

Building homes in Honduras

We return to our campsite each day. Compared to the peasants, who, on average, make \$3 a day, we live in absolute luxury.

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The vultures, I'm convinced, circle at the sharpest hairpin curves, patiently waiting for our truck to ricochet off the rutted dirt road and over the side of the Honduran mountain.

My 16-year-old daughter Talia and I are part of a team of 12 Canadians and two Americans helping to build cinderblock homes for *campesinos* in two remote mountain villages. We work through a pair of non-governmental organizations: *Programa de Reconstruccin Rural (PRR)* in Honduras and World Accord in Canada, in conjunction with First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto.

It has taken half a lifetime to make this trip. The fire of wishing to volunteer at an international level was almost extinguished by work, raising a family, health concerns and the usual busyness of daily life.

Even though these conditions still exist, an inner voice has become more persistent: "Do it now, while you still can," it whispers. The voice reaches a crescendo last summer when Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, speaks eloquently and passionately in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., about our role as global citizens. He re-energizes my hunt for international volunteer opportunities.

Weeks later, my husband totes home a poster about the World Accord construction expedition. Building skills unnecessary, learn on the job, two weeks, Spanish useful but not required. It is perfect. When Talia joins the work crew we become the first mother-daughter team to participate in a World Accord Honduras project.

We launch a fundraising campaign, hoping to cover the \$1,600 in construction material we are expected to contribute. Family, friends and schools enthusiastically support us and we raise \$3,600 within six weeks. Others donate school supplies, a soccer ball, sewing material and children's clothing. Our hockey bags bulge and we wonder happily if we will exceed the airline weight limit.

Now it is early March and we are in the embrace of this Central American country, its people and culture. We marvel at astonishing beauty as we bounce up and down the west-central mountains in the back of a pickup truck, far removed from the tourist playgrounds on the coast. With one eye on the

vultures, I fervently and simultaneously pray to the gods of adequate brakes, first gear, careful drivers and competent mechanics.

Children, hearing the truck approach, rush outside to shout "Gringos, gringos!" Many have distended tummies from malnutrition or worms. They wave and smile.

Along with supplies, I arrive with a full load of cultural ignorance. I recall the safety scissors I so carefully packed for children who are taught how to handle a machete at the age of 3. I learn to my horror that the hand gesture I have used for a full week is considered lewd and offensive. We are haunted by images of emaciated dogs, so unlike our pampered pet, fed scraps by families with barely enough food to eat.

We work hard building these two homes for Santos, Amado and their families. With our hands we move tonnes of cinderblock, mix mortar and cement, make reinforcement bars, lay block, mortar cracks; by day's end we are hot, grimy and ready to throw in the trowel. Our Honduran foreman is patient and precise and more than one block has to be relaid.

The families will reimburse PRR for the cost of construction materials and contribute their own labour to upgrade their dirt-floored adobe buildings to the healthier and sturdier *casas*. Dina, a Honduran wonder woman, amazes us all as she repeatedly trots up a steep donkey path with two 16-kilogram cinderblocks balanced on her shoulder. In a dress. And thong sandals.

The children who gather at the work site are curious and delighted when the tall, fair-skinned strangers occasionally break from their work to play soccer and dominoes with them. They are shy and beautiful.

It is hot during work (probably above 30 C) and the litres of water we drink at the construction site evaporate through our skin. Rarely does anyone have to use the nearby outhouse. However, one gusty day I make my way to the curtained facility with my requisite toilet paper. With one hand gripping the flapping curtain and a steel-toed work boot sticking out beneath to signal my presence, I congratulate myself on superior multi-tasking skills -- when the chicken struts in.

Later that day, whoops and hollers alert us that the cow is making an unscheduled inspection of the *casa* interior.

During the final week, Talia and team member Bruce deliver soccer uniforms to two schools. They sing *O Canada* to the children and teach a short geography lesson, Bruce translating with his fluent Spanish. It is a highlight for both.

We return to our campsite each workday where we have running water, bottled

drinking water, electricity that works most of the time, ample prepared meals, and simple metal cots with sheets and blankets. Compared to the peasants, who, on average, make \$3 a day, we live in absolute luxury.

As well, we are without communication: no cell phones, no computers, no televisions. No CNN. No Dubya. Most of us quietly welcome this blackout and appreciate our stay in a country where orange is a fruit and not a state of alert. We know with grim certainty news will await us when we return home.

By the end of two weeks, we are loath to leave our new friends. We have built a home, established friendships with the families and other team members and acquired first-hand knowledge of living and working in a Third World country. On our last morning in Honduras, Talia slips one of her own necklaces over little Sindy's head; shared hugs transcend language.

As we pack for the return trip, we note our hockey bags are lighter. Odd, considering we gained much more than we gave.

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