



## **Learning on La Finca: *Community Development from the Bottom Up***

La Fundación Turcios Lima provides technical support to poor rural farm communities where most families are returnees from exile. It hires social workers and agricultural engineers and assigns them to work in specified communities. Participating farm communities have heard about the foundation and solicited its services. I worked under the guidance of Cesar Montes, ex-Guerilla commander of FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes or Rebel Armed Forces.)

### *Project Goals*

- Learn and understand the history of the 36–year civil war and how it affected and continues to challenge the lives of the Guatemalan people
- Assist in the promotion of reconciliation efforts for campesinos in two rural farm communities

### *Personal Goals*

- Understand the hard work involved in grassroots community organizing and how to do it in a way that responds to the specific needs of La Lupita and Montecristo
- Employ and enhance my Spanish speaking abilities in addition to learning some Mam and Quiche (Mayan languages)
- Create personal relationships based on trust, listening, and interdependence

### *Activities*

- Gathered census data: name, age, weight, height, level of education, ability to read, indigenous background, and occupation
- Co-facilitated group diagnostics—local workshops that provide a space for families to evaluate community progress, discuss both short and long run needs, project ideas, and financing plans—at both Lupita and Montecristo
- Solicited aid and donations from local firms and businesses
- Contributed to the development and creation of a youth project that focused on self-esteem and collective history. This program encouraged the organization of a strengthened youth and an appreciation for their farm community.

### *Key Dilemmas*

- Local, national, and foreign political corruption—especially during an election year—partnered with false promises and an outright disrespect for the 1996 peace accords undermine development efforts and makes it difficult for families to maintain hope for a more prosperous tomorrow.
- It is an ongoing struggle for non-governmental organizations to remain active, positive, and effective when their human and capital resources are lacking.

### *Important Learnings*

- Reading about suffering and fear can never truly prepare an individual to receive oral history. Meeting victims face to face and listening to their stories of murder, rape, torture, loss, and escape is very real and terrifying.
- A community's future sustainability depends on the work and presence of a strengthened, informed, and literate youth.
- A collective with minimal resources still has the ability to create an egalitarian structure. The key elements include a common philosophy, non-opportunist technical support, and a high level of organization from the bottom up.



*A young campesino poses for a portrait at the Montecristo Maricela farm community that I visited.*

Xiomara Gonzalez

# Guatemala



At community meetings, attendance was taken. Since many campesinos in rural areas cannot read or write their own names, they sign with their thumb prints.



La Milpa: Corn is the most widely cultivated crop in Guatemala. The ever-so-essential tortilla is made from this staple produce. Expansive fields of tall and beautiful stalks can be encountered at any given moment in this green country.



(Above) A few men from Montecristo show their appreciation for their fellow neighbors by giving each other back rubs during a group workshop.

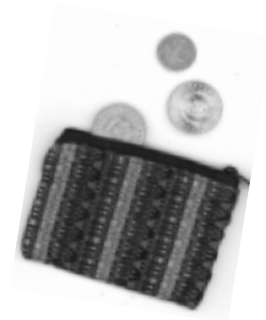


(Above) I found political propaganda all over the country—on trees, rocks, and walls—during this controversial election year.



(Center) Colorfully painted school buses serve as Guatemalan public transportation.

(Lower Right) Senora Dominga does the daily laundry at Finca La Lupita.



Elaborately decorated, condemned school buses travel down broken highways across the country into cities out of pueblos and back again. "Tikisate! Tikisate!" shouts the gold-toothed man with widened arms from the open side door of the moving camioneta in the market. "Dale, dale!" he shouts with hard slaps on the side of the bus. Heavy footsteps overhead are heard as bags and packages are tossed, caught, and squeezed into place on the bus's roof. The camioneta continues on and the man hops in. Inside, sweaty morning bodies wrapped in brightly woven traditional patterns press tightly together in contorted positions forming colorful human collages in seatbelt-less seats while struggling to breath through small window cracks. They pass golden quetzales, while making way for migrant vendors to crawl in the crowded aisle and sell their aguas or naranjas con chile pimienta. The driver pulls the loose string by his side and the horn blasts. Rocks and heavy diesel smoke trail the bus. The vehicle curves and makes sharp turns in order to avoid deep potholes. A sudden exhaustion comes over me on the Monday commute to La Lupita.

The Lupita livestock choir holds their first rehearsal of the day. The rooster begins with a high-pitched solo and the dogs provide backup with less than harmonious howls. Mosquitoes later chime in with a sporadic buzzing surround sound. The firecracker percussion will be random, not seldom, but unpredictable and dramatic indicating a birth, union, or perhaps loss. My not-so-subtle natural alarm clock partnered with the arrival of the morning heat begat by the rising sun makes returning to sleep an impossibility. I arise.

I pull my mosquito netting back, toss my legs over the hammock's side and extend my toes down until they reach the damp earth. I hoist the remainder of my body up and stand. I take my first steps and make my way to the hut's small opening so that I can confront the new day. Upon exiting, I unexpectedly plop my feet into the cool morning mud provided by the heavy rains that took place throughout the night. Very faint is the shrieking horn of the only bus into town as it passes by the Monte Gloria farm community and heads into Willywood. I look down at my freshly soiled feet, smile, and whisper "buenos dias" to myself. I rub my feet deeper into the wet ground and decide that I have never been happier.