

**Thrivent Builds Worldwide  
El Salvador Community**

# **Travel Diary**



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# Nicole Doebert



## Occupation:

Marketing and Communications Specialist, Thrivent Builds with Habitat for Humanity Alliance Strategy Office. I create marketing pieces and Web promotions to inspire our members to make a difference through Thrivent Builds.

## Previous mission/travel experience:

I helped with the initial design of the Thrivent Builds Worldwide Gulf Coast Community. I've also traveled to Europe for my honeymoon, and to various places in the U.S.

## Hobbies:

I love to sing and use my talents with a Christian music ministry. I also devour books and knit lots of gifts for family and friends. I try to be healthy so I like to experiment in the kitchen and work out in aerobics classes. Bible study is also a priority ... as is time with my husband and friends drinking good coffee.

## Reason for joining this team/trip:

I've gotten to be part of Thrivent Builds projects for work ... but I really wanted to participate in one strictly to give something of myself. I wanted to serve families ... and by doing so, to serve God. I also wanted to learn about what life is like outside of the United States. We live in a society of excess and constantly full schedules. I wanted to be immersed in a completely different culture, even just for a short time, to find out what people are like in another part of the world.

## The thing about this trip that most excites you:

To meet families in a culture so different from ours ... but also to appreciate how much we are all the same and that we are all here to serve God.

# El Salvador Community

## Aug. 2, 2008

In the Wisconsin airport at 4:30 a.m., I was the first person of the day to go through security. The trip officially began as I stood there, filled with excitement, anticipation and just a little anxiety as I prepared to embark on my first international Thrivent Builds Worldwide trip. I had heard from so many others about how these trips were life-changing. I wondered ... how would it change my life? Would it strengthen my faith? Would it make me realign my values?

On my flight to El Salvador, I sat next to a man from that country. He worked in the U.S. to send money back to his family. It is very common for El Salvadorans to support their families this way.



When we arrived at the airport, our friendly volunteer coordinator Patty greeted us with a Habitat para la Humanidad (i.e., Habitat for Humanity) sign. Since members of our team were from all around the country, this was the first time we all met in person. Patty led us to our van where we loaded our luggage and piled in for the two-hour ride to Santa Ana.



We arrived at the Hotel Sahara, our residence for the week— attractive and clean, very friendly staff and, thankfully, air-conditioned. After dropping our bags off in our rooms, we went to a

meeting room in the hotel and received our orientation from Patty and her fellow Habitat colleagues, Ana Maria and Fernando, from the regional Santa Ana office.

During the meeting, we learned about the desperate housing need in El Salvador—one third of the population lives in substandard housing. We also learned about the type of houses being built and the construction work we'd be doing for the week. Before wrapping up, Thrivent Builds welcome kits (toiletry bags filled with necessities like sun block, bug spray and a reflection journal in which to record our thoughts and learn more about Thrivent Financial and Habitat) were given to everyone on our team.



After orientation, we gathered on the open-air veranda for our first team meeting. Our leader, John, talked to us about how Thrivent members, by purchasing Thrivent Financial products, actually make programs like Thrivent Builds Worldwide possible. As a fraternal benefit society, Thrivent Financial gives back to the community. We

then had an opportunity to tell why we were on the trip and shared our fears and expectations.

Most of us had been up since 3:30 a.m., so we made it an early night and settled in for a good long sleep. We drifted off to the sounds of a Salvadoran wedding band.



## Aug. 3, 2008

I was up earlier than necessary this morning, along with my roommates Laurie and Carole, so we took our time getting ready for church. We met downstairs around 8:30 a.m. for a buffet breakfast before we left for Cristo Rey Lutheran church with Ana Maria from the regional Habitat office in Santa Ana.



The church was small and brightly painted. Pastor Carlos Najera gave a brief welcome, which Tom, one of our team members, translated for us. Despite the language barrier, the church service was incredibly moving. I was almost in tears several times. The people were so welcoming even though we were complete strangers.

Pastor Najera spoke about how Jesus fed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Tom shared with us that even though most of us couldn't understand Spanish, the pastor had still

addressed us throughout the sermon, saying that by our presence we weren't just building homes, we were building hope.



After the service, we distributed school supplies we'd brought for the children of the church. Ana Maria gave a passionate speech to recruit

Habitat volunteers and within minutes, she had a long list of people ready to volunteer!

We had a chance to change our clothes before we headed off for the afternoon. We drove for about half an hour when suddenly, at the top of a large hill, we saw beautiful lush green mountains with a gorgeous lake nestled in the center. We stopped at the top for

photos. Then, our amazing driver Ramon took us back down the mountain trail to a lakefront hotel where we had lunch on a freestanding deck set on tall stilts. We were joined by another Habitat team from Massachusetts, and Cristina, the architect of the community we would help build.



After lunch, we took a bumpy ride back to Santa Ana. It was a great time to get to know team members better. The rest of the evening was spent in the Santa Ana city center, at the hotel for dinner, and then reflecting together in the open-air lounge.

We shared the Prayer for the Future by Óscar Romero and discussed the significance of his life in El Salvador. (His assassination in 1980 was a tipping point that began the civil war.) We discussed how our own spiritual experiences brought us to El Salvador; how the events of the day had an impact on our faith; and how the church service had moved each of us. We all wanted to give more.

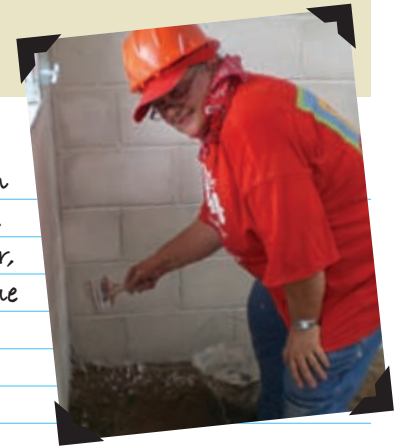
## Aug. 4, 2008

We were up by 6 a.m., decked out in work clothes and boots. After breakfast, we were off to the build site in a rural part of Santa Ana where Habitat for Humanity El Salvador had obtained land for a community of about 60 homes.



We drove to a larger building that was already completed and will eventually be a day care center. For now, it is being used as "construction central." Habitat El Salvador staff and Pastor Najera greeted us and gathered us together for a morning

devotion. Pastor Najera, with translation from Patty, led our devotion and prayer. We then held hands for the Lord's Prayer, said in Spanish and English at the same time. We also met one of our partner families, Óscar and Marisol and their children Óscarito and Paola.



With water in hand, we headed toward the two duplexes we would help build. The four Thrivent Builds teams here before us had completed much of the house construction, which meant our team could work on finishing the houses this week.



The day's tasks: apply two coats of primer (called "cal") to the houses; cover the floors with a sort of cinder gravel to level them before laying tile; and haul wheelbarrows full of dirt to put around each house. The latter was my job ... which meant bringing the dirt from 1 1/2 blocks away! Team member Len, a former marine, joined me. When one of the masons noticed that I had been hauling dirt most of the day, he said that I had "muy músculos"

or "much muscles." I told him it was because I was a tough American woman.

After a short break, I shifted duties (realizing my limitations) and hauled cinder gravel into the house with my teammate, Tim. The gravel pile was only about 20 feet from the house. Tim and I took the carts of cinder across bridges the masons set up (so we wouldn't get stuck in the mud), then into the house where we smoothed the cinder with a shovel.

At mid-morning, the partner family who would be moving into the house came to visit. The family introduced themselves: José Antonio and Aida ... and soon they would be joined by little Felipe. Somehow, through a few shared words, I learned that the baby was due in October; José Antonio sells cell phones; they hope to run a pharmacy in the community; and Aida is excited about the beautiful view from their home. The couple even showed me



ultrasound photos of Felipe. I couldn't believe how much we could share with hand gestures and a few words. Meeting the family was a memorable experience.

Encouraged by my previous attempt at speaking Spanish, I talked a bit with the masons during lunch. Again, I found

that just a few words of Spanish got me much further than I could've imagined. I learned that Antonio had 13 brothers and sisters, and five children ranging in age from two to 17. I found out that Juan and Will were brothers, and that Matozo had been learning English from the previous teams.

Of course, I made mistakes along the way. For instance, the masons thought it was hilarious when I said, "tengo esposa," which means, "I have a wife," instead of "esposo" for "husband." But even with my serious lack of grammar skills and large vocabulary, I found that if I tried to communicate in Spanish, or even made hand gestures, they were eager to share with me. And I'm so very glad they did.

After cleaning up, everyone on our team felt very tired but satisfied with the work that was done. During the ride home, we

reflected on the language barrier being less of an issue than we'd thought it would be. There are just some things—like family and helping others—that are universal.



## Aug. 5, 2008

Today we painted the inside walls of the duplex that we primed yesterday. The four of us who were painting had fun joking and laughing. Sometimes our masons even joined in. Pedro was especially friendly and smiled all the time. He'd also been asking us to teach him a little English, which Tom and Ron—our best Spanish speakers—were happy to do.

By this time, we were starting to feel very comfortable around each other. I had previously shared that I used to sing opera, so, after a bit of coaxing by Ron, I belted out a chorus. He followed with a song from Gilbert and Sullivan. We spent much of the morning serenading while we were painting.



During our break, we learned from Ana María that she has a bachelor's degree. Her daughter is a doctor, another daughter is an engineer and her son is pursuing his master's degree in engineering in Germany. She is very proud.

We also talked about her hopes for the community. Ana María told us that while they have both private and public education in El Salvador, many children don't learn as much as they could. More importantly, she believes children must receive education in good values along with academic education. What good is a lawyer without morals or an engineer who doesn't care about people?

Ana María was such an inspiration to me! Here was a woman who was educated and had made a better life for her family—but had also chosen to make a better life for her countrymen, as well. Inspiring!

## Aug. 6, 2008

This morning, most of the team continued painting the inside of one duplex and the outside of the other. However, the “fun” job for most of the day involved moving rock, then digging a ditch in front of both houses to prepare for the sidewalk and curb. The team moved a tent along with them for protection from the blazing sun. As they dug, one of the masons used a machete to make the sides of the ditch straight and to the exact measurements. The

measurements were laid out with two strings suspended from sticks.

Construction on the site ended early today for a special treat. The partner families joined us and brought their children, while the local women, Patty and Ana María, taught us how to make traditional Salvadoran food—pupusas.

We dipped our hands lightly in water, then made a ball with the pupusa dough. Next, we flattened the dough by patting it back and forth between our fingers. We added beans and cheese through a small hole, closed up the ball, then flattened it again between our fingers and put it on the grill. Several women, including Ana María, had been working all day to prepare the rest of our feast: pupusas, pastry with vegetables inside, tamales, yucca (which tasted like potato to me), corn and cheese. While we were eating, a piñata shaped like a chicken appeared.



You could just see the anticipation in the children's eyes. The kids waited as politely as they could for us to finish eating, and then the fun started. One by one, each child was blindfolded, spun around three times and was given a stick to try to hit the piñata. When it was broken open, goodies spilled out for all of the children.

We then moved on to sack races. First the children, then some adults were coaxed (or in my case, dragged) into the game as well. I laughed so hard, I nearly collapsed. It was a purer sense of joy than I had felt in a long time.

After a quiet dinner of chicken and mashed potatoes, we headed to the roof for reflection and everyone shared their observations of Salvadoran culture. Words like “welcoming,” “friendly,” “open” and “fun-loving” came up many times. Surprisingly, every person said it had been easier to enter into this new culture than they'd imagined.

## Aug. 7, 2008

Some of our team continued painting the inside of a duplex.

Others painted the outside of the other house while the masons installed the tile floor. The rest of our team did some additional digging for the sidewalk because heavy rain had caused some of the dirt to collapse.

Today, I had an opportunity to talk with Noemí, a single mother for whom a special house was built to accommodate her wheelchair. She suffered from a stroke that left her unable to support her own body. Fernando, the Habitat social worker, mentioned that Noemí





could get better with therapy—but that it would be extremely painful and cost much more than she had available to her. Before moving into her new home, Noemi paid \$100 a month to rent an

abandoned house—a huge expense considering the average monthly income in El Salvador is \$185. She used cardboard to make room dividers for her children. When it rained, six inches of rain and mud covered the floor—a difficult and unhealthy situation.

I was so happy to learn that Noemi now lives in a new, two-bedroom home with her four children and her mother. When asked what her house meant to her and her family, she broke down into tears, saying that her house “meant everything.” It provides shelter for her family and a place where she can maintain her business selling coffee, hair nets that she crochets, and piñatas made in her living room.

Despite her hardships, Noemi was full of joy and faith. She insisted on having her photo taken with us and asked us to sign her address book so she could remember us. I know that I will never forget her.



One demonstration of true community was the way the children played together and how all of the mothers seemed to help care for them. The saying, “it takes a village to raise a child,” is definitely true here. One little girl who particularly warmed my heart was Flor (which means flower). She was Noemi’s daughter. She ran to Elsy, our Habitat communication specialist, and immediately wanted a big hug. I

was surprised when she so readily let me hold and hug her, too. She was so beautiful and trusting ... and I was glad she would now be able to grow up in this warm, loving, safe community.



Thursday night was special—we had dinner at Carymar, a local restaurant. Everyone enjoyed the fun evening out after working hard for four days. The food was wonderful—several kinds of pupusas, tamales and enchiladas. After dinner, a few from our team and from the local Habitat office went to a local dance club. We returned to the hotel that night, tired but glad for the chance to enjoy some time with our new friends.

## Aug. 8, 2008

Up early once again, we packed our bags for our recreational trip. We could hardly believe this was already our last day of building! Our teammate Laurie said it best: “It seems like we’ve been here for a month and yet it seems like we just got here yesterday.”

At the build site, Cristina led devotions with a Bible reading. Then, we shared a prayer in a style Cristina said worked well with children—and also with a group like us. We joined together in a circle and not only joined our hands, but also crossed our feet over one another’s so we could truly feel our connectedness.



Several people offered their prayers, each in his or her language.

Work today stopped at noon for our team. It was amazing to see the progress we and the masons made in just one week.

After lunch, the Habitat staff had a special farewell planned for us. Just before it started, I had the most unexpected and most memorable moment of my trip. Will, our quietest, most serious mason, gave me a gift. I looked at him with question—a gift for me? He handed me a small bag. Inside it were two postcards, several bookmarks with religious sayings in Spanish and a wooden plaque with a map of El Salvador. What's more, he had written me a special message and a prayer. I looked at him and started crying.



Will had touched my heart with his quiet yet deep faith. But I'd had no idea that he'd felt the same sense of kinship. I also thought about how difficult it must have been for him to find time to obtain these small but precious gifts. I hugged him tightly and tried to express my emotions in my limited Spanish, saying that he had "touched my heart and was my brother in Christ." Even if I would have known more Spanish words, I don't know if I could have adequately described to him all that his gift—and his friendship—meant to me. Are there really words that can express to someone that they have truly changed your life and you will never, ever forget the impact they have made on your heart?



I managed to collect myself and join the others ... until Patty announced that we were going to begin our farewell with a special devotion from our quietest mason. The tears were in my eyes before Will even began. He read a passage from Galatians 3: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek,

slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

He went on to say we all reminded him of potatoes, which got some laughter. All potatoes are different—some small, some round, some even with little lumps—just like people are different. Yet we can bring them all together and make delicious mashed potatoes. The whole of every one of us mixes together completely. And that, he said, was how he felt we all were: all together as brothers and sisters under God. We were all one people, working and serving together. I don't think there was a dry eye.

After Will finished to much applause, we were each presented with a few gifts to help us remember our trip. Our partner family, Óscar and Marisol, gave each of us a hand-painted ceramic plate with a house and volunteers in red t-shirts—just like those we'd worn all week. Our Habitat friends gave us each a little bucket with the Habitat El Salvador logo, a Habitat El Salvador hat and a personalized certificate with our team photo on it. Ana Maria also gave us each a bottle of honey that was made on her family's farm.

Just as our group was feeling like we were going to burst with emotion, we got a real surprise. A full mariachi band came out from behind the building! It was the perfect way to move from our sadness over the end of our time with our new friends to a celebration of all the work we'd done and the hope we'd created together. We all took turns dancing and hugging our friends. No one said goodbye—rather, farewell until we met again



As we were wrapping up, we got another surprise. The Habitat folks started breaking confetti eggs on our heads! The eggs were made by poking a hole and blowing out the egg yoke, then covering them with paper mache, filling them with confetti and decorating the outside. They are part of the Salvadoran celebration tradition. Finally, we all got into our van—exhausted, emotional and covered with confetti.



We had just a short time to clean up at the hotel. Our tour guide Claudia was already waiting to take us on the Route of the Flowers, through several cities known for their beautiful flowers, scenic landscape and artisan craft shops.



On the way to our first stop, we drove through lush green mountains that went on as far as we could see. We stopped in Ataco to visit the most amazing shop full of handmade Salvadoran crafts. In addition to

hand-painted items in bright colors, they had hand-woven textiles in every vivid color imaginable. The looms stood in the back and we were able to watch the weavers at work. The complexity of strings, color and skill were mind-boggling.

We took a driving tour through the rest of the peaceful, quaint little town and then arrived at Los Cabaños, our hotel for the night. The hotel grounds were a tropical paradise where we each had a little brightly colored cabaña. A highlight of our dinner was enormous glasses of fresh pineapple juice.

During our team reflection, no one seemed quite ready for the week to be over or to leave our new friends. The depth of the

relationships we'd formed in a short time—with each other, with the Habitat staff, with our masons and with the partner families—surprised us.

## Aug. 9, 2008

This morning's first destination was a quick stop in Juayúa for shopping and to visit the town's cathedral, home to one of only two black Christ sculptures in Central America, and as such, is actually a pilgrimage destination.



Next, we headed for a real adventure: an ecological adventure park located amid the coffee fields in the mountains. We knew we were going for a four-mile hike, but I don't think any of us realized it was a hike up and down many hills along slightly muddy, rocky roads. Although it was challenging, the rewards were great. We saw breathtaking views of the local mountains and volcanoes that stretched all the way to the Guatemalan border.

The ultimate experience was the hot springs at the peak of our hike. The highest point was a rock that was just above a steam geyser. I admit that I was feeling some trepidation as our guide led us across jagged rocks to get to the landing, but when we got there, we felt amazing. The steam washed over us, covering us in warm clouds. And we all felt a bit of pride at going outside our comfort zones ... and succeeding.



After hiking back, we enjoyed lunch in our beautiful surroundings before



heading to Salcoatitán for a visit to a coffee plantation. El Salvador is known for having some of the best coffee in the

world, probably due to the tropical climate and rich volcanic soil. The plantation owner, who was also the owner of our previous night's hotel, met us to give us a tour of the coffee mill and fields.

First, Fernando took us through his personal garden and plant nursery. It was his hobby—but it was the most extensive hobby I'd ever seen! As we walked, we heard the sound of power tools. It turned out to be the sculpture studio of Fernando's wife, Patricia.

Patricia invited us in to see her work. Her current piece was a large table with a ceramic tile mosaic design with butterflies. It was unbelievable to me how these wonderful people just opened their home, their work and their passions to us—total strangers from half a world away. Our visit ended with a lovely cup of Fernando's own coffee, which was delicious.

Next, we headed toward our final stop: the capital city of San Salvador. The wealth and modern structures of the big city were in stark contrast to the rural and humble towns we'd visited all week. I was reminded that I would soon be back home in another modern culture. Part of my heart truly grieved for that, and I longed to return to that culture of simplicity and joy.

We arrived at Hotel Mariscal for the night and dressed for our final meal together. A few blocks away at a Mexican restaurant,



our meal was a beautiful "make your own fajitas" spread, complete with fresh salsa made tableside. Our entertainment for the evening was a live Mariachi singer.

Our night was bittersweet. Several of our team members were leaving early in the morning, so we had to say our goodbyes after dinner. Once again, I was surprised at how quickly a group of people who barely knew each other could become so closely connected. I believe there was something about the shared experience of building homes—and hope—that brought us together. We were doing God's work with God's people. We were definitely two or more gathered in His name, and He was there with us.

## Aug. 10, 2008

Those of us still around this morning gathered for a quick breakfast in the hotel before hopping a direct shuttle to the San Salvador airport. As we drove, we appreciated our last beautiful views of the lush green foliage and majestic mountains. It seemed surreal that we were leaving. We had been in such a different world for the week that in some ways it was hard to remember what home would be like when we got there.

This was so different from a normal vacation. On a vacation, you go somewhere to be entertained ... to be distracted. You pay others to serve you. On this trip, we went to serve. We connected with other people. We became part of a new family. We came together, sharing our cultures, united as God's children.



I learned so many things on this trip. I learned that you don't need a common language to have meaningful communication.



That serving together creates a stronger bond than common hobbies or interests ever could. That family isn't dependent on your blood, but rather your heart. That going outside your comfort zone makes you a stronger person. That quiet faith can sometimes have greater impact than loud proclamation. That your home can be in more places—or even countries—than what's listed on your address label. That becoming part of another culture means so much more than just seeing it. That you can do more than you thought you were physically capable of doing with the encouragement of others.

That Matthew 19:26 is true: "With God all things are possible."

I learned that one week can change your whole life.



To my new friends and family in El Salvador, I would like to say, "muchas gracias." You will live in my heart forever. Thank you for

inviting me to be part of your home. El Salvador is now home in my heart, too. And I promise I'll return home again.

To anyone reading this journal, thank you for taking the time to learn about the amazing opportunity you have to serve others through a Thrivent Builds Worldwide El Salvador Community trip.

Come build. Help make a difference.