

My Guatemalan Experience Vince Vloch

On January 1, 2009, fifteen intrepid volunteers of the Mission of Love left their comfortable and accommodating homes for a mission trip that they will never forget. To start the new year, these dedicated and caring people were on their way to Guatemala, 2500 miles from home, to help build a greenhouse for the orphans of Casa Guatemala

The Mission of Love is a non profit non governmental organization which is the brainchild of Kathy Price and her husband Bob, of Austintown, Ohio. It was founded in 1989 with the goal of bringing loving and caring in a tangible, material way to those less fortunate people who live in much of the world. In this particular case, the people in need are the 250 plus children of Casa Guatemala, an orphanage located on the Rio Dulce, "Sweet River", in a jungle located in the northeast part of that central American country.

Kathy had arranged for 78,000 pounds of food, clothing, building materials and classroom equipment to be transported to that distant locale for the benefit of the children there. This tonnage included almost 10,000 pounds of corn that will eventually be made into nutritious tortillas and other food staples for the kids. Additionally, there was a great quantity of classroom desks and furniture obtained from local Ohio schools for the children's use. The shipment also included lumber that was going to be fashioned and hammered into a greenhouse which the orphanage will use to grow specialized crops to sell for income for the orphans.

The fifteen people from the United States came from both sides of America, 10 from Ohio and 5 from Southern California. These committed people came from all walks of life, spanning three generations. They included a retired 76 year old surgeon, a teacher and her husband, an engineer and entrepreneur, a contractor, a community activist, two

lawyers, (both in their late fifties) and about six college students or recent graduates, all sharing a common desire to and intent to help out and assist those far less fortunate than themselves.

All of these concerned people were brought together by Kathy Price to forge their individual talents, abilities, and resources, into a unified whole to construct this greenhouse for the orphanage.

Jeff Housel of Lordstown served as our team leader due to his experience and knowledge in the areas of carpentry and construction. The Americans were joined at the worksite by local Mayan workmen, who were very industrious, diligent, and full of spirit. As work at the site progressed, a trust and eventual friendship developed which was truly inspiring.

The common goal of this dedicated group was the fabrication of a greenhouse in the midst of the orphanage grounds. The blueprints called for the construction of a three tiered structure, 80 feet long, 36 feet wide and 25 feet high. The skeleton of wood will be sheathed by a netted wrap with a translucent fiberglass roof to allow just the right amount of sunlight and rain for the plants inside. The structure somewhat resembled a primitive church with see through sides.

The orphanage itself is situated on about 40 acres of land, on which are located the buildings sheltering the children, housing the volunteer teachers and staff, a common mess hall/dining area for the children, classrooms, an office, and several small houses for the native workers. The grounds also include several small fields for corn, aloe vera, banana trees, pineapple plants and coconut palm trees. Accommodations for the children are primitive at best, consisting of older wooden structures, most similar to deteriorating

military barracks, but without the luxuries of clean running water, (there was no hot water at all) or adequate toilet facilities. The septic system leach bed flows directly into the river. The nearest medical facility is miles away and is accessible only by boat. There are no roads on the orphanage grounds, the "sidewalks" are old and decrepit with cracks throughout, just waiting to trip up unsuspecting travelers, (or running children).

The children and native workers help care for a variety of workers care for a variety of farm animals which are penned in or allowed to wander on the grounds, several broods of chickens, overseen by big roosters, (*gallos*), several pens of rooting hogs, a small heard of cows, and numerous ducks of various breeds. There are also a wide variety of wild, sometimes dangerous, animals- a band of howler monkeys, sometimes reaching 30 or 40 in number. These monkeys were particularly vociferous in the early morning hours, serving as a unique alarm clock for several wakeups, wildgeese and ducks plying the waters of the river, vibrant parrots and macaws, long reptilian iguanas, (known as tree chicken by the locals when they are captured, roasted and eaten). A boa constrictor was sighted in the children's dining hall, (it was on top of a tall column and not a danger to the kids). Our group dealt with a large scorpion as we cleared away the old greenhouse, and large spiders were everywhere. While we were there, the mosquitoes mad sure they got their fill of American blood.

The group arrived at the worksite by boat early in the morning Saturday January 3, and work began immediately. The wood for the construction was unloaded at the water's edge, due to the fact that there are no roads or even wide paths on the grounds, and no trucks were available (in fact only one wheelbarrow was sighted that day and it was being used by another group of workers). All of the building materials and tools had

to be moved by foot from the river to the building site, a round trip of about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. All members made innumerable trips to the site hauling lumber. In all, at least 8 miles a day were travelled carrying lumber. Although it did not rain the entire time that we were there, the sun and humidity were intense at times, and the frequent trips and construction were difficult, especially to the older members of the troupe (myself included)!

All of the group, both native and American, worked as a team. I never sweat so much in my life, carrying lumber, priming it and painting it, erecting the necessary supports, installing the posts, etc. Each day was literally filled with activity, from sun up to sun down. Everybody was completely exhausted by the end of the day, and some even dozed off on our boat trip back to our rooms. The team rested up during the evening, then would usually get together for a group dinner to talk over the day's activities and to plan for tomorrow.

Unfortunately, some of the food and drink available did not agree with everyone. Almost all of the volunteers, at one time or another, got sick during the trip, most for only 24 hours from an intestinal bug, and each bug refused to leave before the full twenty four hours was up, not giving up a minute of its required stay, but torturing the poor host body for the full allotted time. The health problems were relatively minor, but for the person involved, the suffering seemed like an eternity, accompanied by a hard knot in the stomach, nausea, and sometimes diarrhea. But with some broad spectrum antibiotics and other helpful aids, (pepto bismol, aspirin, etc) the 24 hour bug eventually abandoned its host. Unfortunately, the invasion temporarily deprived the group of the sick persons attendance and company for the time involved, and so briefly slowed the work progress.

Then the bug moved on and involved someone else, and the cycle was repeated again on the newly afflicted person.

Despite all this, the group as a whole, invested and donated over six hundred man and woman hours into the project, a great testament to the dedication and commitment of the group.

Everybody returned home on January 11, 2009 after an exhausting but fulfilling time. Everybody indicated that they would like to return the next time the opportunity opened up.

Dr. Abdu provided a medical clinic for the native women and children from the nearby villages. The clinic had been supplied with rudimentary but necessary medicines to treat some of their common complaints. Despite the language differences and lack of a fully staffed clinic, Dr. Abdu was able to apply his insights and experience to his patients. He is a concerned and caring doctor, and his contribution to us was inestimable.

All in all, the trip was full of personal internal rewards and tangible achievement. The orphanage obtained a greenhouse built to stand the test of time and the elements of a Guatemalan jungle. Everybody was filled with a sense of fulfillment and goodwill. Everybody is looking forward to the next trip for the Mission of Love.