

HOLA! WE'RE BACK!

After a whoosh of a trip to La Capilla, San Ramon, in Guatemala, Conrad, Greg, and I are back. Even though these first few days after our return feel like we left all our strength, heart, and spirit with the La Capilla community, we also feel filled to the brim from so many hugs from so many children, the kindness and gratitude of so many families, and the beauty of a place so full of grace even in the middle of much poverty. I said in a Facebook post that much of what we are bringing back from our travels simply cannot fit in a suitcase; you need a broken-open heart and mind to carry it all home.

While I'm still unpacking both heart and mind, I want to share a few highlights. Then I hope that Conrad, Greg and I can put together some kind of presentation soon to give you a better sense of the place, people, and mission we experienced over the ten days we were away. Here is a first snapshot...

Our time in Guatemala really began after a long, winding journey on mostly dirt and rocky roads from Guatemala City to the Mission House for Hands for Peacemaking in Barillas. There we were offered a warm welcome from Marco Tulio Maldonado and his wife Mimi, who held the fourteen of us with such hospitality and grace from arrival to departure. Our first task that night was to meet the staff and then to divide into teams to learn how to assemble the stoves we'd come to install in 152 homes, as well as in the school and churches in the community. "Team Fauntleroy" got the hang of things pretty quickly for first timers! Just a few loose screws. And we learned the Aller stoves replaced open cooking fires found in much of rural Guatemala, making homes healthier, especially for the women and children, and reducing the work and environmental impact of gathering fuel. Manufacturing (and constantly improving) the stoves onsite in Barillas also provided employment for the Hands for Peacemaking staff and for those in the villages who supported our efforts to reach homes and communicate with families, and then with continued follow-up for repairs and upgrades in all of the communities long after we were gone.

Along with the stoves, we supplied Eco water filters and had brought 15 giant suitcases with school supplies for about 180 children, reading glasses for seniors, basket- and soccer balls, *and* I'd tucked in 50 of our Fauntleroy Easter butterflies, which turned out to be a great delight and instant connection with kids we met along the way!

After a good night's work and sleep at the Mission House, we attended a marvelous worship service at Iglesia Centro Biblico Vida Abundante (Abundant Life Church) in Barillas, where we shared your gift of "God's Got the Whole World in God's Hands" by singing in Spanish with the congregation and then they shared a verse in English that they had been preparing for us! We were blessed and sent with joyful music and a spirit-filled sermon that had enough fiery passion in it to almost make translation unnecessary.

Then it was off to the Western Highlands with volcanos in view from the bus windows, steep gorges along the narrow roads, roadside shepherds, some official roadblocks and one delightful one set up by kids with a long rope "demanding" some coins to let us continue down a detour through their village. Thank goodness for Conrad and his ukulele-led singing that made the miles feel like they were going by quickly.

Finally, after a dusty and lengthy journey, we arrived in La Capilla to an extraordinary reception. The whole village met us at the bus doors with flower petals, cheers, marvelous music, and the merriest

band of Carnival clowns in full drag who urged us up the hill to the stage on the schoolyard. Their joy was contagious! And the hugs from more children than I could count washed away any weariness of travel. What a welcome! Even the “old-timers” said they’d never experienced anything like it.

And the day remained full of emotion—the whole range of it. That night as I was leading devotions for our group, loud music played at a home just beyond the school where we’d set up camp. It was loud enough that we assumed it was some kind of party and asked Marco if things could be just a little quieter. He shared he’d heard it was a wake for a two-year-old who had died of a fever. Tradition required music and prayers to be lifted loudly all night until the funeral the next day. Suddenly the mood shifted from casual devotions to prayerful concern for the family. A small group of us asked about the appropriateness of visiting to offer condolences to the family. Hearing that it would be warmly received, we arrived at the simple home on the hill surrounded by nearly everyone from the village—oldest to youngest—sitting in vigil in plastic chairs or on makeshift benches around the home. We settle on a bench and held silence and quiet prayer, too, as the music played on. Only in the small pauses between the songs could you just catch the sounds of the deep weeping and grief from somewhere inside the home. It was enough to break our hearts. Eventually we headed back to the school but were told most would remain there until morning.

And that was just the first day in this rural village of about 700 residents who mostly speak a Mayan dialect of Q’anjob’al. It was hard to believe that in a nation with urban centers, tourist attractions, and upcoming election posters plastered everywhere, these families cooked with firewood and collected rainwater during the rainy season or walked to the river to get water during the dry season. We were told the average income ranged from \$6-10 dollars a day. Most of the women told us their husbands were miles away for work. Some had a little electricity and had set up tiendas with refrigerators to hold simple snack foods for sale. Most had cellphones but washed clothes by hand, and at least half the homes had dirt floors, wood slated walls, and corrugated iron roofs. No doors. No windows. Still, in all the dust was a counterpoint of vibrant color in everyone’s dress. We were the drabest people in town with our t-shirts and jeans. A simple bright green church called “¡Jesucristo viene pronto!” was just down the main street, and the school that was our homebase was a hive of kids playing until late at night. And equally vibrant was the expansive hospitality and mutuality that was evident in how older children shepherded younger and families shared what they had with one another *and* with us: bananas, mangos, watermelon, cold water, a ladder, a hoe, a helping hand, and, as I mentioned, hug after hug after hug. This was our introduction to La Capillas...