

Life in Guatemala

By IAN SKOTTE

Staff Writer

A young Guatemalan man's guitar gently weeps as the ground on which he plays slowly slips away.

Eduardo and his family are a group of squatters living on the top of a cornfield in rural Guatemala. It's a 45-minute walk through rough terrain just to get there.

Two miles of hardened horse-stomped clay stands between the people and their homes.

Eduardo strums his guitar as the sunsets behind him. A cool breeze jostles the plastic canopy providing him and his fellow squatters shade from the 90-degree heat.

A crowd has gathered around him. Children with stickers given to them by today's visiting missionaries huddle around Eduardo looking up at him with fascination in their eyes.

An older gentleman sits directly across in a plastic chair.

The squatters say the land is their home, and has been so for years. Now the legal owner wants them off or pay him \$2 million dollars.

With the average worker earning \$300 a month in Guatemala, it's unlikely they'd be able to come up with the money.

Eduardo and his family have no plan for the future.

Their options look grim.

As the wind dies down, the palm trees, taller than 3-story homes, help provide a way of life — a life where children carry water on their heads. Girls wear colorful dresses to church with delicate tops while boys sport shorts and T-shirts of all kinds.

English and Spanish are not understood here. Quiché is their language. But music is universal.

So as Eduardo plays his guitar, the squatters take comfort. It's a happy tune. And the faces of the squatters light up with each cheery note.

Simple donation turns village's world around

By IAN SKOTTE

Everyday in Guatemala, women and kids haul dishes of soft corn on top of their heads to the nearest corn grinder.

Many Guatemalans walk more than a mile just to complete the process.

Shoes are optional here. Children dart up and down the rocky roads narrowly escaping disaster with each bumpy step.

Dogs looking for their next meal lag behind, ribs poking out hoping for a few kernels to fall to the dusty ground.

A pig waddles by with a pathetic looking string tied around its neck.

In the distance a generator begins to purr muffling the pigs' grunts/snorts -- it's corn grinding time.

Soaked corn falls into the machine squashing the kernels into mush. It's a three-person operation: one to pour in the corn, another to operate the grinder and a third gathering the dough.

As the dough oozes out from the grinders' clutches, a young woman rolls the remnants into a ball. Its appearance mirrors that of Playdo, or a ball of bread, than its former corn self.

Nothing is spared.

Finally, the dough gets jammed back into the bowl where it's transported back to the village for cooking.

It's all in an effort to keep families from going hungry. This process, for one Guatemala community, became much easier thanks to a \$1,200 donation from the Presbyterian Women of Westminster, First Clarksville Church and the of the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee.

"The women here [at the church of Monte los Olivos in the village of Valle Nuevo] asked for a corn grinder of their own," said Middle Tennessee Ruling Elder Chuck Higgins.

Ten years later, the same corn grinder can be still found at the village.

Before the corn grinder entered the village of Valle Nuevo and the church of Monte los Olivos, turning maize into tortillas involved more than just grinding corn.

It started with a trek to the nearest corn grinding location.

It's a journey Patrocinia Cholom and her family remembers taking for years.

The corn grinder enriched the church and village. Through proceeds obtained from fellow villagers using the corn grinder, the church of Monte los Olivos has been able to construct a Christian education building and a guesthouse, according to interim pastor Juan Andreas Lopez.

But the fruit of their labor does not stop there. Church leaders were eventually able to invest in a calf from funds raised from the corn grinder. The community raised the calf into adulthood that produced three more calves. Finally, one of the cows was sold and those earnings went to purchasing a generator to help power the community.

"This has had the biggest impact on the community than anything we've done," Higgins added.

It's a project not lost on a recent mission trip to the poverty-stricken country.

"When you hear about in 10 years and all that's come of it -- it's simply amazing," said mission representative Paula Adams.

According to Higgins, one of the main lessons learned from the project was listening to what the community needed and not what the North Americans felt the community could use.

"This is the best thing that's happened during our 10-year mission," said Middle Tennessee Ruling Elder Fred Kirchner.

The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee began a partnership with the Presbytery of the Peten in 2002. The partnership covenant lasts three years. At the end of three years, the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee assess the future direction of the partnership.

Since the partnership began, 20 trips have been made to the Peten through the partnership helping with education (both secular and theological), healthcare and water issues.

The Guatemala-Peten task force meets at the PMT, in Nashville at 6:30 p.m. on the third Thursday each month.

Heading south to Guatemala

By IAN SKOTTE

Staff Writer

There was talk of lice, bed bugs, tainted water, malaria, kidnapping and murder.

Before our journey began, I was already freaking out.

We took preventative measures in the form of \$300+ in shots and antibiotics, and no, that still didn't deter me from making the 2,400-mile trip to Guatemala.

It's all part of a mission/fact-finding trip conducted by the Cowan Fellowship Church. We weren't the only group going. At least six members of Tullahoma's United Methodist Church were also Central America bound. Doug Brown and his group (that included missionaries from Tullahoma as well as Clarksville) were on the second part of a mission laying anti-earthquake materials for a building the church erected near Guatemala's west coast. Our group of travelers from Nashville, Lebanon and a few from Franklin County were headed in the opposite direction.

We were jungle bound.

Getting there was an altogether unique experience, which included a near catastrophe in the form of carsickness from your humble narrator.

Chaos filled the streets where children rode on the backs of motorcycles gripping tightly to their mother's waist while the father dodged large potholes in the street.

America's mark also filled parts of the city.

McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, Coke and Pepsi could easily be found.

But where we were headed, America's reach was only a microcosm of the remoteness of this vast, rural land.

We drove for hours on our first day in Guatemala. Yet, we only traveled a few miles.

Guatemala's landscape is like none I've seen before. Hills, mountains and volcanoes surround the capital city of 3-4 million.

A member of our group said it reminded her of Colorado.

However, one of the first things you notice exiting the city, beside the beauty, is the poverty. So-called shantytowns hug the city's outskirts like kittens latching on to its mother.

The weather was less than desirable on our first day thanks to the dry conditions. However, I'm told this is a good thing since it makes the roads passable.

During the rainy season here, roads easily wash away in the country's mountainous southern region. When entering a new town, several speed bumps would deter high-speed traffic from flying through. It's an obvious fix for remote areas of a country whose police force spends more of its time fighting gangs and violent crime than to busy itself watching for erratic drivers.

Hotels weren't exactly "posh" either.

Instead of warm showers, pure water and clean sheets, we settled for cold, intestinal-issue producing agua and the possibility of bedbugs.

Our first hotel in the town of Coban had its own security force. An armed guard welcomed our arrival behind a large, thunderous steel gate.

Just like every night during our week's long journey, the first thing I did was to inspect the sheets and beds of our hotel rooms.

Prior to leaving for Guatemala, I tried to keep myself ignorant of any "bad" things associated with the country. However, soon after our arrival one of my fellow travelers, Lauren Brock, proceeded to fill me in on all the nightmarish details travelers before us had encountered.

Luckily, there were no bedbugs.

Just to be on the safe side, I wrapped myself in the cocoon-like bedding material I had purchased at a Mountain Outfitters in Huntsville shortly before departing.

I'd climb into the neon green covers and pull the sheet over my head to protect myself from any unwanted friends of the night.

Like all of my fellow travelers, we'd take our anti-diarrheal and malaria-fighting medications then attempt to go to bed.

Most nights included tossing and turning.

One reason is that it's hot in Central America. Even being February, temperatures got as high as 93 degrees and not all of the hotels we stayed had air conditioning.

In the mornings we'd usually hit the road and head to the village or villages we were visiting that day.

This is where it gets difficult to describe the experience. That's because this wasn't a mission of building or giving – but instead a fact-finding and “hey, we haven't forgotten about you and we're here because we care” mission.

Each visit included a church service followed by requests made by the churches being visited. These requests included floors, new roofs and a fence to house farm animals.

While this was going on, the rest of us would play the villages' children.

I was given the task of playing soccer with the kids. I grew up playing soccer, and since it's the most popular game in the world, we all could bond over it – despite the obvious language barrier.

Bubbles were also a big hit.

Adults in our group would allow the wind to take the circular liquid soap in the direction of the children who would then try to destroy them.

Giggles could be heard from all over the church ground as kids jumped and played.

It wasn't all fun and games.

At night, our group of travelers would reflect on the day's events. Many times our thoughts were with the villages we visited and the people in them.

Flying over the remote areas of Guatemala appeared more like North Korea than of a free society.

I remember lying in bed at night thinking of what those happy, smiling faces were doing at that moment. Were they sleeping on the hard, dirt floors of their thatched roof homes? Were they going to sleep hungry?

It always made me feel uncomfortable, and it still does to think about each individual we met along the way.

Despite having little to nothing at all, the Guatemalan people we encountered always gave what they could in the form of hospitality.

These are the same people who created some of the most awe-inspiring monuments at Tikal. A place where limestone rocks were stacked so high they could be seen from miles away and tower above the trees.

Now, Guatemala ranks sixth in the world for murders per capita instead of being known for its greatness it's looked down upon by most of the world. Before knocking this country for the brutality of a few, go there yourself and experience the most loving and beautiful people the world has to offer.

You won't regret it.

Guatemalan way of life being destroyed

By IAN SKOTTE

Staff Writer

At midnight on Dec. 21, 2012, those of Mayan descent were the least surprised the world didn't end. They're more concerned about the current conditions in their homeland than of rotating Mayan calendars.

Deforestation, drought and over planting are more cause for concern to these people.

There are preventative measures being sought to alleviate deforestation. Law requires Guatemalan companies to plant five trees for every one cut down. The problem, according to Jairo Mendez Fero, a Guatemalan state worker, there's not enough resources to see this policy through.

More than a thousand years ago, Fero says, just before Spanish conquistadors conquered the Mayans, droughts destroyed corn crops and a way of life.

Tortillas are an important resource for Guatemalans — especially in rural areas. Paste for tortillas comes from corn maize.

However, Fero says without the ability to produce corn, breadnut is used instead. "It's not as fulfilling for the hungry," he says. "It happened a thousand years ago, and it's happening again."

Chronic malnutrition is already a problem here. Stunted growth is a sign of malnutrition. The average height of Guatemalan men and women is eight inches shorter than men and women in the U.S.

With less land to grow corn on, U.S. biofuel standards and tougher climate conditions, farmers are having a more difficult time feeding their families.

A majority of Guatemalan corn gets exported to the U.S. where it's converted into ethanol.

"The average Guatemalan is now hungrier because of biofuel development," Katja Winkler, a researcher at Idear, a Guatemalan nonprofit organization that studies rural issues told *The New York Times*.

According to the *Times* article, three years ago, one quetzal — about 15 cents — bought eight tortillas; today it buys only four. And eggs have tripled in price because chickens eat corn feed.

At the same time, sugar cane exports are increasing. Sugar cane grows abundantly in Guatemala. In fact, villagers offer candy bar-sized sugar cane as a sign of their hospitality.

It's consumed similar to tobacco by biting into the carved cane and spitting out the excess pieces. Sugar cane tastes as sweet as maple sugar with a similar texture.

Fero explains Guatemalan farming practices are different than those in the U.S. For example, Guatemalans let the soil "rest" before the next planting, whereas American farmers plant nutrient-benefiting crops following a harvest.

The soil in Guatemala measures less than 2-feet deep — below that point rests limestone. Millions of years ago, ocean water covered Guatemala.

It's the same limestone used to build Tikal's Mayan ruins.

So while "end-of-the-world" parties were going on in Tikal late last year, Guatemalans were more concerned about where their next meal may come from.

To escape Guatemalan violence, man hopes to be refugee

By IAN SKOTTE

Staff Writer

Guatemala has one of the highest violent crime rates in Central America.

With 39 murders per 100,000 people, its the sixth highest murder rate in the world.

To escape the violence in his hometown, a Guatemalan man named Ernando hopes to secure a visa.

He's looking to work in Canada or the U.S. and send the money back to his wife and two children.

Two days before, he says, two men were gunned down with a shotgun just a few hundred feet from where his children sleep.

Ernando works odd jobs.

The \$100 he earns a month working as a mechanic, painter and fieldworker isn't enough.

So he's learned English and can speak a little French to go along with the two languages, Spanish and Quiché, he speaks fluently.

All he wants is a visa, he says.

But he can't get one.

His brother currently works in Wyoming and Ernando has worked in the U.S. and Canada before.

"It's different now," he says. "The jobs just aren't there."

Everything he's done to improve his life — all legally — has been to no avail.

"I want to help my family," he says.

Instead, for the time being, all Ernando and his family can do is hope for improving conditions in his hometown of Sayaché, Guatemala.

"There's too much guns, too much ammunition," he says.

Simply to survive, Ernando is looking to become a refugee.