

Searching for a new dawn

by *Gabriela Ochoa Brenneman*

As a Guatemalan woman, I have seen how race and gender keep indigenous women from gaining access to credit, education or health care. Poor indigenous women have little autonomy or participation in decision-making at home or in their local village. Em-

powering women by giving them an opportunity to learn a skill and market their products is a good way to improve their situation. I want women to be able to provide for their families and at the same time, gain more independence.

Last January I traveled to Guatemala to work with *Nuevo Amanecer* (New Dawn), a women's beadwork cooperative in the village of Panabaj. Panabaj is a small village located at the foot of a volcano just a short walk from Lake Atitlan, one of the most beautiful lakes in the world. My goal was

to work together with the women on new designs, quality control, pricing, and also to find a more reliable supplier that would enable them to keep consistency in their designs.

The cooperative is a small but exciting project that grew out of MCC's relief efforts in the wake of tropical storm, Stan. All the members in the cooperative are indigenous women.

I was excited for the opportunity to work on a project that could really make a difference in their lives. Even so, the night before I left for Guatemala I wondered if my plan was really going to work. I knew that others had worked very hard on the project. Would my short time there really help them in any way? Did I have anything worth offering?

After my first visit to the cooperative I realized that I did have something to offer them, although it wasn't anything I had earned or achieved on my own. I was privileged enough to grow up in a dif-



Gabriela Ochoa Brenneman demonstrates jewelry-making in Guatemala

Courtesy photo

ferent social group in Guatemala which enabled me to have other opportunities as a woman that most indigenous women don't have. I could offer my social networks as an urban middle-class Latina now living in the U.S. This connected them with new opportunities.

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I also had aspirations that came from a different reality, and these combined with their own aspirations, resulted in greater goals for the cooperative. Finally that one thing I believed was most valuable to them was self-confidence. I was raised with the assurance that I was capable to do many things with my life and that I could try any project I wanted to. I received a good education that supported me in my projects. Even if some projects did not work, I was taught that I had the right to try and learn. I encouraged the women to believe in the value of the products they make and demand a fair price for them. Together, we encouraged each other to try new styles of jewelry, to experiment with new designs and to go to the city and bargain for better prices for their supplies.

These three assets—networks, aspirations, and self-confidence—became assets for the women. Before I started working on this project I had to learn how to make jewelry. A very good friend gave me intensive training on making the pieces. Together we came up with new designs that I took with me to Guatemala.

Through friends, family and my social networks, I learned of a place that offered supplies for the women at a better price. I helped the women to navigate the city by bus and buy supplies. I traveled to the village and we worked together in making new designs and improving quality control. During the process we became friends and shared our vision for the future of the cooperative and their village. Some friends and I are currently working on setting up a

Indigenous Guatemalan women beading jewelry with a women's beadwork cooperative, New Dawn.



Photo by Gabriela Brenneman

website for fair trade products and we hope to be able to sell the cooperative's jewelry and continue to support their work.

I would love to say that by having bigger aspirations, more social networks, and a strong self-confidence, these women could



overcome anything, but, in truth, poverty for indigenous women is a structural problem that can not be solved just by providing women with a job. Five hundred years of racism, a culture of machismo, poor schools and a

Gabriela with indigenous Guatemalans.

Courtesy photo

tradition that believes that women do not need to get an education cannot be overcome easily.

But, I believe we have to start somewhere. Many people continue to work with the women and what we learn and share by working together opens up new possibilities, even if just a crack. ☐

Gabriela helping women select beads for a pattern as they create jewelry for the women's beadwork cooperative.

Courtesy photo

