

Weaving Peace and Stringing Hope

Pachitulul, Sololá, Guatemala
Grinnell College

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www.weavingpeaceandstringinghope.wordpress.com
<http://www.changemakers.com/project/empowering-pachitulul>

Section I:

Our initial project goals were to support the artisans of the community by constructing a communal production area in the village, training local producers, and finding a market for their goods. In addition to the goals outlined in our project proposal, we also arrived with the goal of diversifying production to reusable feminine products. We funded the entirety of the summer project with the support of the Davis Foundation, in addition to personal donations. Leah has recently begun a fundraising effort to be able to continue to support the project for three additional months past the September 15th date.

While our original intent was to focus on the development of artisan products, we realized that if we could train local producers to make a necessary product for the local market, we could have greater success than focusing on the tourist market alone, which is already saturated with highly talented artisan goods. Upon our arrival, we worked quickly to organize women of the community into a cooperative structure and pitch our idea of producing a reusable feminine product. The Pads for the Planet project we proposed, based on a model put forward by the organization, Days for Girls, was eagerly accepted by local women who struggle to finance disposable products each month. After a woman purchases a Pads for the Planet kit, she is no longer dependent on expensive disposable pads and can maintain better hygiene during menstruation. The money that women save each month can be put towards nutritional food or education expenses for their children. Our women were eager to learn how to make these products themselves so they could market them to other women and generate an income for their families. After six weeks of training five days a week, our women learned to sew with manual machines and have gained confidence from presenting their reusable feminine product to other women's groups. The 20 members of our cooperative have received a Pads for the Planet kit and are now free from the burden of buying single-use sanitary pads each month.

Prior to our decision to hone in on the feminine product project, we had already been in contact with the artisans of the community, who were also eagerly anticipating the arrival of their development project, Tejiendo la Paz, or Weaving Peace. We benefited from having three people working full-time on the implementation of the grant for the first six weeks, which allowed us to work on more than one sole objective. While Emily worked with the women and our instructor to explain how to manufacture the new feminine products, Moses Gaither-Ganim, another student from Grinnell College, and Leah were able to gauge the feasibility of finding a local market for the producers' traditional artisan goods. Given the saturated textile market in Guatemala, we learned that our women's woven products are not as competitive when they leave their local village. We therefore view the production of our reusable feminine product as a much more viable way for these women to earn a livelihood. The men's artisan jewelry, made from organic seeds and natural products, however, attracted more interest from potential retailers.

In the midst of our development project, it is necessary to also explain the economic and food crisis that began to affect local families this year. While the full effects of the current drought during a characteristically rainy season in Guatemala are yet to be seen, families are already suffering from increased costs of food. Even worse, however, is the devastation of this year's corn and bean crops in the local area, which is how our producers feed their families. In addition, coffee rust poses a serious threat to the local coffee crop, which has increased area unemployment. Given the lack of job opportunities for local men, we felt compelled to also provide an economic opportunity for male residents. We have made connections with two businesses in Xela, Café Red and Al Natur; a hotel in Antigua, Earth Lodge; and soon will have products in the restaurant La Fe and the store Shambhala in San Marcos de Laguna. This first phase of placing our products in stores will help test where the artisan goods will successfully sell and at what price.

While we followed through on our promise to work with the artisan group of the community, we have invested the majority of our resources into the women's cooperative, given the large impact that our Pads for the Planet can have on local women and the wider community. We are now at the critical point of creating a market for

our products in the local area, which is the reason that Leah has stayed on with the project to hopefully secure this market before departure. In the future, our women's cooperative's Pads for the Planet business will earn sufficient revenue from local sales to propel the project forward, which can fuel expansion to other areas. Revenue will be used to pay producers' wages, purchase additional materials for production, and cover the group's marketing expenses. The women plan to sell Pads for the Planet through pharmacies, environmental organizations, health clinics, and the popular street markets. We will soon have a documentary of the project featured on the local TV channel and have plans to expand production to reusable baby diapers.

The path to arrive at where we are today was at times comparable to the mountainous slopes that surround our lakeside community. We would not have been able to overcome the challenges that arose as successfully without the support and assistance of our local contacts. At the start of the summer, we arrived in Guatemala with materials to begin production of the feminine products, but we underestimated the difficulty we would have in encountering some of the fabrics and materials locally. In addition, organizing the community to work collaboratively did not prove to be an easy feat. The male artisans of the community were not eager to welcome in new men that were not skilled in jewelry production, and long-standing personality conflicts persist between some members of the community. While my spirit has at times been burdened by hearing the conflicts and distrust among community members, I realize that these prejudices have not formed overnight. Years of exclusion and a lack of equal opportunity have created deep wounds that must be tended to with love and care in order to reach a state of healing and peace. It is my hope that our project can provide a new example of the successes that collaboration can bring for our small Mayan village of Pachitulum.

Section II:

Peace is not a crop that can be harvested overnight. Rather, it is a seed that must be planted, watered and weeded before one can harvest its sweet fruit. Many people define peace as the absence of conflict, but this definition solely defines what peace is not. In order to truly build peace at the household and community level, it is necessary to foster economic opportunities and equality among women and men. As stated, our Davis Project for Peace could not miraculously erase all history of conflict among members of our community. However, what we have done is demonstrate a new way of working together and a new model of inclusion. The women told us that this is the first project that has ever arrived to their community, and for many of them, the first time that they have received an invitation to work together. The many reunions we have held, hours of training in product generation, and days of working together and sharing company have helped to build peace in our community. In order to sustain this peace and achieve long term success with our project, we must achieve our goal of selling the products that our women have so quickly learned to produce.

I have been blessed with the opportunity to work in many different community development projects, which perhaps made me underestimate the extent to which implementing this grant would impact my worldview. This summer, however, was my first time to bring such a sizable sum of money to a community, with tangible improvements for the local community. Living and working so closely with this community has opened my eyes to the reality of life for rural women around Guatemala and in many parts of the world. Living in an area where female subservience is commonplace has led me to become even more committed to advancing global gender equality. Watching talented and charismatic women work selflessly day in and day out, but remain subservient to their spouses, has been frustrating. However, the discussions I have had with local women about their rights and capabilities have been fulfilling. While one must always be cognizant of the cultural impact that they have on their locale, I am proud of the example we have brought of female empowerment to the community of Pachitulum.

"Our project has offered local women an opportunity to leave their houses and work on a collaborative project which can improve the future of their community. Watching the members of Pachitulum work tirelessly to create opportunities for their children in spite of unfavorable economic, political, and climatic conditions has further motivated me to use the privileges that I have to work for justice." Leah Marie Lucas



During our first reunion, members of the cooperative learn how to use a foot-pedaled sewing machine.



Emily teaches women how to produce the reusable feminine product.



Just a short six weeks later, our women were already producing the reusable feminine products.