

Parishioners Join Guatemala Vision Team 2011

By Loretta Merlone



Bienvenidos! Welcome! Share our adventures, observations, visits and challenges as Wiley Rutledge and I travel to Antigua, Guatemala during the week prior to Semana Santos or Holy Week. Wiley and I, along with four folks from Minnesota and one from Montana, formed a Vision Team to visit our multiple sponsored children, build a 12x12 foot fiberlite house for a family of ten, and learn more of the culture of this ancient city.

Sunday provided the first challenge as we boarded a high truck-bus of Filedefia Vinca for a canopy tour using zip lines. We pictured ourselves leisurely navigating through the tree tops on 20-30 foot long cables. Imagine our shock as we stepped into a canvas leg and waist harness, were given a helmet and leather gloves, and clipped to a lo-o-o-ng cable system over a canyon! Hold on, lean back, cross your legs and enjoy the ride. Yeah, right! After the first 20 seconds of sheer terror, it was GREAT. Never have I felt such a feeling of helplessness yet freedom and trust. My life was truly in another's hands, especially had to be hauled hand-over-hand to the platform. Wiley zipped along like a pro. Next we went up, up, up the mountain to a larger and much steeper line. Traveling at speeds up to 36 mph, 394 feet above the canyon floor, we traveled almost a mile. Back in Antigua we witnessed the processions of carved sculptures of Christ carrying the cross, the Sorrowing Mother, Mary Magdalene and John being carried through the cobblestone streets on large wooden floats.

Saturday, children dressed in black robes or black skirts and white blouses, carried smaller floats on a



shorter journey. The Brotherhoods, dressed in purple robes with pointed hoods, lead the procession with the Christ float which could weigh up to 7,000 lbs and requires 80 men to carry it. Every two blocks they change carriers. Accompanying this float are incensors and a brass band with drums playing traditional funeral marches. Next were men wearing brown robes with brick colored pointed hoods that carried lanterns on poles, with banners of the various brotherhoods and those depicting scenes from

the life and Passion of Christ. Two blocks behind this group was the float of the Sorrowing Mother carried by members of the Sisterhoods. Next were the incensors, funeral band, and the small floats of Mary Magdalene and John.



Along the procession's route, large colorful carpets of colored sawdust flowers, pine needles, and other natural materials were designed in the streets. Intricate patterns, symbols from the life of Christ and scenes from nature were depicted in the ornamental carpets. Once the procession passed, the trampled carpets were reverently cleaned up to prepare for the next procession.

Monday, the team began building the 12x12 foot fiberlite house with corrugated steel roof, for a family of ten. Their current shelter consists of rusting steel sheets which provide no protection from the night's chill or torrential downpours during the rainy season. The family earned their house by accumulating "sweat hours"--leveling their land, helping at the Familias de Esperanza (Common Hope) project headquarters, and aiding in construction. Fiberlite panels are built at the project by Vision Teams and hauled to the building site in pickup trucks. There they are bolted together for walls. A poured concrete slab is the floor for those who own their land; those who rent have floors of concrete blocks. If they need to move, houses can then be disassembled and packed onto a pickup truck. Friday we gathered with the family for a house blessing. Don't know which the children enjoyed more, their new home or the chocolate cake we brought. Mami said, "Now we'll not be cold or wet anymore!"



Tuesday, Wiley and I visited with my godson **William Orlando Lopez** and **Erick Garcia** sponsored by



the Seibyl family. As both boys are students in Guatemala City and their homes in the highlands are 1½ hours away via city bus, we met with them after school at Pollo Compera, Guatemala's KFC. Language barriers and shyness quickly vanished. Eating fried chicken, French fries and drinking Coca Cola together, is the perfect ice breaker. William is in his last year of high school and will graduate in November with a degree in computer science. He plans to attend university eventually to be an engineer. William hopes to supplement his education fund by repairing autos and motorcycles; he's taken additional classes in motor repair. His older brother, Viellman, graduated last year and is working with computers for a large manufacturing company. Viellman (also a sponsored student) is married to the cousin of the Seibyl's godson Eric Garcia.



Erick Garcia is in eighth grade at the most academically advanced government school in Guatemala. Admission is by a competitive exam. In his spare time he enjoys drawing and playing 'futbol' (soccer). He hopes to continue in the same school which offers a high school major in accounting.

Wednesday morning Wiley and I spent a few hours in the kitchen slicing up zucchini squash, red bell peppers and tiny yellow squash and chopping onions to be used in the stir fry at lunch. That afternoon we drove to Jacotenango, a little village east of Antigua, to visit my godchild **Tanya Gabriella Chacon**. Tanya is 11-years-old and in the fifth grade. She enjoys reading books, soccer, playing the guitar and maracas, and practicing make-up and beauty culture. Since we visited her 18 months ago, the family moved into their own fiberlite home in March. Her older brother Eduardo (also sponsored) graduated high school last November.





Thursday was a zoo! Wiley and I clowned at the medical clinic and at the playground in San Rafael, a village of the indigenous Maya. We wowed the children and adults alike with stickers, magic tricks, Monica & Marvin Monkey puppets and Paula de Pollito—a dancing chicken. After lunch we lugged a 30-pound food bag with beans, corn, cereal, pasta, cooking oil, hand/dish and laundry soap, to the home of my godchild **Maria Yolanda Suruy** (right in photo). She's a very shy 6-year-old and studies in preschool. She did enjoy blowing bubbles and playing with her mouse dolly who was wearing blue overalls.

Friday was our busiest day visiting four godchildren. At 8:00 am, Trinity-sponsored **Jonathan Lopez** visited the project with his mother and younger brother. Jonathan has 15 other siblings. He's 13-years-old and in the 7th grade. He also enjoys soccer and drawing anything and everything.



Later that afternoon we visited with Trinity's other sponsored student, **Iris Catalina Marroquin**. She is 18-years-old and studying in the 7th grade. Her primary classes were spent in the pilot school in the Common Hope project; a facility for those not fitting well in the public school curriculum. Iris was accompanied by her older sister and baby nephew. Once in high school she plans to be an accountant.

Iris Marleny Flores is 17-years-old, in the 10th grade and sponsored by the Rucinski family. Iris is a student at the Instituto de Formacion Secretarial and hopes to become a secretary/clerk upon graduation.



Experiencing possible empty nest syndrome with the graduation of William, Wiley and I decided to co-sponsor **Juan Josef Sican**. We saw his photo on a bulletin board of children needing sponsors and it was love at first sight. Juan's the cutest 7-year-old and is studying in preschool. We met Juan, his mother and baby brother for pizza lunch at the project. Much to our astonishment he ate six pieces of pizza to our two or three, then politely offered us the remainder of his Coca Cola. Usually the children are rather reserved when first meeting their sponsors, but not Juan. He inquired regarding our jobs, health, families and if we had much ice this winter.

It is such an honor to sponsor these young students and provide them with the opportunity of an education and their families' chances to improve their homes and receive health care. We left Guatemala with the hope that the positive changes we observed will continue and influence others to accept the hand up to greater progress and self-esteem.