

**Background: Moira Peters is from New Brunswick, Canada and is volunteering with the Kaqchikel Mayans in Guatemala for 6 months through the United Church of Canada. She is one perceptive and dedicated young lady as you will see from the excerpts below taken from her most recent e-mail to the Presbytery's Guatemala Partnership. The Onil stoves she speaks about, which we know as Lorena stoves, are the ones being sponsored by our Partnership:**

Hi all,  
Another month, another report. Aren't y'all lucky!

Love Moira

Part of my job this March was to prepare eighteen families in Labor de Falla to receive Onil stoves. These cement stoves were introduced by an international aid organization (HELPS International) that originally began working in the area of nutrition in Guatemalan communities. As with anyone living or working in rural Guatemala, it became quickly apparent that the people's health was compromised every day by a lifestyle that requires women to spend hours and hours breathing smoke. (I myself developed a chronic throat infection after a couple of weeks making tortillas.) Since women carry the population in their breathing bodies for nine months, and after that children spend their first few years glued to their mother's side (i.e.; still in the kitchen), the health of the people is oppressed from the start. Creating a means of making food and tortillas that would allow women to work in a clean environment became the priority of HELPS. The stoves they designed are easy to assemble, use a fifth the firewood of a normal open fire, and have chimneys. Their flat tops with removable disks allow for two pots at a time, and space to make tortillas.

Vilma (natural medicine presbytery worker from Labor de Falla [nurse at the HDV Clinic] and I began visiting homes in the village to gauge interest and need. Some of the women seemed so disempowered, at times almost unable to speak for themselves, to get beyond our presence enough to deal with what we were trying to say. Thank god for Vilma, who is a fantastic diplomat. She knows when and where to be sensitive, and how to communicate without threatening. She is also strong, reminding people that the stoves are not handouts but supports, which require their participation in a workshop, and oblige them to support the presbytery should they be called upon. Thank god for me too! whom Vilma used in explaining how the choosing of families would take place. It is useful to have someone involved with whom people are familiar, someone without much bias, someone who can be praised and blamed.

To build the stoves in each house, the women marched from home to home, a troop of soldiers of the right sort, kids and dogs and me and my visiting boyfriend trailing with our camera. Christopher, at five-foot-eight, was the tallest person around, so he had the job of cutting a circle of roof out of each kitchen to allow for the chimney. Other than that, the ladies did everything themselves. An engineer was discovered in a thirteen-year-old son, who put himself in charge of the general assembly of parts and climbing onto rooves to crown the chimneys with their SOMBREROS. My memories of this work

are dominated by the photos we took of brown arms and gray cement, the crowd of colorful women making so much sense against the black soot of their kitchen walls.

One of six Tatamagouche Centre interns, I am part of the Breaking the Silence (BTS) solidarity network between Canada and Guatemala. We have been taught that solidarity is not giving money or material things, and it does not mean we are here to do things for other people. Well then, those people ask, what ARE you here for? Solidarity is a noble concept. But I have found it difficult to explain without getting ridiculously academic the reason for my presence in a system where white people, representing the kind of monetary wealth that most Guatemalans will never have, come to either get richer off Guatemala's riches, or, loaded with white guilt and good intentions, to bring hand-outs. Still, the question must be answered. What EXACTLY IS IT that I am doing here? Some answers spring to mind: right relationships, trust, being honest, learning about life here in order to make more informed choices about the way I want to live my own in the future. The challenge lies in the asymmetry between my reality as a Canadian and the world in which I am now living. For example, how can I be here in honesty when I have the means to provide a hundred-dollar operation to Enrique so he might not have to live the rest of his life in pain – he cannot afford it – but I cannot do that because solidarity will not allow it? In other words, how can I, as a person of wealth, and I, as a human being whose loved ones are sick, and I, as someone who understands that the consequences of beginning to “give” “aid” are deep and dangerous, pull all of these realities together into a form of solidarity that includes honesty? trust? right relationships? Observing the way the women took charge of their stoves, fulfilling their obligation to be active participants in what was happening, I have begun to be able to let go of this work, which in the beginning I wanted so badly to be mine too. Sometimes, solidarity means not being there.

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The flip-side of the unconditional love that is part of family life in Guatemala is intense pain when something goes wrong. One Friday night when compañera Kat was visiting, I walked into Elida's room, and she was crying, tying her baby on her back. My instincts kicked in – this was a serious blip in the pattern of life I had gotten used to. I couldn't help going to her, and she clung to me, sobbing. I am so bored, so tired. I am not like this, I never used to feel like this before. Bring me to Canada please, she said into my chest. Confused, I asked where she was going. Home, she said. I carried baby Natalie and Kat and I walked her to Cerro Alto, where her folks live; the baby cried all the way. Elida didn't hear her. I have never seen her walk ahead like that. I will not forget her shoulders that night, small and beautiful, unencumbered. She was dressed in a small black sweater, and had the baby shawl draped around her, for warmth instead.

I felt so thankful that she did not accept her husband's criticism (that she should stop lazing around – breastfeeding – because the house was not clean). I was so thankful that she knew she deserved a break. However, I wasn't sure who else thought so, how deeply machismo runs. Would she be able to return? Under what circumstances? By accompanying Elida, was I helping a friend or assisting a fugitive?

Later, Tomasa came home from preparing for a wedding lunch and joined Kat and myself in the kitchen. She asked if Elida had left. We nodded. She said, my poor daughter-in-law. Then she covered her face, and cried, short and intense, and dried her eyes. Where did you drop her off, she wanted to know. And did the baby cry?

Sometimes, Tomasa explained, people get married and have children and don't realize that they have to try to understand each other. Elida works so hard, and she is a good person. Edwin is sick, which makes him angry and mean sometimes. Tomasa told us the saddest part for her is that she and Enrique have always tried to teach their children respect, through the example of their own relationship. That their son doesn't respect his wife is a sign of the greatest disobedience.

The sincerity and eloquence with which Tomasa expressed her feelings touched my soul. This woman was able, with full human emotion, to clearly see what was happening, with the simple understanding of how people ought to treat each other. It felt holy.

I said goodbye to the Sets in their kitchen on my last night. I was humbled by Enrique and Tomasa's "uneducated" words, which articulated the concept of solidarity perfectly. You ate with us. The baby knows you. That was the most beautiful part of our time together, that we were truly together. I never told Enrique how happy I felt the day he said to me, "Buenas tardes, m'hija" (good afternoon, daughter), just like he would say to Lily or Elena. For me, that simple greeting held the truth of everything they said that night in the kitchen.

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March 29th was a day of change. I left my home with the Set family, my belongings packed in the principal's car. Moving out of Labor de Falla, the end of the line, where the bus turns around, I felt like I was beginning the long return back to my native world. The principal drove Brendan and I to Chimaltenango, and we waited for his host family in Pollo Campero, Guatemala's biggest fast-food chain. It felt weirdly good to be there, somehow fitting to be sitting in air-con, playing hangman among disposable cups of yogurt and OJ.

It rained.

My home in Cerro Alto (the next village down the road) has no dirt floor. I have a room, and a bed. All is quiet; from the porch I can see to Chimaltenango, and just beyond that two volcanoes. There are no children playing marbles outside, no baby crying at night. In the evening the sons hang out with their friends, not in the smoky kitchen with the rest of the family. I have semi-serious conversations about God and the nature of women's groups instead of gossip and jokes. It feels peaceful and lonely.

Margarita, my new host-mom, makes things her business; makes the war and the telling of it her business to tell me. She kept silent when the soldiers came into her house and threatened her, calling her a guerilla. Kept silent in her women's group to protect herself and her ladies. Kept silent as she was being manipulated, being sent to take sides in

protests, being ordered to send her sons to take sides in the fighting (now they demand knowledge). Her reality, it turns out, was closest to the truth. This thing, called “the violence”, this silent terror, was about money and land. People wanting a place, a WHERE to belong to. A little, s---y piece of land was what a group of landless families wanted when the army came, one group of soldiers from town, another from the mountain (where Tomasa’s grandson now takes the cows to pasture), took the sick man from his bed and the others from their meeting. Later the bodies were found close to the capital, on the side of the road.

I visit Labor de Falla often, to see Elida [she has returned home]and baby Natalie, grab a good gossip session, and continue working with the women’s group in the garden (the radishes are gorgeous! – spicy bright bulbs which kids beg for and eat like apples). It is delightful to see the little Onil chimneys poking up through rooves at funny angles, smoking away.