when I think of the world situation. This experience tells me, "This is something you can do to help make the world a better place. This is building world community, one cement block at a time."



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