

Return to Las Quebradas

After a lifetime, forty years, which actually was the life expectancy of a Guatemalan when our Peace Corps group served, it was time to return.

My close friend, Mary Visarraga, and I traveled to my old Peace Corps site. We meet up with my old teacher friend, Rosa. That was the real return to Guatemala - the place where I had sweat and breathed for two years.

Las Quebradas and Quezada are where my heart really lies; where some of the best days of my life were lived and this will be one of the best days again.

Nobody meets us at the bus stop on the Pan American highway so we walk for a mile with our backpacks and Rosa with her sodas in a plastic woven shopping bag on a hot August morning. There are women cooking the school lunch on a porch across from the school and the elderly Don Rodrigo, who was on the school construction committee. I barely recognize him for, of course, he is much older just as I am, and he is finely dressed from sombrero to boots.

Rosa, Don Rodrigo and I explain to the teachers the history of the construction of their school. An old dark house with no windows was used until 8 young men resolved to build a fine new school, and they involved the Peace Corps. It was agreed that each man would bring 100 handmade adobes, 100 lbs of lime gathered from the hills, 100 lbs of sand from the river, and as a group they would cut down and drag as many trees as needed for lumber. We would elicit help from our friend, Mike Guolee, who taught at Peckham Junior High in Milwaukee. Through a bake sale the students raised \$500 for a tin roof, a cement floor, windows, and hardwood doors.

The teachers were eager for their students to hear this history; we would tell the story over and over again to the 3 crowded classrooms. Really, it was just mainly me talking but the children understood and applauded. I told them to be proud. Not all communities have such determination to improve their children's education.

With the sound of applause ringing in our ears and swelling our hearts with gratitude, we walked down the hill, through a river and past a field to Conchitas. She is one of the lifebloods of the community from our Peace Corps days. We joyfully hug as if to say we are both still alive and full of that creative spirit of the sixties. Yes, Isaias, her handsome, fine featured, dark haired husband has passed away but from next door comes gentle, happy Francisco and his wife. Don Leopoldo is also walking up the path in an ironed white cotton shirt and pants. Everyone knows he is lonely, and everyone expresses sincere understanding that I live alone. Do they think more about others' feelings or am I really special to them?

Conchita has made a tasty soup of chicken broth and everyone has one or two potato slices with a sprig of cilantro. There are those delicious corn tortillas I remember and a cold soda for Conchita has a refrigerator. She sells cold soda from it, next to our bed, while we are in it, till 10 at night.

After the long awaited fiesta meal is over I bring out a half dozen of beautiful 8x12 photographs of Las Quebradas. One photo I always shared at my school, Peace Corps talks and art exhibits was the classic Guatemalan kitchen with walls made of poles. There are two younger women and an elderly grey haired woman in the center. On the left is a young girl standing behind a metate, a slab of black volcanic stone; she holds a stone to grind the corn into flour. To the right is the fogon, a raised table with a fire for cooking the clay pot of beans. This is the way women prepare the basic diet of corn tortillas and black beans eaten breakfast, dinner, and supper. Maybe every other Sunday they will prepare chicken or eggs.

I show this meaningful photo to Don Rodrigo and say that I believe this woman on the right is from Las Quebradas, and I know she died in childbirth. He says “Yes, this is my wife, and the grey haired woman is my mother.” I have never had a photo of my wife to show my first born son.

I place it in his hands. This is yours, expressing my true understanding of what was just shown to him.

Tears swell and everyone on the porch gathers around. We can't believe what has just happened. Had someone ever envisioned a connection this strong when the Peace Corps was formed? I know there is a true connection that has made the meaning of our lives deeper. How can these people time and time again give such fulfillment and meaning to my life?

Mary and I spend the night at Conchitas. Her house is one long, wide room with two beds, a tv and a refrigerator. Our bed is so ornately decorated in the Guatemala City style of lace and ruffles that Mary and I joke, “Is this our honeymoon suite?” There's a large cement sink where water is collected off the roof to wash dishes and/or clothes. The outhouse is down by the cornfield. Nothing seems to bother Conchita; she knows how to work hard and she knows how to have a really good time. She remembers at the school inauguration we had a few beers and danced till midnight.

The whole visit I wore the gold medal with blue ribbons the committee presented me in 1965. It is engraved ‘En eternal gratitud por sus multiplos sacrificios.’ “Look how she cares. She has guarded it all these years,” they say. I say to myself “Thank you for feeling about me that way in the first place and treasuring me again.”