

Let's take a delegation of youth and adults to Guatemala!!!!!!!!!!

G.E.T. R.E.A.L.

GUATEMALA EXPOSURE TOUR

Rights Education Awareness Learning

I know there were thoughts running through the minds of some of the participants and you, to whom we would direct the majority of our fundraising efforts, that we were just embarking on an adventure to an exotic land.

I couldn't wrap my mind around a useful purpose that this initiative would serve. I was thinking adventure. I'd visited some exotic places, witnessed substandard human rights treatment, so I figured any learning on those issues would be for the others.

Fundraising and learning begins in earnest. What do we tell people about our goals for the project. Right to the end it is difficult for some to sell our Guatemala Exposure Tour as representing any real step toward helping or eliminating the subjugation of people in third world countries.

My personal journey to confirmation took root during this time as we were walking down the path of becoming an Affirming Congregation. I felt an obligation to support that cause. I discovered that the United Church or maybe only at St. John's it is possible to have wide ranging beliefs and still be called a Christian. Both of these journeys and my pride in our congregation opened my eyes to the justification for the Guatemala Exposure Tour. It didn't make selling the concept to friends and acquaintances any easier but it planted in my psyche a concept that something positive could come of this.

Like all the rest group, my life was so busy that the trip seemed secondary to almost everything else until the final learning session, the final weekend and then the last night. Judy, bless her heart, took on the role to do all the worrying for our family for everything from malaria, election violence and

natural disasters. Jessie and I were oblivious to it all and were treating it like a weekend at Camp Kidston.

Standing out there at the airport I finally realized what I had gotten myself into: 11 females (counting Kat MacNeil, our interpreter, formerly of Sydney by way of Iona) and me on a road trip in Guatemala. What was I thinking??? I soon found my place in the pecking order and it was not at the front of the line. In all fairness to the team the only real problem I had was to try and keep them from walking in clusters in the middle of the road in a country where traffic laws are nonexistent and the only speed for vehicular traffic is as fast as you can go. All I could say was think back to fast Eddy, our first bus driver, careening around twisty, steep mountain roads. A blur of crosses marking the ones that couldn't negotiate the turns at high speed while passing on a blind corner. It took days for everyone to forgive me for diligently pointing out each cross, but still they walk in the middle of the road.

The countryside is overwhelmingly beautiful. Bold mountains, lush valleys. How can the economic discrimination, the religious discrimination and the racial discrimination have thrived here for five hundred years. It seems unbelievable, yet it is true and our Canadian countrymen have contributed to some of this madness.

As we were exposed to various organizations such as Quachum Aloom, a cooperative agricultural/research group, the New Hope Foundation headed by Jesus who told a horror story of unconscionable cruelty, the women's group Assoc of Fleur, CCDA and several schools we heard stories of terrible struggles but also witnessed a glimmering of hope. These indigenous people of Guatemala continue to hold their heads high and refuse to be defeated. With extremely limited resources these groups are trying to better themselves and strive for the justice that has been withheld for so long. In these places we saw strength in community and a real desire to aspire to a higher standard of living for their families. We saw the smiles and heard the laughter of children who are the recipients of these efforts.

After a home stay in a community outside Chimaltenango I think we all felt changed. Kate, Jessie and I kind of rolled our eyes when we were introduced to our host family and began to understand the demands of their daily living. A special bonding occurred with that family of Eddy the father, Mowdi the

mother, Hernandez and Melba. After a sleepless night we all proclaimed that it represented the most moving part of the trip to date.

The day after our home stay, as a very tired group of spiritual adventurers, we went to the Ketchiquil Presbytery. We were introduced to two very special people. Margarietta, a Pastor and Moderator of the Presbytery. Margaritta made us feel good about our project and helped us to understand how the retelling of the stories is an important part of the process.

Saul, the second individual we met at the Ketchiquil Presbytery, led us on an excursion to the Mayan historic site of Ixmiche on our last full day in Guatemala. It was a beautifully cared for site that oozed historic relevance. It was our good fortune that a traditional Mayan ceremony was taking place on that same day. It was extremely moving to see Marie Jose and Saul join in the service as participants.

I always remember Neil MacDonald stroking his chin and saying “TELL The STORIES”, “TELL The STORIES”.

That will be our role. We will tell the stories, not because we feel an obligation, but because we are changed and believe that by retelling the stories, maybe one more person will be bitten by a social justice cause.

I must close my little spiel with a few thank yous. Thank you to the Breaking the Silence Network who helped out in so many ways. Thanks to our church leaders for guiding us to an understanding of the issues and a calming of emotions. Our group worked well together. We all bonded in a special way that will remain with us. Thank you GROUP. And I think a big group hug is in order for Marie Jose for the extraordinary amount of effort she put into this excursion. We would not have had such an extraordinary experience without her.

Rod MacInnis