

## *FROM HOUSES TO HOMES* SERVICE TRIP TO GUATEMALA

*Excerpts taken from an article by Michele Carlin*

The flights were inconsequential and with a few hiccups passing through customs behind us, we finally heard, "Welcome to Guatemala!"

By now, we were a little bleary from lack of sleep and really, really hungry. All that fell away, however, when we looked around... we were in Central America with an exciting journey ahead of us....

...After one and a half hours of treacherous travel, our driver pulled over to a path that disappeared into the jungle and asked if we wanted to go for a short walk. Against my better judgment, I peered into the jungle, looked at the boys and I said, "Yes." We departed the van, stretched, looked warily through the mangle of trees and started walking. Suddenly, the valley opened up below us and we were in the shadow of a 300 year old crucifix, erected by missionaries and conquistadors when they settled in the Valley of Antigua. Later, from the streets of Antigua, we looked up and saw that same cross, keeping vigil over us in the valley.

Our hotel, Posada Don Valentino was 2 blocks from the historic central square of Antigua, the former capital of Guatemala. Because Antigua was once the capital of the country, it had a great water and sewer system with necessary irrigation. As we climbed the roads surrounding Antigua, the value of this water became abundantly clear---most residences in the hillside towns have the equivalent of 30 minutes of running water per day if they are lucky. Those who are not as fortunate must walk miles every morning to receive plastic containers of potable water for their daily use...

...The valley of Antigua is guarded by the Fire Volcano, the Water Volcano and Pacaya.

The water volcano, dormant for many years is a giant lake; the fire volcano still puffed steam as a reminder of the inevitable eruption; Pacaya, which last erupted in 2010, was our next destination after check-in at the Posada Don Valentino.

...A caldera forming eruption at Pacaya occurred 23,000 years ago. The next activity on record occurred between 1961 and 2000. More recently, strombolian activity persisted, with two to three paroxysmal eruptions each year. The most recent eruption took place on May 28, 2010. Guatemala's President declared a state of "calamity" in two provinces and opened emergency shelters to accommodate over 1,700 residents who were evacuated. The international airport at Guatemala City that we flew into remained closed for 20 hours while workers removed inches of volcanic ash...

...There are no words to describe walking on blackened ground, still warm from its 2010 eruption. The panorama was barren; steam still rose out of small holes in the ground. The air has cooled from the 75 degrees F at the base to 45 degrees at the summit. The boys crawled inside some of the holes to warm themselves before we continued on our trek... nature's sauna. Before leaving this eerie scene we roasted marshmallows and etched "T-P" into the lava field for posterity.

The hike down the volcano was a bit treacherous as well. Night was falling and the sounds of the evening were nothing less than creepy. Gone were the familiar peepers from the pond at T-P,

replaced by calls of animals and birds we could only imagine. As we descended the mountain, it began to rain, with the full downpour mercifully holding off until we returned to a covered area at the base of the volcano. It was here, the boys got their first experienced the true poverty of the area. They observed parents sending their children to beg for food and quetzals (Guatemalan money).

Our dinner Sunday evening was bittersweet as the boys reflected on the dirty, young children, running in the rain to beg for scraps, while they awaited a wonder meal of steak and guacamole. Exhausted, we went to bed early in anticipation of our first day's work...

...When envisioning the building of a house, one must stray from the conventional wooden construction of which we are accustomed. We were building a 13' X 9' single room, concrete block and mortar structure with a corrugated steel roof accented by a skylight fashioned from corrugated clear plastic. The building would have one operable window and one door that locked. The floor is poured concrete.

When we arrived at the building site, we were speechless. We expected poverty, but this moved past that. This lovely family of 5, mom, dad and 3 daughters ages 15, 11 and 4, lived in a walled patch of dry and dusty dirt. They slept under a lean-to, all 5 in the same area. They cooked over an open fire under another lean-to but were fortunate to have functioning sanitary services made private by only a few pieces of rusted, corrugated steel and a curtain of withered fabric. They bathed, washed their food, clothes and dirty dishes in the same sink and showered under a garden hose. In their "yard" we found, sand to make concrete, 100 lb. bags of cement, gravel and concrete blocks.

The workers wasted no time delegating tasks to us: move 100 blocks over to that spot and hammer a hole in the center of each; move 20 wheelbarrow loads of sand, 8 wheelbarrow loads of gravel and 8 100lb. bags of cement over there; turn on the water; dig the footings; mix the concrete...

Every day was another in the building process---move this, mix that, carry it here, dig it there...

Through blisters to calluses, sunburn to windburn, warm sunshine to chilly mist, the boys worked tirelessly alongside the patriarch of the family and his 2 oldest daughters. Anytime we were tired, we did not need to look far for inspiration to find the eyes of the family working alongside us toward our goal...

...If we take anything away from this experience, it should be a deeper appreciation for the lives we have been given. We should be grateful for what we have; we should give more to those that do not; we should complain less; we should thank more. We should define our life by the quality of living we do, not the quantity of "stuff" we have.