



“I have more than I really need”

By George Perdziak, team member of an August 2009 *Thrivent Builds Worldwide* team led by Sue Husar to the El Salvador Community

At 11:15pm the night before our flight, I was still packing, even at the late hour. This was standard procedure, of course, for me and my wife, Denise. Usually though, we're not leaving for the airport at 2:30 am! Not to worry. Sleep is overrated. And with six hours of flight time en route to El Salvador, we should be able to get some rest.

First things first. There are so many things I *need* to make sure I bring. Malaria medication; Cipro (the traveler's best friend); sunscreen; work gloves; sunglasses; iPod; camera; extra memory sticks and batteries; cell phone and charger; some of those mini drink mix packets so that I don't have to drink plain water all week; a box of Teddy Grahams; a bag of Iced Animal Crackers. I mash all of these necessities along with my work clothes and boots, and some casual wear into my duffle bag. It's heavy. And as usual, it weighs twice as much as my wife's bag. "I hope I didn't forget anything!" She rolls her eyes and goes into the kitchen to finish up with the dishes.

We touch down in El Salvador around 11:30 am. It's hot. It's much warmer than it has been all summer in Chicago—especially this morning when the thermometer was firmly planted in the 50s. Having dressed for the weather in Chicago and the typically chilly conditions on the plane, I was a bit overdressed for our new surroundings.

Leaving the airport, it didn't take long before getting an idea of the condition of the country. Not too many years outside of a brutal civil war, many of the buildings were still topped with shiny coils of barbed wire. In the two hour trip from El Salvador to our destination in Santa Ana, we would get a glimpse of how some people were living. Houses made of discarded sheet metal could be seen from the side of the road along with a number of makeshift stands on the expressway that sold anything from fruits and vegetables to furniture. Old vehicles of various makes and models, many of them appearing to have been resurrected back into service, were making their way. The poor people here are lucky to make a \$1,000 a year. If you are able to make more than \$600 a month, the government considers you able to afford the essentials – food



and shelter, although visiting some local grocery stores in the area and seeing the prices it hardly seems possible.

Day two is our first official day on the worksite, about 30 minutes from our hotel in Santa Ana. After 20 minutes, we make a left hand turn into the Thrivent Builds community that we would be working at for the remainder of the week. The travel is at a snail's pace over heavily rutted roads past a number of small shacks, a church, an enormous soccer (I should say futbol) field before we finally come to a halt in front of a daycare center. The courtyard in front of this cinder block building, colorfully painted with pictures of the characters from Winnie the Pooh, would become our starting point, break-time and lunch area for the week.

After devotions and instruction from the Habitat leader, it was off to the worksite. Down the street were a number of homes, all of the same design, though with differences in paint scheme and individual owner landscaping. Not what we would normally expect in Chicago. Some homes had corn planted out front – others had a variety of colorful bushes and flowers arranged around in front. Most of these houses were duplex structures – two family units, each family getting roughly 450 square feet – two bedrooms and one common area divided with a small half wall. No running water inside the house as the sink was located outside. In some instances the front part of the house was used as a place of business, selling drinks or snacks, or selling services, such as a beauty salon.

This was the Thrivent Builds village.

And, as the schedule would have it, we would be starting two new homes (one duplex and one single family unit) from scratch. As we came up to the empty field, I ran through my checklist of things I needed and hoped I had transferred from my luggage to my day pack. *I need my water and my drink packets. Need my gloves. Need my sunscreen. Need my camera, etc.* As the week went by, the group (two groups as it turns out, eight from Chicago, 10 from various other parts of the US) with the help of a number of local tradesmen and a few men and women who were to be the owners of the new homes, set off to tackle the work. Digging trenches; digging septic tank ditches; clearing stumps; moving cinder blocks (thousands of them); assembling rebar; moving hundreds of wheel barrows full of gravel and concrete mix; compacting sand. Eventually, by week's end, we had moved enough earth, stacked enough blocks and tied enough steel together to have both houses ready for foundations to be poured the following week.

But that's really only part of the story.

Foundations of new partnerships were started; foundations of existing partnerships were strengthened. Language barriers were overcome with gestures and a smile. Jokes were shared despite not sharing a common language. Many of us were definitely on the same page as we realized that 'cervesas' and Miller Time were one in the same. We shared the futbol field together. We shared meals together. We spent time with the children in the neighborhood, watching them play variations of games that children play back in the states. And despite the harsh realities that these poor children faced, they were joyful. They didn't seem to need very much at all.

And almost as quickly as the week began, the week came to an end. During the week and before flying home, we were able to spend some time exploring the countryside and a number of small towns. And, like many towns all over the world, rich or poor, many of the same day to day things took place. Children went to school, adults went to work. Life continued on.

And on the flight home, as I settled in with a cold can of Coke, I thought about what we had accomplished. In the grand scheme of things, we really didn't get that far. A lot of work was done, but it would still be some time before they would truly be homes that people could live in. And in reality, life of the people in that area will go on, our week there just a blip in time. But when combined with the efforts of hundreds of other groups like ours, going to towns like these across the globe, a difference is made. A quick trip to the home with a plaque marking it as Habitat Home Number 7,000 in El Salvador brings to light the reality. 7,000 families in El Salvador alone have a place to raise their families. A place to call home.

After a long travel day, we returned home. We were happy to see our cats (the jury is still out on whether they were really happy to see us – they probably couldn't care one way or another) and settled into the couch. I thought about how much I stressed out about whether or not I had everything I needed for the trip. As usual, I over-packed. And as I looked around the house, I realized that I have more than I really need...