

HISTORY OF THE SIERRA NORTE DE PUEBLA PROJECTS

by
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The Sierra Norte low-cost shelter projects and subsequent auxiliary projects over the past twelve-plus years were, interestingly enough, an outgrowth of District 5510 undertaking to build low-cost shelters for homeless families in Ethiopia. During my year as district governor, I was asked by a PDG in New Hampshire if our district would join with his district and several others in a matching grant to build 20 of these houses for single mothers with small children who were living in abject poverty in Ethiopia. I sent out a plea to all the clubs in our district asking that they each donate \$100. Enough funds were collected to build nine homes in this war-torn country. Knowing that our district had made it possible for nine families to have a roof over their heads was extremely gratifying to me, particularly since the project represented a tangible and permanent change in their lives for the better.

As my year of governor was nearing its end, in March of 1998, I still had some DDF funds available. A sudden idea came to me: If one district could build nine houses, perhaps several districts in our two Zones could do a much larger project. I sent a fax to all my classmates in Zones 25 and 26, saying, "Let's Build A Village!" and asking the DGs to pledge some of their DDF funds. The response was immediate and positive. While not all districts had funds remaining, fourteen districts pledged funds. I had hoped to build 20 houses; I found there were enough funds for 40! I did some research on locations and, in concert with Rotarians in Puebla, decided upon a particular village in the Sierra Norte, Cuaunetla, which had recently suffered mud and rock slides that had demolished most of the makeshift houses in the area and killed several inhabitants. I began to put together two Matching Grants of \$20,000 each to begin building 40 low-cost shelters there.

Lesson 1. Sometimes a new project will grow from a previous one.

Lesson 2. Often we tend to think too small. Try to expand your thinking.

During my year as governor our district had GSE teams paired with Pakistan. I became good friends with the GSE leader, Mohammed Nazim, from Lahore. Shortly before he was to return to Pakistan, we had lunch together and voiced how we would like to do a project together to continue our respective districts' relationship. I agreed that if he were to go home and find a proper site near Lahore and acquire it that I would come and visit his country and dedicate the land, and would return to raise funds for a Matching Grant to build a low-cost shelter project there. It was decided that I would visit during November when my term was complete, the weather was cooler and he had time to hopefully locate land for our project. This discussion took place in May of 1998.

Very shortly after our conversation India tested its nuclear weaponry. A short period afterwards, Pakistan retaliated with a nuclear test of its own. The United States evacuated the embassies in Pakistan and asked all Americans to leave the country. Tension between our two countries was high. Despite the misgivings of our district, personnel at R.I., the State Department, and my own family, on the 1st day of November 1998, I left Phoenix to fly to Pakistan. I took Pakistani clothing I borrowed from one of our GSE members to wear when I arrived.

I spent a week in Lahore, after which I traveled to Islamabad and thence to Karachi. I wore nothing but local clothing. In Lahore I had occasion to speak to several clubs. I visited a government tuberculosis hospital (frightening) and a private cancer hospital set up by their local soccer hero, Imran Kahn (state of the art). I visited museums, stepped around snake charmers and cobras on city streets, and spent an afternoon at their university. I braved their traffic in a city of nine million people and no traffic lights. I loved every minute of it. The most exciting day was the one when I traveled to the land that had been donated for the housing project and saw the foundation stone that had been laid to dedicate the project. It was our hope to build a village that would be ecologically friendly, using biogas and/or hydrogen power. We wanted a project that

could be replicated anywhere in the world. As I stood in a dusty field on the outskirts of Lahore, in my mind's eye I could see the village as it would be, families who were now homeless having shelter for their children, offering hope for the future for people who now had none. It was an emotional moment for me when I cut the ribbon and dedicated that monument.

I flew home on November 15, 1998, and began to raise money for the Pakistani project, which Nazim had named the Kinross Rotary Eco Village, in honor of Past President Glen Kinross. I spoke at many Rotary clubs in all three districts in Arizona and began to raise funds. Clubs from other places in the U.S. who wanted to build one or two houses began to send money to add to our project. It took about six months to raise the funds and put the Matching Grant together, and I sent it off to be signed by the President of the Lahore Shaheen Rotary Club. It was not returned, and I received from Nazim one of the saddest messages I have ever had occasion to read. The PDGs of Pakistan did not believe that the clubs in their districts should participate in this project where “an American woman might get all the glory”! It was the lowest point – and still is – of my Rotary life.

Lesson 3. There can be no limit to what can be accomplished if it doesn't matter who gets the credit.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson, American author, minister, activist (1803-82).

Lesson: 4. Just because one project goes smoothly, it doesn't mean the next one will.

Lesson 5. Politics exist in Rotary as in every human organization and entity. This is an unfortunate fact of life.

It took me a couple of months to decide what to do. I had about 80 checks from Rotary Clubs and individuals on my desk made out to TRF for low-cost shelters. I decided that I would put together a third Matching Grant in the Sierra Norte region if I could gain the approval of all those who had contributed funds. No small task, I eventually got the permission of all the donors and replacement checks for those that were now stale-dated, and I put together the third grant for 25 houses in the Sierra Norte.

While this Matching Grant was making its inexorable way through the system, I made my first trip to the Sierra Norte to dedicate the first 32 houses that had been completed with the money from the two original Matching Grants. I cannot describe to you how joyous this occasion was for me.

The area in the Sierra Norte where the village is built is about a five-hour drive from the city of Puebla. It is in an isolated and remote rain forest. The means of travel in the area is by burro. I saw a few of the shacks that had been spared by the mudslides, bits and pieces of wood and tin, unbelievable that people really lived in them. And then I walked down the muddy road to the site of the new village: sturdy block houses with concrete roofs, each one approximately 400 square feet in area with four small rooms and a bathroom. There were five or six along each side of the road, seven or eight going up one of the hills, six or seven more climbing another hill. The owners were proudly standing before their new homes. Some of them invited me inside, and the interiors were spotless. Each house has a special tile set into its wall with the Rotary wheel on it. These tiles are specially made by the famous Talavera Pottery Company in Puebla. There were children everywhere. A monument had been built reading: HEATHER KINROSS ROTARY VILLAGE in honor of Glen Kinross's late wife who died shortly after he completed his term as President of R.I. For a moment I sadly remembered that other monument standing in a dusty, bare field outside Lahore, Pakistan, where there would never be any Rotary houses. My sadness was short-lived, however, as the Rotarians and the villagers together celebrated the beginning of their new lives in their own sturdy and comfortable homes.

The people in the village made their own blocks with block makers purchased by local Rotarians. Although these blocks were made one at a time, the people in the village became quite proficient at producing them. People from surrounding villages stopped by and asked if the finished blocks were for sale. Thus began a

small enterprise within the original site, making and selling blocks to other villages. It provided an income to the families of the original site. This endeavor continued for quite some time.

I had told the PDG who was my contact in Puebla that I would like to see literacy emphasized in the village. The Puebla Rotarians had begun a literacy program on their own, and on the day I dedicated the houses, I also saw 16 children receive their diplomas indicating that they had graduated from the program. I could never have dreamed that this would take place on this day.

After much ceremony I was presented with “petitions.” I came to understand that this rite would be a part of every ceremony that I attended in the villages on each occasion that I visited. These “petitions” were requests for other items that were needed: a TV and DVD for teaching by satellite at the little school, basic lab equipment for the chemistry class, playground equipment for the children, an ambulance. Their needs were numerous.

On this first trip the DG and the DGE from District 5490 (my husband’s district) traveled with us. They immediately bonded with their counterparts in District 4180. That relationship continues to this day, which has resulted in a number of projects between the two districts. A continued friendship has been built between subsequent DGs in both countries, who have attended one another’s installation dinners, conferences and other events. An important outcome was the shipment of four cartons of wheelchairs being sent to the area through matching grants with the Wheelchair Foundation, with a fifth container delivered in January 2007. A USA-Mexico Friendship Conference, the first of which was held in Oak Ridge, Tennessee (which I attended) was held in Arizona, and has resulted in annual conferences being held alternatively in Arizona and Mexico with attendees from Mexico, Arizona, California, Tennessee and Colorado. During a three-day weekend many projects are funded and coordinated between clubs in the United States and Mexico. District 5490 had a GSE exchange the next year with District 4180, thus continuing the bonds of fellowship that have been formed.

With the help of Rotarians in Puebla a beehive program was initiated in the Sierra Norte. A family can buy 10 beehives and pay 10% of their profits per year from the honey that is produced. The balance is added income for the families. Beehives have an approximate life of ten years.

With the help of Puebla Rotarians there is a reforestation project whereby thousands of trees are being planted: 3-year, 8-year and 30-year trees. The 3-year trees will be used for making bark paper, the 8-year trees for inexpensive pink cedar furniture, and the 30-year trees for expensive red cedar furniture. They are thinking of income for the present, for their children and for their grandchildren.

Lesson 6. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves, too.

All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.

-Goethe

There is no way I can improve on the lesson in this quotation. It describes to me exactly what has been taking place in the Sierra Norte de Puebla for the past eight and a half years. When I began I could never have predicted a literacy program being started or that over 1,100 people who were previously completely immobile would now have wheelchairs. I could not have dreamed that 100 families would be receiving income from beehives or that a long-term reforestation program would be undertaken.

AND THAT’S NOT ALL!!

While the houses continued to be built, my husband, Ron, took one of the petitions to his club, the one requesting video equipment for the school. I went to my own Scottsdale club and asked for funds to purchase playground equipment for the children. Both our clubs met these requests with enough funds to provide these items to the people of Heather Kinross Rotary Village. In these instances I actually sent the money directly to a trusted PDG in Puebla. He went to vendors in that city, bought playground equipment, a TV, a VCR, a DVD and cassette players, and Rotarians from Puebla delivered these objects to the village the following week, sending me photographs of the gifts being presented and copies of the paid invoices.

Lesson 7. The more Rotarians who are exposed to a project, the more apt it is to continue.

Lesson 8. There are many ways to raise funds and to provide needed items and fill requests; it requires some creative thinking and sometimes is as simple as asking a club to sponsor a particular need. Try “possibility thinking”: how many possible ways can I fund this project? Brainstorm. Don’t be afraid to be outlandish. You will be amazed at the ideas that will come to you.

The third Matching Grant was finally funded. The sponsoring Rotarians in Puebla decided that houses should be built in three additional villages as well as in Cuaunautla. Thus there are now houses also in the town of Tecamachalcho on the flatlands near Puebla, and in the Sierra Norte villages of Tlacuilotepec and San Pablito. In Tecamachalcho they have begun a micro loan program to continue the building. Each family has the equivalent of a small mortgage and pays a very small amount each month, gaining equity in their home. This is being done totally outside Rotary funds from TRF, something one always hopes for.

In Cuaunautla the people have built a fish tank which has been stocked with fish to provide their families with a source of more protein.

When I visited these three villages to dedicate the houses, I saw the most amazing happening take place in Tlacuilotepec. Seven families received Rotary LCS houses. Many other villagers also need houses but were not chosen for these particular LCS. The people who received houses got together with those who did not and they all agreed to put funds into an account each month. This account is overseen by Rotarians. Each month they pull the name of one of the people who did not receive a house and they get together and build one for that family. When I visited the area to dedicate the Rotary houses, one of the community leaders said, “Thank you for teaching us how to fish and not just giving us a fish.”

Lesson 9. Man’s mind, stretched by a new idea, never goes back to its original dimensions.”

“Oliver Wendell Holmes, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice, (1841-1935)

Lesson 10. Enthusiasm is contagious.

This project has become well known in Districts 5510, 5490 and 5500. A Rotarian from the Tucson Sunrise Rotary Club in District 5500 contacted me and said that he had found a used ambulance for sale at the Tucson Fire Department. Donations from the Rotary Club of Scottsdale (5510) and the Rotary Club of Tucson Sunrise (5500), along with a personal contribution from a friend of mine in London for “whatever the greatest need is” provided sufficient funds to allow for the purchase of the ambulance for use in the area of the Sierra Norte where there is currently no transportation for medical emergencies.

District Simplified Grants from 5510 and 5490 and a donation by the Rotary Club of Phoenix 100 (5490) have provided funds to purchase basic laboratory equipment for the chemistry class in the school at the village of Cuaunautla. An old school chum of mine, a non-Rotarian, heard about the need, and she sent enough money to pay the sales tax on the lab equipment. This little school has such a dedicated teacher that without even basic equipment, the chemistry class placed second in district testing for chemistry.

The people in the village have begun a pre-school/kindergarten for the three- and four-year olds so they can get a head start in school. I was so honored to hear that it is named the Norma Taylor Kindergarten.

It took considerable effort and much patience to get the ambulance across the border. The lab equipment is unfortunately probably still sitting at the border in Laredo, Texas, where Rotarians tried to get it across the border. In the meantime they have purchased some basic items in Puebla in order to make good on my promise to the teacher in the school in Cuaunetla that I would try to get him the items necessary for him to teach chemistry.

PDG Barb Feder put together a Matching Grant for food to be used as emergency rations for the people of the Sierra Norte and also those who live in poverty throughout the Puebla area. It has been learned that beans and rice can be purchased cheaper in Mexico than in the U.S. Barb, along with PDG Greg Podd, Sharon Johnson and Gary Tannenbaum delivered this food, 33,000 pounds of beans and rice, to the people in the Sierra Norte in May of 2005.

Most of these projects have required innumerable hours of work, created a sometimes intolerable frustration level, and have necessitated patience equivalent to that required of a saint, and required a great deal of faith and belief that through Rotary and with the aid of Rotarians, an entire region can be transformed. I believe the lessons learned by the partnering clubs, districts and individual Rotarians who have participated in the projects in the Sierra Norte is that by working together it is possible for permanent changes to take place in an entire region. Surprisingly some of these improvements can take place totally outside of money from TRF, because when people begin to have hope, when they have a house they can be proud of, when they have an opportunity for an income and for their children to receive an education, they begin to take responsibility for themselves and their children to have better lives. Each time I visit the area I see more prosperity, evidence of pride in their homes with curtains at the windows and flowerbeds in the front yards. The people are smiling. I see hope for the future.

What began as a low-cost shelter project to build 65 houses in a devastated and hopeless area is now a multi-faceted energized movement affecting the entire Sierra Norte de Puebla. Money has now been raised to build the last two houses to make a total of 104 houses at last count. Thirty-seven of these were built through micro loans and cooperation among the people themselves. The final two houses were built with funds raised by PDG Barb Feder from individuals and Rotary Clubs in District 5510. There are probably an average of four to five people in each family, so 400 to 500 people have roofs over their heads who did not when these projects began. The people have homes, a kindergarten, a school with modern teaching equipment, beehive and forestation programs which will provide income, playground equipment for their children, and wheelchairs for their crippled. The home building continues using micro loans and funds outside The Rotary Foundation. Now they have basic lab equipment for the chemistry class and an ambulance for emergency medical transportation. Never in my wildest imagination could I have predicted what has happened in the Sierra Norte de Puebla because of dedicated Rotarians and The Rotary Foundation.

Lesson 11. You will get tired, frustrated and impatient, and sometimes you will wonder if it is worth it. It is.

Lesson 12. Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, a bowl of strawberries in one hand and a glass of champagne in the other, and loudly proclaiming, "WOW, What a ride!!"

-Anonymous

This last quotation may not exactly be a lesson per se; however, it is surely a great philosophy for Rotarians who are involved in humanitarian projects.

P.S. I was ill with cancer during the 2005 and not able to travel to the area for any of the events which were taking place. However, during my illness I had a call from PRIP Glen Kinross from Brisbane, Australia, saying that when I am well again, he would like for me to take him to visit Heather Kinross Rotary Village and see for himself what has been accomplished in the area. It is my great hope that I will one day be able to make this trip with him, because without Past President Glen, the low-cost shelter project would not have existed and the progress in the Sierra Norte would never have happened.

Now it is August of 2006. I have just returned from traveling to Puebla. However, on the plane going down to Mexico City, I had an emergency problem with my throat which necessitated my immediately turning around and coming back home for medical care. Traveling with me were Beth Wexler of the eClub and John Slentz from the Phoenix Arcadia Rotary Club, Jason Brock from the Scottsdale Rotary Club, PDG Bill and Roberta Snedecor from District 5490, and my daughter, Debi Archibald. My daughter graciously acted as my representative and surrogate, and she will write the final chapter of this story.

The following account is that of Debi Archibald:

As a non-Rotary “outsider”, I don’t bring detailed knowledge of the grant process or Foundation mechanisms that resulted in the low-cost housing in the Sierra Norte region of Mexico. However that knowledge is in no way required to see, feel and experience the difference it has made in the lives of the villagers (and the participating Rotarians).

I had originally planned to take part in the four-day trip commemorating the one-hundredth home to support my mother and to see the culmination of all her fund-raising and frustration-bearing efforts of the last several years. It never crossed my mind that circumstances would lead me to stand in as her representative. When a medical emergency forced her to go home without seeing her beloved villages, I was more than a little apprehensive at trying to “take her place” in the eyes of people who adore her and her team. That apprehension dissipated almost immediately in the face of the love and acceptance of the village residents.

It amazed me that in a part of the world where e-mail, voice mail, Internet and instant connection are more Future Shock than reality, the message of the Rotary projects had spread throughout the rain forest. Our very first stop was in San Pedro where no houses have been built, nor have any been planned to my knowledge. Yet this village was very much aware of the opportunity Rotary represents. Their native Totonaco dancers in colorful costume presented a beautiful indigenous ceremony. Their community leader, who had spent some time working in the U.S., then made an eloquent request for housing assistance for his people. He clearly understood what is required to help his community elevate themselves and saw in Rotarians the catalyst to start that change.

We then traveled (and traveled and traveled) to Tlaxco for the dedication of the 100th Rotary House; the first in this village. I was overwhelmed and humbled by the reception. Fireworks were set off at the entrance of the village and we all, men and women, were showered with garlands and bouquets of flowers. It seemed that every single woman and child in the village passed through an impromptu reception line to offer a hand and a kiss and an emotional “gracias”. The Rotary team then mingled with the villagers and walked through the entire length of the Tlaxco to the site of the 100th house. On either side of the street were structures that I can’t even validate with the word “house”. I thought over and over, “How does anyone pull himself up out of this staggering poverty?” One family graciously allowed us to tour her “house”; only two of us could fit at a time because the one room was completely taken up by a bed and shelves holding all their belongings. I have no idea how many slept in that bed at night. Children and chickens were everywhere and there was an abiding (and understandable) sense of lethargy.

At the end of the main road, we started up the hill to the site of the first Tlaxco Rotary home and the dedication ceremony and presentation of keys to the female head of the household. It was festive and

upbeat, and everyone seemed truly happy for his or her neighbor who received this first house. A lottery was held there for the second home, and a Mexican Rotarian was so moved by the statement of a four-foot tall

elderly widow that “she hoped she got the house because she was all alone”, that he personally pledged to build her home.

I’m really glad the timing of the trip was such that I saw Tlaxco before I saw Cuaunautla because I don’t think I would have grasped the difference the project had made otherwise. As we were going into town, a Puebla Rotarian originally from Germany told me how different the people in this town were since he first met them six years ago. Then they would not make eye contact, they had no hope, no purpose. Probably a lot of the lethargy I sensed in Tlaxco. We were honored with a flag ceremony on the basketball court, surrounded by many of the children who now attend the various levels of schools in the town. Despite the heat, the high school girls in the color guard were perfectly crisp in their tailored uniforms and represented their State proudly. The principal went on to tell us how many students had gone on to college and to careers, and how hope is now the rule and not the exception. No principal of Brophy or Xavier or any private American school had any more reason to be proud of his students.

He spoke of the need for ongoing “apoyo”.. support... to finish the good work that has begun here, and the Mexican Rotarians in turn promised the support. There is a palpable synergy between the residents and their fellow countrymen Rotarians. It is not difficult to look forward and see how much more progress will be made.

Down the road in the Heather Kinross village, the most striking image for me was that of a young, terribly handicapped girl living in one of the Rotary houses. We were invited into the house that was absolutely immaculate. This child, also immaculate, was warmly wrapped in her wheelchair (provided by the Wheelchair Foundation) and grinned happily, watched over by her mother. I thought how hard it must be to care for such a disabled child in these circumstances, but how much more fortunate this young girl was than the children living in the Tlaxco shelters. The people in this village, where they run the trout farm, were much energized and animated and came to meet us in the streets with gifts of homemade wine and bananas. Their pride in their homes was written across their faces.

In his speech, the high school principal in Cuaunautla talked about love – amor - , being the foundation of all change. The love that Rotarians on either side of the border have for these people. The love the parents have for their children and the dreams for a better life. The love they all have for their beautiful country. The villages where Rotary has committed to partner with the residents are living and changing testaments to the power of love.

I went to be with my mother on this trip. I never thought I would have to be Mother Teresa for a weekend.

Lesson No. 13: All you need is love.

John Lennon.

EPILOGUE

I believe that sometimes we do not know exactly when the seed of an idea is planted. It may take many years for it to take root. I do believe that every successful project emanates from one person’s idea. If you have an idea for a project, small or large, and you can see it in your mind’s eye, you can make it happen. Below is the story of when my “seed” was planted.

The first time I went to Mexico was 1963. I felt so sophisticated and worldly wise. I had never been out of the country before. I was 30 years old. My husband and I spent some time in Mazatlan and then went on to Guadalajara. We were recommended to a restaurant - I believe it was called La Copa de Leche. I was wearing a brand new tropical-style strapless sundress, fancy strappy sandals, feeling quite sophisticated, a woman-o-the world, as we exited our taxicab in front of the restaurant. As we approached the entrance, there was a young mother, maybe 15 years old, half lying on the sidewalk and leaning up against the building, holding an emaciated baby, barely a newborn, who was so weak it could not even cry. She was trying to nurse it. Both of them were in dirty rags. That little girl -- for that is what the mother was -- looked directly into my eyes. Never before have I seen such a look of complete doom. I had never in my life seen a beggar before. As we passed, she held out her hand in which was a small basket with one coin in it. We went on into the restaurant and were greeted by waiters in tuxedos, there were tables set with crisp, snowy white linens, shiny silverware, fresh flowers. We sat down, but I could not forget that mother and child I had seen leaning against the wall outside. I could hardly eat, thinking of her being hungry. I began to cry. I told my husband to go outside and give her some money, which he did. We had a lovely dinner and when we left, the little girl and her baby were gone. I have often wondered if they survived the night. I have never forgotten them.

Whenever I got exasperated or impatient or upset about trying to get these houses built for the poorest of the poor, I remember that scene. It is indelibly etched in my mind. At that time 43 years ago I had never heard of Rotary. I could not provide a roof or food for that unfortunate little girl and her baby, and I have always wished she could have known the effect she had on me. I firmly believe that it is because of her that there are now 100 houses in the Sierra Norte, that there recently was delivered 32,000 pounds of beans and rice to the area, that they have playground equipment for their children and will in the future have laboratory equipment to help teach their children, and as an unexpected benefit that there have been four containers of wheelchairs (240 and 280 per container) for disabled people delivered to the area with another container to be delivered soon. She was and is my inspiration, and I hope that she and her little one have a special place in heaven.

July 2010. A short time ago I received the following message from my counterpart in Mexico that phone lines were being installed in the original village and that they now had TECHNOLOGY!

Hi Norma

i hope you are doing just fine!

Last weekend I went to the village, and we were thinking about you, hoping and praying you were just fine

People have improved their way of living a great deal, and Pahuatlan has also changed a lot, now they just have installed large antennas for phones, so now you can use your portable phones. The road from Pahuatlan to Cuauneutla (where the village is), and to Tlacuilotepec (where they offered us a great parade once), (and where we left the ambulance) is also been paved

Modernity is coming along!!!!

Regards

ALEJANDRO GOMEZ LEAL

I hope one day to be able once again to travel to my beloved villages and see my friends there. The small children who followed me and held my hand in October of 2000 when I first visited are now grown up. I will

never forget them picking flowers and presenting them to me on that first visit. It was the most beautiful bouquet I have ever received.
