

INGEAR

THE NEWSLETTER OF PEDALS FOR PROGRESS



A PARTNER COMES TO HUNTERDON COUNTY

By Patricia Hamill

The night of April 20th was an especially inspiring evening for P4P. Gathering in the intimate space of the Hunterdon Medical Center auditorium, we sponsored two wonderful presentations. The night was dedicated to a talk by Señora Maria Margarita Caté de Catú, founder of FIDESMA (Foundation for the Environment and Sustainable Development), whose organization runs economic-development programs in the rural highlands of her native country, Guatemala. Many of the programs that FIDESMA sponsors, including agricultural and technological development, are funded by the sales of bicycles and sewing machines that they receive from us.

Opening for Señora Margarita, so to speak, was documentary filmmaker Greg Sucharew who shared the trailer for his upcoming film, *The Bicycle City*. This is “the story of the struggle, determination, idealism, and hope that has brought about the transformation of an entire society.” Greg’s lens records the tangible changes occurring in Rivas, Nicaragua thanks to organizations like Pedals for Progress who have energized the economy by making bicycles an accessible commodity for the local population. We all eagerly await the release of this important testament to the measurable success of how American citizens’ involvement in nonprofit goals affects economically limited regions and countries across the world.

On stage, Señora Margarita described the location and mission of FIDESMA before proceeding to highlight the ongoing programs, aided by a wonderful slide show of participants in the foundation’s programs. The audience witnessed students in groups or individually working at computers or attending lectures related to computer proficiency, nutrition, agriculture, and other such personally and professionally useful topics. Photos showed people of all ages and both genders using bikes to get to work or working on these bikes for a living. Multiple family members were shown proudly displaying their bikes and we were treated to the image of a mob of serious competitive cyclists and the starting

line of a race. Ladies looked up from their sewing machines and large pots of agave leaves boiled on stoves in a large indoor workroom provided by FIDESMA.

A table sat nearby the stage laden with expertly woven and beautifully colored wraps, purses, scarves, and pouches made by women who have been affiliated with FIDESMA for quite some time. A number of us purchased multiple pieces and, with the aid of our trusty translators CEO of P4P David Schweidenback and

our hard-working web master Reykha Bonilla, Señora Margarita patiently explained the meaning and relevance of the colors and designs of each backstrap-woven textile. She made a point of likening a traditional motif—the partial physical connection of two passing snakes—to the relationship of FIDESMA and P4P. No, not tangled or poisonous, but interconnected and flowing and meeting together even though moving independently. It really was a pleasure to be able to spend such intimate time getting to understand both the work that

was being purchased and knowing where the dollars spent were definitely going. There were lots of smiles and many laughs even with the slight delay of the language barrier.

There are those who possess knowledge and skills traditionally shared and practiced by their ancestors and are able and willing to be self-sustaining or even competitive economically, but they simply do not have the economic advantage or land to be successful. Both the film and the presentation served to highlight how economic development, rather than charity, is paramount to the needs of the impoverished and more isolated peoples of Central America. For both those of us who are out there in field regularly organizing and sending shipments of bicycles and sewing machines and those who were not quite fully aware of how much impact our organization has had on so many individual lives, this evening enabled all of us to engage in the results, not just the process.



Dave Schweidenback and Margaria Catu in front of the FIDESMA building.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

When I look at the varying new possibilities of where we could send bicycles, the options are staggering. The number of requests we receive is constantly growing as we become better known and, with a decreased supply available during this recession, it has been difficult to keep our present partnerships supplied with the number of bicycles they need operationally. At the very least, we need to maintain a strong relationship with our current partners and help them stay afloat.

FIDESMA is the type of organization P4P works to nurture and continue to support. They distribute our bicycles for us fairly and equitably in the local community and surrounding area. Any proceeds from the sale of the bicycles go directly to support the humanitarian mission of FIDESMA. They have deep personal roots within the community and can get the bikes and sewing machines not only to those most in need but also those most able to make use of them effectively. Their work with participants, including going to those who cannot reach them, is something that P4P wants to make sure continues without interruption.

This issue of In Gear is dedicated to highlighting the extensive community development that FIDESMA has invested in. The ongoing provision of technical assistance and practical education and the measurable results that have come from the long-term commitment of P4P to FIDESMA are all part of an overall mission we hope you share our pride in.

Dave



CYCLING THROUGH COFFEE COUNTRY

Like most young men, Maximiliano Solorzano started out working in the coffee groves in San Miguel de Dueñas, 20 miles outside of San Andreas. Plantation work is a common occupation in this region that sits in the shadows of the volcano El Fuego and walking to these groves and travelling about this hilly region takes a physical toll on any strong individual. When Don Max was approaching his 20th birthday, an illness that almost took his life permanently took the strength from his legs. Climbing the steep slopes to work for the coffee growers was no longer an option. He still had his nimble hands and the desire to work and be productive so he began to take on basic repair jobs around the area even though these were not initially profitable or consistent.

A consignment of bicycles from FIDESMA transformed his small itinerant subsistence into a steady and relevant business. The bicycle sales and repair keep Don Max and his family quite busy. The bikes themselves are a lifeline for the many other people in the area who continue to work in the groves. These days, he buys one dozen or so at a time, coming in to San Andreas

twice during each container sale, looking for the much-prized and quite necessary mountain bike. During any given day, Don Max may see numbers of clients coming in for more or first bikes and equipment such as new chains, spokes, and patches for tires. It is no easy feat to climb these hills, they slope so dangerously, that one would expect the groves and gardens planted on them to simply slide down into a heap at the bottom. The travel is time consuming on foot and the roads are nothing more than large paths lacking maintenance. The road bikes that initially came to Don's shop almost 27 years ago were still better than no wheels, but the influx of mountain bikes and their all-terrain wheels is what really turned this area into a "bicycle city" and created a demand for more cycles and an opportunity for new businesses to develop.



Don Max in his bicycle shop.

MISSION STATEMENT

TO DELIVER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AID BY
RECYCLING BICYCLES AND SEWING
MACHINES IN THE U.S. AND SHIPPING THEM TO
THE PEOPLE OF THE DEVELOPING WORLD



Images from Guatemala taken by Garl Michel

SPOTLIGHT: FIDESMA

by Patricia Hamill

FIDESMA has established facilities in San Andres Iztapa from which it implements its programs in all of the surrounding communities. Established in 1998, the foundation has a very clear mission: to promote the sustainable development of families and communities by initiating or supporting programs and projects in the areas of education, with technical assistance and economic aid for conservation and protection of the environment in the rural regions of Guatemala.



Bicycles ready for sale at FIDESMA.

One grant from Japan and one from a Canadian monastery together established FIDESMA. Japan's participation in this project enabled the foundation to erect their administrative building complete with computer labs. The foundation was also able to build satellite labs called "capacity centers" in the more remote



An eager sewing student in the FIDESMA sewing classroom.

hill regions and small towns. Each satellite lab has 4-5 computers. These labs are used solely for the purposes of teaching technological skills to those interested in this type of occupation.



Bicycles for sale at the local market.

The agricultural arm of the foundation exists thanks to a monastic order located in Quebec. The order had land in San Andreas and, once they became aware of what FIDESMA was setting out to accomplish, they donated a portion of this property to the foundation.

P4P partnered with FIDESMA in '99 and, since this collaboration began, there have been more than 6,000 bicycles and close to 200 sewing machines shipped. The initial proceeds of these sales were not for discretionary spending but to use for the



A brother and sister saved their change to purchase their own bicycles.

handicapped of the region. The unfortunate reality of life there is that children who have any type of disability, from mild physical handicaps to severe mental and physical debilitations have no opportunity for aid. There is little or no birth control in this region as well, so a severely handicapped child is most likely part of a large family, thus there is often even less money and time to attend to specialized needs. FIDESMA works to assist these families in understanding and accessing proper nutrition and consistent hygienic practices—especially for those who are especially incapacitated and unable to travel.

It's really quite amazing how the sale of an American bike actually has enabled such products as fresh, local vegetables or a toothbrush and toothpaste to become available in a remote region in Guatemala and help an overwhelmed parent properly care for her disabled child. While these families still receive assistance, the proceeds of sales of bikes and sewing machines now also enable FIDESMA to expand their interests.

FIDESMA is fundamentally concerned with education and creating or nurturing one's capacity to work at regular jobs or start a business. There are carpentry, baking, computer, and plumbing courses to choose from. In fact, the foundation buildings include dormitories in order to lessen students' concern over daily travel or lodging. When you think about the combination of bicycle



A local cycling competition gets underway outside of San Andres.

travel and lodging for students, two elements of this economic expansion stand out: FIDESMA is not contributing to excessive fuel consumption and is preventing pollution of the local environment.

This preservation of the community on the personal and environmental levels shows in the beaming faces in the photographs



The traditional weaving techniques are still used today to create handwoven textiles.

that Señora Margarita flashed before us on the screen. The audience was treated to images of small children proudly showing their perfectly sized bikes and the teenagers sporting bright red or sleek black trail bikes. Moms happily roll by with youngsters mounted behind them. One of the most memorable images was a testament to the pride that people develop when they earn rather than receive their possessions: A group of young men sporting plastic piggy banks filled with the money that they had earned and saved in order to purchase their first bikes.

FIDESMA brings opportunity to you if you cannot come to them. Members of the foundation will take bikes out to villagers who cannot easily get to them to make the purchases. They also set up groups of bikes during feasts and holidays where there is guaranteed to be a crowd. Walk miles to celebrate? Ride home on affordable transportation.

P4P just shipped its 13th container to Guatemala. This is a long-term and strong relationship that promises to remain that way and we hope that Señora Margarita and FIDESMA's executive director Señora Isabel Salazar will be willing to return to Hunterdon County to update us on the progress of these programs and treat



A farmer shows off his crops.

us to more images of these working programs and independent business owners. The following articles highlight some of the individuals and families that Founder and CEO David Schweidenback met with during his visit this winter.

MICROCREDIT AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

FIDESMA's ability to offer micro credit is directly connected to its participation with P4P. If not for the bicycles and sewing machines they sell, FIDESMA would not be able to offer the loans so needed by local farmers in order to evolve from subsistence farming to business owners with progressive agricultural practices. Progressive? This isn't about planting what you can on a squat impoverished patch of dust. While there was a limited supply of fresh and nutritious vegetables in town, the land itself is not to blame. The same rich soil that enables the coffee planters to



Coffee processing plant.

thrive can of course support other types of agricultural interests. Poverty and lack of access to large plots of land are primarily what keeps local people from cultivating their own farms for personal use and larger distribution, so FIDESMA invested in a community garden with the hope that a greater supply of locally grown produce with higher nutritional value than what is currently found in the marketplace would initiate a movement towards physical and financial health in the region.

A group of 12 full-time farmers, each with 2 helpers, rents the land from FIDESMA under a 3-year contract. Strawberries, tomatoes, peppers, peas, and corn all grow in raised beds fed with drip irrigation which is gravity fed from the hillside above. Fertilizer flows through the drip irrigation system and hoop houses. Remay fabric is often used to keep pests off or to protect the plants from extreme weather exposure. These accomplishments are not solely the result of FIDESMA's micro-lending practices. Many people in this region have generations of agricultural expertise to draw from. What they lacked was a source of affordable financing and privately owned land to apply their knowledge while also having access to updated technologies and tools.



Señora Antonieta Mesa

The result of this collaboration is a plethora of nutritious vegetables in the local market, grown by independent farmers

who also export to neighboring communities, thus generating a greater income circulation than small individual slope-side plots could provide.

FASHION AND PRACTICALITY CO-EXIST THANKS TO FIDESMA AND P4P

Señora Antonieta Mesa and her sister Señora Irma Mesa were



Señora Irma Mesa

quite welcoming when David and Gary arrived to visit their sewing studios. These ladies clearly each know what market they want to focus on and how to keep their businesses thriving. Señora Irma makes her living by sewing school uniforms and selling to or doing custom work for the middle-class families of the town and she does her best to donate what she can to the poor families who cannot yet earn enough to purchase her clothes. Looking at the dresses made by Señora Antonieta really dispels the

idea that only the very poor or unsophisticated are influenced by the outreach work of FIDESMA and P4P.

Señora Antonieta originally started her business using cheap plastic machines from an unknown source but, through the micro-credit provided by FIDESMA, she was able to get an older model heavy-duty machine from them. It could sew through thicker layers of more expensive cloth. This advantage enabled her to create the much coveted wedding dresses seen in high-end bridal magazines and the very necessary lovely gowns for young women's "sweet 15" parties. Yes, 15 not 16. The age may differ, but the idea is the same. Señora Antonieta does rely on yardage from overseas for the more intricate orders, but she is often able to make use of fabric made in Guatemala. And these knock offs don't compete with the real thing because the stores that sell these types of dresses are nowhere near these ladies or their customers. It's fair competition for a fair price. Imagine being able to own something exactly like the design you saw in Vogue or Cosmopolitan for the equivalent of \$500? No, it's not cheap, but much cheaper than the real thing, available locally, and excellent quality.

This duo of sisters contributes to the clothing of daily use and to the elegance and beauty of special occasions. They apply wise business practices that can be implemented with little impact on the environment. Local products, personal service, reasonable prices, sustainable practices—all because of P4P's machines and FIDESMA's micro credit and determined distribution practices.

STOVETOP SHAMPOO: NEW PRODUCTION OF AN ANCIENT "MUST HAVE"

Although P4P is not currently planning on adding stoves to its repertoire of collections and shipments, we felt that it was important to highlight how organizations like FIDESMA search out every option available to enable every possible idea or practice



Scraping the Aloe Plant for the shampoo.

to evolve into a thriving business. When David went to visit this winter, Señora Margarita proudly pointed how lovely the local women's hair is. No matter how long or short, there seemed to be no lack of health and shine in these ladies' tresses. To those of us with access to every miracle product modern chemistry and "new" natural options offer, this may seem mundane, but this is not a cosmopolitan area and no

store holds ready-made specialized products. She took David to see for himself how FIDESMA was involved in the production and dissemination of the product responsible for this beauty: shampoo made from locally grown agave by local women and available for sale beyond local boundaries.

Is this remarkable? Not in general, until you become aware of the fact that without the stoves that FIDESMA provides, they would only be able to make smaller batches over longer periods of time, thus ensuring that only enough shampoo would be made for personal or local consumption. These stoves make the difference between limited cottage industry and competitive sustainable products creating reliable income.

Alongside the dominant Hispanic population, there are a number of small groups of indigenous people in and around San Andres who have supported themselves by marketing the products of their ancestors. On his tour, David met Doña Ana Maria Guich and her friends, a group of indigenous women who have been producing the soft-soap shampoo at FIDESMA since the year 2000. The making of the shampoo itself is work intensive and fascinating to watch. This process is done by hand in a modest space provided as well by FIDESMA. On the day that David visited the ladies, he watched as they prepped the 120 leaves they had gathered from 20 plants and began the process of cleaning, slic-



Mixing the Aloe with water to create the shampoo.

ing open, and scraping out the extremely gooey centers of the leaves. They added to this gelatinous mass equal parts water, mixed it all together, and then cooked the concoction on the

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stoves. After the cooling down, the shampoo was left to sit for 1-2 days before being bottled. At least one hundred pounds of leaves are needed to in order to make 400 bottles.

This time-consuming work had been done in makeshift shelters or in the direct sun before these women came to be associated with the foundation. The most basic changes to the mechanics of the process and the working environment allow Doña Ana and her partners the chance to make a greater return on their labor and reach a wider consumer base, thus perpetuating the interest in and dedication to continuing to create this sustainable product. Perhaps our readers will one day find this shampoo on shelves in American stores that participate in promoting safe ingredients, sustainable consumption, and fair-trade imports.



Label from the FIDESMA Aloe Shampoo.

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