



## VOLUNTEERING IN MEXICO

Editorial Note: Our theme this issue is Volunteering in Mexico as presented by volunteers recruited by CAPD to work with Caminamos Juntos (Walking together for Health and Development) or 'CJ'. We begin with David Wiens who expresses a sense of fulfillment that comes from using one's talents to assist others. Craig Baskett, who visited Tlamacazapa with his wife on their winter vacation, follows with the perspective of a first-time observer. Bob evaluates his contributions in terms of net benefit to the organization and reflects on lessons learned. Lastly, Chantal Camden, in charge of the Special Needs Program for six months, reflects on changes in perception and understanding as the result of a very challenging experience. We hope you enjoy reading their stories.

A description of Tlamacazapa, written by CJ, provides a context for the stories:

"Tlamacazapa is a large, poor indigenous village in rural Guerrero in central Mexico (estimated population of 8-10,000). Most of the Nahuatl-speaking people earn a meagre living by weaving palm baskets. Approximately 60% of the children are severely malnourished or undernourished and stunted. The majority of adults are illiterate, and most women over 30 years of age rarely leave the village. Major health-related problems include: insufficient water that is contaminated with bacteria and heavy metals (arsenic and lead), non-existent sanitation with subsequent heavy parasitic infestations, alcoholism among men, domestic violence, accidental/violent deaths, and malnutrition. Years of grim survival coupled with villagers' strong belief in the evil eye have shaped a complicated culture of distrust and suspicion. *Caminamos Juntos Para Salud y Desarrollo* (CJ) is a small NGO comprised of self-supporting international and Mexican volunteers working in Tlamacazapa since early 1997".

## I'D GO BACK IN A HEARTBEAT!

David Wiens, Bob's brother, had a month to spare and wondered if his knowledge and experience in concrete could be put to good use in Tlamacazapa. Of course it can, we chimed! You can join the Water & Sanitation program to construct dry toilets! Not only did David construct dry toilets, he also reviewed the design and construction techniques. David was able to make useful suggestions to reduce the complexity of construction of CJ's water and sanitation installation that now includes a toilet, water tank, bathing area and laundry scrub board.

According to David, "This was one of the best months I've spent volunteering. I would do this again at the drop of a hat. The January trip opened my eyes to what I

could and can do to help the people of Tlama. I'm looking forward to next Jan/Feb. so I can participate in the work of CJ".



David & Diacono, a local constructor, installing the mold prior to pouring toilet vaults.

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### Global Steps Together

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## A First Hand Glimpse at Life in Tlama



Dancers at the Festival.

The opportunity to visit CJ in Tlamacazapa presented itself this winter when Eva and I took our winter holiday in Mexico. Because I believe that it is important for me, as a CAPD board member, to see the work we are doing first hand, I arranged to visit Tlama during our vacation. We made our way to Cuernavaca where we connected with Bob and Marlene. After being briefed by Susan on both etiquette and some basic health precautions (don't pet the dogs – they are not pets) we headed off to Tlama.

After nearly 2 hours of driving we passed through a very pretty town that I assumed was Tlamacazapa and my first impression was that Tlama was not as bad as I had imagined. But this quaint town was not Tlama; indeed it provided a study in contrast to Tlama. Further up the dirt road we rounded a corner and could see Tlama built on a barren mountaintop. As we drove closer, a beautiful gateway made of flowers and colored plastic provided a welcoming contrast to the stark land-

scape. Having reached the CJ Centre, Bob explained the various programs showing us the sewing machines, the store cupboard, the scales used to weigh children, and at last, a dry toilet. After instruction on dry toilet protocol, I gave it a shot. I think the dry toilet is an ingenious solution to human waste in a place that has no sewage treatment and is basically perched on a rock.

Our village tour began with a visit to an open pit well. Witnessing this had the biggest impact on me – the water had garbage and algae floating on top and was a murky brown. While examining the well, someone came and got their drinking water supply for the day. I cannot imagine the effect of drinking this water on the health of residents.

Accompanied by a therapy promoter, we visited people in the Special Needs Program. Our first visit was to the house of a woman with crippling rheumatoid arthritis. We were welcomed by her family and as we visited I realized that 12 family members sleep in their house, the size of our den. Next, we visited a woman with a type of epilepsy that causes permanent damage to her nervous system. She was lying in bed while her mother and other female family members sat around her chatting and weaving baskets. It struck me as a very caring scene, truly inclusive.

Our visits to different homes in Tlama were set to a backdrop of a festival that included residents dressed in colorful costumes, a marching band, streamers of little white birds and flowers cut out of paper and what appeared to be a lot of consumption of alcohol exclusively by the male residents. Our day ended in front of the church

where the festival was in full swing. The band was playing while men and young boys dressed in costumes danced around endlessly in a hypnotic trance-like manner. The women viewers sat around the perimeter wearing headscarves in what appeared to be a scene from a Muslim country.

As I reflect back on our day in Tlama I felt there were layers of moods; the friendliness of the people whose homes we visited contrasted by the tense, threatening feeling we had passing groups of men who were intoxicated; contrasted with the thousands of beautiful white birds cut of paper strung from strings; contrasted with the hypnotic dance in front of the church. It seemed there were so many struggles in Tlama, each compounding the other but I am amazed by the resiliency of people to carry on, often carrying a burden that make their lives difficult beyond anything I could ever imagine.

Eva and I gained an appreciation for the depth of respect, caring and faith that Marlene, Bob and others hold for the people of this town, which is truly a world away. Their ability to reach beyond the barriers of culture, language and experience to help villagers fulfill their potential as human beings, is something that we will always remember.



Eva learning the art of basket weaving from Victoria, a therapy promoter.

## An Electrical Engineer Turns Volunteer

You may be wondering how a person with engineering education and experience could benefit a grass roots organization with programs in health & healing, water & sanitation, and special needs. I discussed the possibilities with Susan, the Executive Director of CJ and we decided that administration-type work would be my focus. And so I began my 2-month experience with CJ.

The first order of business was Spanish up-grading through a one-week course. I had been reasonably proficient in Spanish some years before but how would my language skills hold up in the Mexican context? I found the idioms and words to be very different and after 2 months I was just starting to become comfortable with the language.

Since I grew up in a construction household, my first task was to replace a door frame decimated by carpenter ants, thus reducing the security of the CJ office. My brother David, also a volunteer, and I had to rely on Susan as our driver, translator and knower of all the shops in order to get the materials together. Unfortunately, Home Depot has not yet arrived in Cuernavaca so we had to drive to a number of locations to find milled lumber and hardware. We finally got it all together, but used up much of Susan's valuable time in the process.

CJ needed the accounts done in order to complete the previous year's tax returns. This was something I could do relatively independently. After a month of piloting a popular accounting software package, it became apparent that this package was not usable in the present context. So, I created a data-

base to track expenses and was happy with the ease and simplicity in entering the data. I entered four months of expense receipts and this was definitely a net benefit to CJ.

I then turned my mind to CJ programs where I prepared Summary Reports for store sales, an income generating activity. Because of my engineering background (process oriented) and some retail owner/operator experience, I felt I could improve the inventory and sales tracking for this area. My changes, made after consultation with the young women using the system, were refined after personally pitching in to help sales in the village. The new record keeping system reduces data entry times, tracks sales quantities and makes new inventory entries easier and this, I feel, will be of net benefit to CJ.

I'm reasonably knowledgeable about computers and software so I advanced a number of small jobs such as drafting business cards and a publicity package, creating a database for tracking baby deliveries by CJ midwives, finalizing a logo for therapy promoters, and capturing electronic images of traditional Nahua designs for quilting. Definitely net gains.

I also learned a couple of important things. First, great technical solutions, new skills and more efficient methods are not easily implemented in community development. They require long term hand-holding, encouragement and discussion. I also saw that short term volunteers, although useful, cause extra work for an organization in providing orientation, translation, and logistical support. Perhaps the second time around, we will be more independent. But one thing is for certain, I really enjoyed the camaraderie and the opportunity to contribute.



Bob monitors a child's height & weight.



Chantal poses with therapy promoters and neighborhood children.  
(Read Chantal's story on page 4)

# Tlamacazapa is the Combination of all the Problems of the World. But it is also the Emergence of all the Possibilities in the World.

To be a volunteer with Walking Together in Tlamacazapa for six months was an experience that challenged my limits, professionally as well as personally. Arriving as a professional in rehabilitation – or better said, supposedly as a professional, I soon realized that I had to expand my vision and my concept of what it meant to work in a community program for special needs. By being more open, a world of possibilities suddenly opened. The fact that a promoter said that she could not go the following day to the Special Education School, now wasn't a problem that I had to fix, but an opportunity to better understand the reasons that influenced her decision and to better understand the life of women in Tlama. To not have the slightest idea of what to do to help a person feel better, now wasn't a question of professional incompetence but presented a possibility to work as a team with the therapy group, who continually surprised me with their excellent ideas when given the opportunity.

What am I therefore left with after these six months of volunteering? The memory of the promoters when they tried a new exercise and it went well; the smiles of children when we played with them; the smiles of people with disabilities when we visited their homes. The memories of chats with the promoters in the entrance of the Centre in Tlamacazapa or the chats with women who stopped me on the street to tell me something about their lives.

More than anything, I learned how to learn, not by using my pre-formed ideas or my prejudices, but with my mind and my heart open. I learned to question, not to limit my understanding of what I see or believe I am seeing on the superficial level but to search for the deeper reasons behind every explanation. I also have to admit that I experienced and lived the expression, "that which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger". Because, in spite of the difficulties and problems that exist, Tlamacazapa is the emergence of all possibilities for people of the village as well as for whoever takes the risk to live the community development experience (January 20, 2004, Personal Diary).



Chantal demonstrating the evaluation of child development in a baby 5-months old.



Angelica, therapy promoter, evaluating child development in a baby 6-months old.

**You can contribute to CJ's Special Needs Program through one of the following options:**

<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>COST</b>
<b>Educational materials for therapy promoters</b>	<b>\$100</b>
<b>Purchase of educational toys for children</b>	<b>\$200</b>
<b>Living expenses for volunteer for 1 month</b>	<b>\$300</b>



**Canadian Association for Participatory Development**

**Our Vision**

The vision of CAPD is to facilitate the integration of people with disabilities as contributing members of their communities and society through the building of individual and organizational capacities internationally.

**Our Mission**

CAPD builds long-term relationship of trust and respect with our partners in developing countries through a process of 'accompaniment' in which there is reciprocal learning and understanding. We value authentic participation of partners by affirming abilities, promoting local leadership and enhancing opportunities for self-actualization. We develop and assist with educational activities, financial support, technical support, networking and research

**Our Activities**

We promote and support:

- Awareness about disability and disability policy
- Participation of people with disability in projects that enhance accessibility
- Visionary leadership in organizations promoting disability issues
- Educational opportunities for people with disabilities
- Networking and information sharing on a local and international basis