



## Not Just Building Houses

By Wendy Luker, team member of the July 2009 *Thrivent Builds Worldwide* team led by Tom Edelen

When I told people that I was going to El Salvador on a Habitat for Humanity build, the location seemed to register in most folks' minds as "Costa Rica." Since El Salvador hasn't been much in the news since their civil war blessedly ended in 1992, it's not really a place on people's radar. Well, all they will have to do is visit El Salvador (preferably on a Thrivent Builds with Habitat for Humanity build) and the country, with its beautifully spirited people, will be permanently on the map of their hearts.

Before our trip in July, 2009, I'd never been to a Central American country, nor been on a Habitat build. I don't speak Spanish and I do not like hot weather, nor sweating. Despite all that, for some reason, I eagerly looked forward to visiting El Salvador. I've traveled a lot, but I had no idea what to expect with El Salvador, and that excited me. It was truly "terra incognita." Now, having been there and created brief but true relationships with some Salvadorians; ridden the Pan American Highway, boated across Lake Coatepeque, and hiked through a coffee plantation on the side of a volcanic mountain; gotten the orange dirt under my nails and invested my own "sweat equity" in the place working on houses of Salvadorians I broke bread with, I now know through experience what my intuition knew in spirit, and why I was excited to go.

We were "Tom's Team," an assorted bunch of ten folks from across the country and of varied ages who were either friends with, or related, to Tom Edelen. Tom is my cousin, a Thrivent Builds Program Consultant, our able, relaxed leader and skilled translator for us non-Spanish speakers. Though Tom was the only common link between our team members before the trip, we got along wonderfully and with humor. There also happened to be another Thrivent team there at the same time and we all just mucked in together at the work site.

Early on, Luis, the Salvadorian Thrivent Builds/Habitat liason, assistant, guide, friend, air-port greeter, etc. extraordinaire told us that we were not just building houses, but also building peace. It was back-breaking work in the hot sun, but the masons and the families for whom we were building the houses at Villa Esperanza, a community near Santa Ana, made it worth it. We built peace by building safe, earthquake-proof houses for hardworking, deserving families, and by extension, the future of El Salvador. Of course I wasn't thinking about the future of El Salvador in so many words while I was shoveling 15 wheelbarrows full of gravel or cement blocks, or tamping down the earth by hand by repeated lifting and dropping a *compactar* (a 50 lb. can full of cement that had a wooden pole sticking out of it) so the ground would be level when they poured the cement floors inside a house. Nor were my sweaty, dirty cohorts who were digging latrine holes or whacking weeds with a machete. Did I mention virtually all of the work is done by hand (I only saw two power tools being used on the entire site--a cement block cutter and a welder) and that almost all the work is in the sun? I went through an entire bottle of sunscreen. Take more than you think you'll need.

I learned so much about patience and "just doing it", not complaining, from the skilled, humble, kind, patient masons on-site. They didn't tell me to just do it, they showed me by their behavior. And they did the more difficult work. Even with our meager shared language skills, we joked a lot, worked hard and laughed together. Lots of "Hola, Wendy!" and smiles everywhere I went.

When it came time to play our international game of fútbol/ soccer, one afternoon, it was amazing to see the true personalities of some of the masons come out. An unassuming, seemingly shy mason on-



site became a steamrolling machine on the field. I told myself to just “get out of the way, Americana, cuz you’re going to get run over.” Those guys were serious. But we all had fun. And again, on the field they were very patient with us. They had to divide us up evenly between the two teams and we were *all* the last ones to be picked. It was all in good fun. Lots of laughter and fuel for conversation, such as we could have not speaking the same languages, in the days following the game. Sport really is an international language.

Don’t worry about not speaking much, if any Spanish. But of course, it helps. Just really make a sincere effort and you will inevitably pick up more by the end of the trip. It is wise and valuable that in the Thrivent Builds/Habitat orientation at the hotel, we were encouraged to take the time to try to communicate on site. They said building relationships is as important as building houses. And it is!

I cannot say enough good things about how well organized and thought-out this trip was by the Thrivent Builds/Habitat folks. We felt completely taken care of (accommodations, meals, cultural opportunities, etc.), yet free to interact with the Salvadorian people. We had opportunities to get to know some of the families for whom we were building houses (Shout out to crazy Juan Carlos, his sweet wife, Gloria and little Enrique.) It was a wonderful 360 degree blend of experiences.

I feel like I have a good taste, *let’s say a very satisfying appetizer*, of what El Salvador and its people and culture are (and Salvadorian food is tasty!). This trip is the best of voluntourism--doing work to help the people of the host country, and in doing so by interacting closely on a daily basis, actually being able to create little relationships, which almost never happens when one is simply a tourist. We experienced diverse aspects of the culture: from their construction methods at the site, to a church service at a humble, very welcoming church; from the ancient Mayan ruins of Tazumal, to hiking in a coffee plantation and touring a bean/roasting operation, and exploring the markets and artisans crafts in several different towns.

After our coffee hike with a guide and one of the men who harvests the coffee beans, buying fair-trade coffee is even more ethically important to me. I have a deeper respect for the labor that goes into my morning cup of coffee. The people who do some of the most difficult work, *picking each bean by hand* on a 45 degree slope with a big basket on their backs that can hold 25 pounds of beans, may only earn \$5/day—\$15 on a good day, depending on how many pounds they’re able to harvest. I can guarantee that the people doing the picking are getting a miniscule amount of profit, if any, from that \$3.00 latte you get in the morning.

Another valuable, eye-opening experience was driving through Villa Emmanuel, a 3 yr. old slum in Santa Ana. Because of the grinding poverty and pressing need for shelter, the city took municipal lands that used to be soccer fields and turned them into space for free housing—if you could even call it that. What a contrast to what we were building at Villa Esperanza. These were dwellings smashed up next to each other between dirt roads and made out of whatever materials they could find—corrugated metal, boards, tree branches, etc. It’s what extreme poverty looks like. It’s also, though, what the beautiful, warm spirit of El Salvador’s people looks like. There we were, an obvious bunch of gringos in a van driving through their narrow dirt paths, and we were met with virtually universal smiles, waves and “hola!”s. When we stopped at intersections, kids ran up to the windows grinning to say “hola!” Again, the warmth speaks volumes about the nature of so many Salvadorians we encountered. So kind, friendly and interested to make a connection. I don’t see much of that ready friendliness here in New York.

Build peace--that I could do. Doing the actual construction work made it quite clear to myself that although I have many talents, I was not gifted in masonry/house-building. But I tried really hard to do a good job. And that, I suppose, is what is needed on a Thrivent Builds with Habitat build-a willing spirit. The rest can get worked out.