

Guatemala, Pierced to the Soul

What we think, or what we know, or what we believe, is, in the end, of little consequence. The only consequence is what we do. ~ John Ruskin

In May of 2004 my husband and I went to Guatemala to look at a water system for a local orphanage, and a project at an AIDS Clinic. Now it doesn't seem unusual for a Rotarian to use his time in this way. The unusual thing is that he had been there the month before; to accompany a container load of donated school equipment, dictionaries, and medical supplies. The 3 Club Project of Petaluma was sponsored by the Guatemala City South Rotary Club through Juan Forster, who assisted with this delivery. One month later, we were making the trek again to check out another project. But while I agreed with the concept of helping others, and have always been in the helping profession, I couldn't say that I understood the push to be there. As we settled into making the rounds to orphanages, AIDS Clinics and schools, I began a process of discovery that would change my life.

Many people came and went over the week that we visited, and all the while our local guides, also Rotarians, shared their country with pride and enthusiasm. Richard Rivera and his wife Ivonne from the Metropoli Club were instrumental in getting us into every imaginable arena. Between the Rivera's and Elias August, we never wanted for transportation.

Elias, an employee of Ed Carrette, another Rotarian from the Sunrise Rotary of Santa Rosa, CA. escorted us through Guatemala. Ed is a Guatemalan who still has family and a business in Guatemala. During this time, I was continually struck with the hospitality and genuine warmth of the people of Guatemala, as well as the human dignity of all of the people for whom we were privileged to share time. For example, after being introduced to a doctor's parents we were invited in for an impromptu tea. They simply stopped conducting business for 2 hours to entertain us.

Later, while at the city dump on a beautiful spring day, a girl stood eating an ice cream cone absolutely delighted with her tattered soccer ball find. Her mother and a friend crouched a few yards away, scavenging for food and essentials, sometimes fighting off the vultures for booty. These people lived at the city dump in clap board shacks around the debris. I began to see a dichotomy building as I witnessed more contradictions between the life style and reality; their needs were so very great...

During our stay, we met with a myriad of dignitaries that provided a multifaceted view of the intricacies and issues surrounding the education of the youth of Guatemala. From local university professors to the Assistant Minister of Education, they discussed the programs that are in progress at this time, and what they saw as the concerns of the future. We were delighted to spend more than two hours with the First Lady of Guatemala, Dona Wendy W. de Berger. She was generous with her time and gracious as she explained the plans that her country had for the future of their people.

As I went from one meeting to another, I was struck by the beauty of the country and warmth of the people. The somewhat timelessness of the countryside seemed incongruent with the bustle of Guatemala City, which looked a bit like Los Angeles. I surveyed the small communities that I passed and was intrigued by the women who made up the country people. From town to town, their ancient, colorful uniformed dress, portrayed the history of their past. I began to piece together a system of communities that, although happy enough, seemed somewhat stuck in time. Well, what was wrong with that, I argued to myself? They are happy enough, are they not? Yes and no, came the swift answer.

At an AIDS Clinic we dropped off health related products to the Director and toured the facility. She was very impressed with the contributions made by the 3 Rotary clubs of Petaluma, so we suggested that she attend a meeting. She accompanied us that night to the Metropoli Club of Guatemala City. During this meeting we facilitated a PowerPoint presentation that I put together before I left Petaluma. Hundreds of pictures collected from all 3 clubs during the last trip and tour of Guatemala, highlighted the preparation, and delivery of a full container of donations. Jim Becker and my husband Robert Mitchell, both of the Petaluma Rotary Club and I collaborated on the presentation. Which had, I felt, a surprising response. The group seemed touched, and not aware of the magnitude of the issues within their own back country.

The Director of the AIDS Clinic, Ana Lucia de Estrada, stood and gave a brief talk. She said that she also was also touched by the presentation and mentioned that the visiting Rotarians gave her patients something that they had not received from anyone. Simple hand shakes and hugs. My husband went around the room at her clinic and touched every one of her patients, and she was amazed because her own people were afraid of their touch. She went on to explain that her father had been in Rotary when she was a child. The presentation, combined with the evening at Rotary, moved her so that she was also interested in becoming a member. She was sponsored immediately by the Metropoli Rotary Club of Guatemala City.

Over time, Jim Becker from the Petaluma Club took a leadership role in setting up speaking engagements and coordinating the process, becoming the principal speaker. The speaking tour and PowerPoint presentation was so successful that we would go on to do 7 more at various Rotary Clubs in our area. This garnered much support for our Guatemala projects along the way. The total club support increased from the initial 3 Club Project (Petaluma, Petaluma Valley and Petaluma Sunrise) to 6 participating clubs (Santa Rosa Sunrise, Cotati and the Guerneville Rotaries). In fact, the original Three Petaluma Club Guatemala Project has won the Hal Wood International Project Award for 2003-2004.

In Solola, Guatemala we discussed the needs of the Maternity and Neonatal unit of their local hospital. While visiting with their female doctor, she explained that 50% of the women in the region died in childbirth and 2.5 children died at birth. That is, for every successful birth, 2.5 infants die. Part of the reason that the death toll is so high, in both cases, is that girls get pregnant so young, around 12 to 13 years of age, too early to

conceive and carry a life. Two other very important factors are infection and hypothermia. Comadronas or midwives, also called traditional birth attendants, continue to use ancient methods of birthing, which still work well for normal births. The doctor was quick to interject that the problems regarding midwifery births, mainly surround knowledge of when more skilled care is needed, which is the last issue that contributes to mortality rates.

Getting women to go to the hospital when they are in trouble medically, seems easy enough on the surface, but as a professional who deals mostly with managing personal and cultural change, I knew deep in my bones that they had a lot of work to do. A history and culture of living close to the earth keeps change at bay. So what to do? While the numbers on mortality rates are staggering and grim, they seemed incongruent with what I saw on the faces of those beautiful people.

The levels of poverty and the lack of base necessities did not alter the fact that they were a strong and proud people, doing the very best everyday to make a life. I was pierced deep in my soul. Women and men worked long and hard at daily tasks to get the basics of life. They walk sometimes 4 hours for water for cooking, and firewood for heat or to sell their wares. Though there seemed to be no dearth of food. The most beautiful and largest fruits and vegetables were available and plentiful at the market place. Lovely needlework and clothing graced the tables...I was struck by their capacity for detail and of level of skills.

As I absorbed the scenes of everyday life, I was very conflicted, and I felt compelled to act in some way. My work had always been in the helping profession, which means that I have always helped people find growth and independence, while I helped to create systems that are healthy and flowing naturally. So, as I assessed the situation, I was stymied by a conflict of feelings as to what seemed right. The question seemed to be to help or not to help? Would helping make a proud people dependent? Would a beautiful culture become tarnished by intervention? Hmmm, don't know. But doing nothing seemed cruel and indifferent. And, so I left Guatemala with these questions in my heart and a feeling of restlessness inside me.

When I returned to Northern California to a fairly comfortable life, I pondered the situation. In reflection, I had already gotten caught up with things as we sat having breakfast with the doctor from Solola. Jim Becker challenged me to take action. "You really understand the needs here, why don't you take this on? Well, I am not a Rotarian, I thought, but I don't really have to be to help. Regardless, as time went by, I found myself taking more and more on as I talked to people at connecting services like Johns Hopkins University and others.

Eventually, I was invited to a Rotary Club meeting by John Strong, past District Governor of District 5130 unofficially dubbed the father of International Projects in this area. Soon I was invited to be a member of the Petaluma Valley Rotary Club. End of the story? No, it doesn't end there. I still had a conflict around developing independent systems in healthy free flowing societies. But the one size fits all, nonintervention stance

seemed inadequate here.

How do people survive the everyday elements of living, when poverty and lack of education keeps a whole segment of society stuck?

While I pondered this dilemma over the months, my first book, *Searching for the Waters of Antiquity* was published and I was finding some success with the distribution. As I struggled to find a balance between my philosophical and professional idealism, and still assist with the project, a solution came to me. I was moved to write a book based on the people and needs of this culture, although the thrust of the book could be anywhere in the world.

The book is a children's book for adults, entitled, *Because Maria Wants to Know...* This is a book about 2 girls growing up in the back country of Guatemala, one from the northern jungles, and the other from the southern farming communities. They will learn that when they grow up and become a woman and mother, it is up to *them* to teach their boys to treat girls differently. They will learn that they must teach their girls to *expect* to be treated differently. In this way, an evolution of culture will take place.

In the meantime, the Petaluma 3 Club Guatemala Project for the spring of 2005 has an accumulation of donated school supplies, health care equipment including maternity/neonatal supplies from various communities around Petaluma, CA. Matching grants from Rotary International will make it possible to coordinate and send 2 containers of these supplies to the people of Guatemala, this year, and we hope to send more in the future.