

GUATEMALA

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It was 3:15 a.m. on a cold and snowy Saturday morning; January 26th, 2008 to be exact.

Four members of the 'Canadians-to-Guatemala Team' were waiting in sub-zero temperatures (C^o) for a mini-bus to take them to Toronto's airport. Little did we know what kind of adventure was ahead of us. Obviously we were eager to find out...why else would we be standing out in the cold in the middle of the night!

When Leslie asked me to write an article about "...what my time in Guatemala meant to me", I really had to think hard about it – back beyond that freezing cold morning in January.

Our group leader, Denis Martel – soon to be known as 'El Jefe' – had been to Chichicastenango three times before. In September 2007, when he decided to pull together an 'all Canadian' group for his next visit, I was ready to sign-up for whatever he was planning! Between then and the time I arrived back in Canada at the end of the trip, I experienced an amazing physical and mental journey!

Why did I want to join Denis in Guatemala in the first place? Well...having lived in Africa for several years and traveled in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay, I'd seen a lot of poverty, discrimination, misguided attempts at assisting the under-privileged, and the human cost of hopelessness and sheer desperation.

As the years have rolled by, I've realized that we have a duty to give back to our fellow human beings while we are on this 'mortal coil'. We all have the 3 Ts to give of our selves – Talent, Treasure and Time. I have frequently given of my treasure, but only occasionally given of my talent and time. Denis offered me the opportunity to get involved with something that sounded totally worthwhile and hugely beneficial to the Mayan people in Chichi, and...to finally put the record straight for the remaining 2 Ts!

Our team's first goal was to make as many friends, relatives and colleagues aware of our impending trip as we could. Asking for sponsorship and donations towards the trip, seemed pretty straightforward... "Hey, I'm going to the Guatemala Highlands for a week to help build homes for the Mayans! We need cash, tools, school supplies, kids clothes and medicines. Can you help?" Reactions varied from "...you've got to be kidding?" to "...here are the tools, cash, kids clothes, etc., you need."

It amazed me how extreme peoples reactions were to a simple request. I pitied those who "could care less"!

But we did it...we raised \$s and got hold of a ton of power tools, school supplies, children's clothes and much more. Between the 10 team members, we checked in close to 500 lbs of supplies at Pearson International Airport, over and above our own belongings!

Denis had been very diligent in preparing us for what lay ahead. He showed us pictures, repeatedly told us "...in Guatemala, you have to expect the unexpected!" Despite his efforts, there were still many surprises waiting for us...

Our team was what one might call a 'non-religious' group; a healthy mix of various spins on Christianity, right the way through to die-hard atheists! It worked for us – we certainly seemed to have interesting and non-confrontational discussions about faith and religion in their many different guises. Matt and Leslie were incredibly respectful of our diversity as we - I hope! – were of their beliefs too. However, I don't think a single one of us left untouched or unmoved by the strength and power of the faith Matt and Leslie, and all the missionary people, carry with them every second of their lives.

What did all this mean to me? Well...we built some houses. But that was almost incidental to what the whole experience ultimately meant to me...

I met and bonded with the diverse group of Canadians that I travelled with, all of whom were committed to our mission, each for their own reasons. I interacted with local Mayan people, who seemed to be able to smile despite the poverty, misery and discrimination they have to live with every single day of their lives. I was given the opportunity to become involved in improving the lives of just a few of these proud and ancient peoples; to gain some insights into their history, culture and traditions. The Good Lord gave me the chance to spend a week of my life with two amazing people – Matt and Leslie Capehart, a couple who epitomize the concept of giving one's life in the service of God and for the benefit of His flock.

I visited a beautiful country and was able to see just a little of its grandeur. I had what could be described as one of the most impactful experiences of my life.

So many emotions run through your mind when you come face to face with the level of suffering and poverty that the Mayans of Chichicastenango endure. From the selflessness of José, who prayed for us and thanked God for making it possible for us to come to Guatemala and help his people, through to the river of human waste flowing through the site where we were building houses. This was a life-changing journey.

My indignation and anger over the plight of the Mayans started when we stopped in Antigua in the way back to Guatemala City. What a huge difference to Chichicastenango... The contrast was massive! Instead of old bicycles, there were fancy Harley Davidsons; instead of tuc-tucs, there Porsche's and Corvettes. No mules, no people struggling with huge loads on their backs. Instead of squalid out-door kitchens, there were MacDonald's and Burger King. Instead of filth and garbage everywhere, the streets were clean and the sidewalks clear of beggars.

I asked myself how all of this could be so, when just 100km up road was the total opposite!?

Everything came into perspective...

- how fortunate I am to live in Canada
- how insignificant my problems were back home – I have a home, a job, cars, and so much more
- the good fortune I have enjoyed for most of my life
- how I take so much for granted – things that would be incomprehensible to the average Mayan in Chichi
- that I have two healthy daughters and three healthy grandchildren
- that I am not persecuted or discriminated against because of my race and culture
- that I have access to free education, healthcare, social security benefits, a pension and so much more
- that the misfortune of falling down the stairs – the cause of José's plight - would never condemn me to living in a dark squalid hut on the side of a mountain for the remainder of my days
- how, despite the indescribable conditions that some people are forced to endure, they can still smile and enjoy their lives as best as they possibly can

The downside of these realizations was that for several weeks after I got back from Guatemala, I had no patience or sympathy for anyone who complained about the slightest thing. I was angry and upset that I couldn't articulate the poverty and suffering I had seen; that the people around me could be so petty minded about 'what they are entitled to' when I had witnessed a people who had no entitlements of any description.

I spread the word of Matt and Leslie's wondrous works in Chichi; I prayed that The Good Lord watch over them and guide them every day of their lives.

I will return to Chichi in 2009 to continue with my puny attempt to make a difference in the lives of the Mayans of Chichicastenango.

Thank you Denis for dragging me with you! Thank you Matt and Leslie for your gracious hospitality. Thanks to Cheryl, Jennifer, Doris, Edna, Vickie, Angeline and Brock and Susan for sharing this adventure with me.