

POCO A POCO SERVICE SOCIETY  
275 Judges Row, Qualicum Beach, B.C. Canada  
V9K 1G7

phone 250-752-2545 email poco@island.net  
Charitable # 89175 0978 RR 0001 web site www.pocoapoco.ca

### Poco a Poco Newsletter for 2005 and plans for 2006

2005 was a busy year for Poco a Poco. It started off in a frenzy when the Tsunami struck S. E. Asia. We gathered a lot of medication and some money & Jill flew to Sri Lanka with a medical team from Vancouver. After a week or so in the hospital she switched to organizing the building of temporary tent shelters. An important part of Poco a Poco's mandate is to try to inspire others to help less fortunate people. Jill came back to Canada after a month but a friend from Vancouver Island stayed 3 months and carried the building on to a new level. He is now truly "hooked" and organizing things there on his own.

We organized 5 x 40 foot sea containers, 1 to Sri Lanka after the Tsunami & 4 to Guatemala. This is a huge amount of work by many volunteers because it all has to be collected, sorted, packed and loaded. Once it arrives in Guatemala we have to pay for large trucks to haul the contents of the containers from Guatemala City to the Lake Atitlan area, (a trip that takes 3 1/2 hours each way). We had a structure built for the temporary storage of container goods which doubled as emergency shelter during Hurricane Stan's flooding. Our keen group of volunteers in Guatemala then distribute the goods which is not an easy task as there are always more people in severe need than there are goods.

We financed and helped with a number of small building projects. These included a bathroom in a grandmother's house (and bought her a bed), a cement block wall to stop a small home from falling into the river & provided a basic bathroom, this created space for another room to be added on because 7 people were living in a small room, we build several energy efficient stoves and fixed some leaking roofs. After Hurricane Stan a great construction crew from Abbots ford build a new roof and kitchen and they will be back in February 2006 to finance and do more building.

In 2005 we had roughly 13 students at various levels of support but as of the start of school in January 2006 we have 57 students. This

reflects our commitment to education being one of the only ways to create long term change. These include an indigenous woman in 3rd year medicine, an indigenous young man in 2nd year pre medicine, a nursing student and many students in elementary or secondary school. Elementary school in Guatemala is supposed to be free but there is a sign up fee and strict requirements for school supplies, books and uniforms that often overwhelm poor families besides the lost wages of the child.

An exciting project has been providing start up flocks of 10 young chickens for a 208 group of war widows, single mothers and very poor families. This has been an incredible success and we hope to repeat it for another group of women. The women had to show that they had an adequate chicken coop before their name went into the draw. Before the next draw the chicks were inspected so the peer pressure meant the chicks were very well taken care of. All these chickens are either laying eggs now or have increased the protein in the families diet and all the women used their profits to buy more chicks.

Having wonderful long term volunteers living in Guatemala has facilitated paying for various crises. These included paying for surgery, medicine, supplemental food, rent & medication. One of the recipients is a poor single mother with 5 kids who is HIV positive. We also bought some manual typewriters, sewing machines for small business set ups and simple beds and mattresses for people sleeping on the floor. We pay for oxygen refills of the tanks for the paramedic groups we work with.

We had a number of great teams working in Guatemala. Our midwife training team were back in San Lucas Toliman and this coming year will be teaching side by side with their graduate midwives in a new program in Nebaj. Many of their original students have now completed a government sponsored course so they can work in hospitals. Our physiotherapists and occupational therapist worked hard in Comitancillo and will be back in Guatemala this winter. One of our longstanding dental worked long hours for 2 weeks in rural Guatemala. At the moment we have 2 paramedics assisting with the victims of Hurricane Stan while they teach refresher courses to Guatemalan paramedics.

We helped a group of Guatemalan friends form a Guatemalan registered Charity. They wanted to call it Poco a Poco Guatemala. We have been helping them with the early stages of organization and are

We have been helping them with the early stages of organization and are supporting their first project which is helping very needy women's cooperatives to raise rabbits and vegetables.

A big project was organizing the engineering and putting in a water tank, pump, piping, toilets, electricity and a cement block garbage incinerator for the school in San Jorge. It is the first time the school has had reliable flushing toilets and water.

Perhaps our biggest thrill to date is to have finally encouraged the Guatemalan Government working with the Antigua Rotary Club to fluoridate salt. This will reduce the number of cavities substantially. We started pushing this concept 10 years ago to have this happened - definitely was a poco a poco situation !!

We initiated a micro loan project with \$7,000.00 USD available for revolving loans for women's small business projects but have had to use most of the money for Hurricane Stan relief. Hurricane Stan has dominated our recent efforts since we work extensively in the area hardest hit. Luckily we were in a good position to help and all the bombero (paramedic, fire fighting, rescue worker) training really paid off.

We are currently working on a stove project with joint financing between Poco a Poco, the Qualicum Beach Rotary Club and Rotary International to put in 100 energy efficient wood stoves into homes. These will reduce the number of burns from open fires and consume much less wood which is in short supply in Guatemala due to deforestation.

We have plans for providing lighting from small solar panels and LED lights for areas where electricity is not possible. This will allow students to study at night.

The purpose of the November 2005 trip to Guatemala was to help people after the devastation of Hurricane Stan. Ironically we were fortunate because we temporarily had 2 x 40 foot containers hung up in the Guatemalan customs. The emergency prompted their speedy release so we had a huge quantity of shoes, clothes, beds, mattresses, bedding, household items, medical supplies and equipment to distribute. Catherine, a paramedic from Calgary and Tony, a Canadian team leader in training, joined me in assessing how Poco a Poco could best use it's funds effectively. 7 other great construction volunteers from Abbots ford arrived a few days later.

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The huge challenge is that Hurricane Stan had not only destroyed many families homes, it had also swept away their land - in our area into Lake Atitlan. The river bed is now about 8 times it's previous width. Over a 150 homes of poor people in the Panajachel area had been swept away by the river and mud slides.

The frustrations were very similar to those I had encountered in Sri Lanka after the Tsunami - nowhere to rebuild peoples homes even though we had the funds to help.

This problem was exemplified by 3 generations in one family of single mothers who took us to their tiny piece of land. They appealed to us to help them rebuild - somehow they knew where it had been and had put in corner pegs of branches. It was a boulder field in the middle of the river bed. They were crying. It was a futile request but they were so full of hope. To make them understand we went to see the Mayor of Panajachel. He received us immediately with great pomp and circumstance but was very firm that the town council could not responsibly let anyone rebuild in the river bed. He said the best the local government could do was to wave the taxes if property was being developed re electricity, sewage or water lines. He said the federal government had no plans as yet to provide land for those who lost there homes. When we asked what he thought the homeless could do his only suggestions were move in with other family members on a permanent basis, rent, and start to save again in hopes of someday being able to afford a tiny piece of land. This particular family group had already paid 12,000Q on the land and still owe another 6,000 Q all at 24 % interest per year. High interest rates really hurt poor people. Despite extensive searching and networking at the time we didn't come across a single situation where people had lost there home but still had a safe place to rebuild. (Since then we have found people given land by other family members.)

So we focused our temporary energies into providing them with food, bedding, shoes, clothes, beds, sheets of plastic, household items and medical care. All of the container goods and other donations were being distributed from our good friends' place. The house and yard were like a zoo - often with 25 Guatemalan volunteers working and hundreds of people lined up outside the gate - full of tales of woe and needs. Those

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hundreds of people lined up outside the gate - full of tales of woe and needs. Those claiming a need for beds had to be checked out which meant a trip to where they were living.

Our building volunteers started in on house repairs for a very poor family that had approached us for medical care of their 5 year old daughter. Her an eye infection was probably from pieces of rusted tin falling from their leaking roof onto her bed. None of the family had mattresses on their beds and we were able to provide them with 2 mattresses. The ceiling was draped in plastic in an attempt to keep the rain and tin off the family. We bought sheets of roofing tin, cement blocks and wooden boards and the team quickly re roofed the sleeping room and built a kitchen room.

These people cook over an open fire which consumes a lot of firewood and is dangerous re burns. Often young children are left alone as both parents are out working. Our stove project in conjunction with Rotary International will provide 100 families with good stoves. We have a series of building projects in progress including the house behind the first one where 3 generations of indigenous people live in one small room with a dirt floor and no kitchen. We have agreed to build them a simple kitchen and to put a skim of cement on the floor once they have leveled it a little. Mainly we will employ Guatemalan workers to accomplish the building as the flooding also caused a huge loss of jobs.

We were told of a man who had been tumbled down the mountain in a mud slide and lost the use of his legs. When we arrived at their rented one room house he was lying on a bed with no mattress, his 2 little girls running around barefoot and in rags. His wife, now the only bread winner, washes clothes by hand for people. We tried to convince him to go back to hospital but he refused because the hospital is so poor. We were able to deliver 2 mattresses, clothes, shoes, household items and some food and asked his wife to stay in touch. We have since had a Guatemalan doctor visit him.

It was a thrill to see so many Guatemalans volunteering along side the Canadians. We all worked long days, making, little by little, a difference to peoples lives. Since then our 5th container of goods has arrived and been distributed by our wonderful Guatemalan volunteers. We currently have 4 great Guatemalan builders employed at

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employed at \$10.00 Canadian a day to carry on the building until we return in February to reassess.

## Plans for 2006

In February we have teams of Canadians going to Guatemala to volunteer, including spina bifida/physiotherapy, hospital equipment repair, mid wife training and construction. A dental team will follow later. It was great to see how successfully the chicken project and the communal gardens are going. Some women are raising their 4th set of chicks and are able to give their families more protein, sell the meat for a profit and use the profit to invest in their children's education, enlarge their chicken flocks or improve their lives in other ways. Our micro finance project for women is being very well received. Most of these women are war widows or single mothers and are using the loans to start small businesses or grow their existing ones. As we explained earlier most poor Guatemalans can only borrow money at about 24 % interest per year from lending institutions, if they can borrow at all. We are currently not charging any interest and hope that the women's cooperative peer pressure will justify this unusual approach.

For \$30.00 we can provide 10 quality chicks (vaccinated) and a sack of chicken feed for a family, a start to self sufficiency.

For \$120.00 we can support a child in school for a year.

For \$135.00 we provide a energy efficient safe wood cook stove

For \$1,000.00 we can build a simple but sturdy home.

These projects are only made possible by donations from people like you and all the hard work of many many volunteers. Our 2 big fund raisers, the Pasta Dinner in February and the Home and Garden Experience netted about \$12,000.00. So you can see that what we can accomplish is directly related to donations above and beyond the fund raisers. We pride ourselves on being an organization of only volunteers with very little overhead. Many thanks for making a difference in the lives of people less fortunate than ourselves.

"Better to Light a Single Candle than to Curse the Darkness"

*Till Smyke*