



A Guatemala Connection

(All photos courtesy of Vale United Methodist Church)



This group from Oakton, Virginia, spent a week working in the highlands of Guatemala to help Mayan villagers improve their lives.

Members of Vale United Methodist Church, a small congregation in a rural suburb of Washington, D.C., support programs to assist those in need both locally and overseas. Through the Highland Support Project (HSP), the Vale church is working to build relationships with Mayan women in the highlands of Guatemala to encourage these women to take charge of their lives and improve their communities. A group from the church travels to Guatemala each summer to help construct houses and stoves and to teach the villagers new skills. The stoves they build are particularly important because they replace old unventilated stoves and open fires that cause eye problems and upper respiratory conditions, the major cause of death for highland children. The new three-burner stoves also reduce the workload of the women and greatly reduce wood consumption in an area that suffers from mudslides and floods because of deforestation.

A volunteer who celebrated her 70th birthday during the Guatemala trip in 2006 and returned in 2007 summed up the experience: "By no means is it about the giver feeling good. We need to give what they want, not what we think they need. We were intent on building a relationship, not just a house." Other comments from volunteers appear throughout the story.



A Photo Story

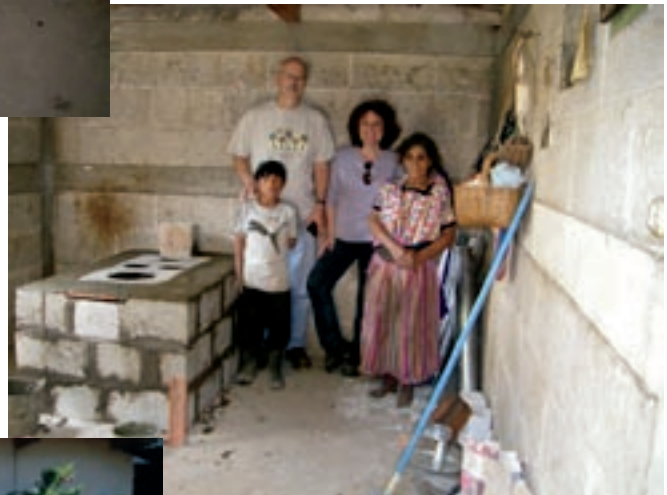


A volunteer is building a stove that will be ventilated to reduce the smoke inside a house.

“It was heartwarming to see the excitement and hear all the laughter among the women deciding where to position their new stove.”



These Mayan women are knitting items, some of which will be sold in an international craft market and others used by their families.



Once completed, simple stoves such as this will dramatically improve the lives of Mayan families.



Before the Vale team departed, the women who had received stoves prepared a meal for them and presented them with flowers wrapped in fabric that they had woven.

“I had felt we couldn’t make a difference with so few people ... I was wrong ... we did !!!”



A Photo Story

“For the fund-raising event, they had several ‘rooms’ for which we paid admission. One showed native costumes which we were allowed to try on for \$1.00; one had the children presenting folk dances; one had children’s artwork (some for sale); and one had woven products that we could purchase.”



On the final day of the trip, the Mayans held a special celebration that also became a fund-raising event. Several of the Virginia volunteers enjoyed learning a new dance.



The Vale team organized activities for the children — making paper airplanes, a sack race, jump rope, and doing “the limbo,” a dance in which the dancers bend over backwards and pass repeatedly under a pole.



“It was difficult driving away from the village for the last time as all the children crowded around the bus waving good-bye.”

“We visited the classrooms, had our faces painted, tried on the Mayan clothing, had photos taken, and bought some of the items the women had woven. They made several hundred dollars, and the day was a big success. It was very evident with all the bright smiles; they were pleased with their efforts.”