



# PORT TOWNSEND & JEFFERSON COUNTY LEADER

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## Serving El Salvador: PT church takes a risk for friends a world apart, finances homes for rural village

By Ben Herndon

They're called bjarreques, or "shelters of whatever is available." The patchwork huts of sticks, corrugated metal and tarps line the roadways and dot the lush volcanic contours of the El Salvadoran landscape.

More than one-third of Salvadorans - 2.2 million people - live in the dirt-floored huts, according to a 2006 study by the El Salvador census bureau, often with limited access to running water or electricity.

It's no surprise then that the townspeople of Santa Elena, El Salvador, reacted with blank stares and silence when an American woman arrived in their village a few weeks ago to tell 16 families they would soon have roofed, concrete houses because of a church three thousand miles away.

The congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Port Townsend is no outsider to the small Central American country of about 6.9 million (about the population of Washington state). The church's involvement with Santa Elena goes back more than nine years, through ups and downs - from sending down six aid groups, computers and money, to having the last two embezzled by community leaders.

Last year though, church board members decided they wanted to go a little further to help their friends in El Salvador.



Port Townsend resident Lori Macklin (front row, second from left) stands with members of the 16 Salvadoran families who are to receive new homes courtesy of the First Presbyterian Church of Port Townsend, through disaster relief and aid organization Asociaci?n A-Brazo. The homes will be built this fall and are being paid for with a loan. Also pictured are A-Brazo founder Hilda Borjorquez (front row, far right) and staff member Amy Wagner (second row, far right). - Photos courtesy Lori Macklin



Santa Elena resident Chepe (left), who is blind and mute, stands in the doorway of a "champa," a small hut made of sticks, corrugated metal and whatever else can be found. The government of El Salvador estimates the country has more than 500,000 homes considered unsafe.

They already knew what the community's needs were. About a year ago the church hired the Asociación A-Brazo, a non-governmental aid organization in El Salvador, to conduct an in-depth study of needs in Santa Elena. The survey, completed in April, stated the overwhelming priority was housing.

Spurred by rising construction costs, church board members looked into the possibility of a loan instead of waiting to raise the \$65,000 it would take to build the 16 two-bedroom homes.

"We decided when we get the money, then we'll pay back the loan," said the Rev. Robert Slater of First Presbyterian.

That's when an anonymous church member approached the board with a generous offer: The total loan must be repaid within two years. If paid back in one year from June 3, no interest will be charged. If paid within six months, \$2,000 will be shaved from the total amount. Any balance left after a year will incur 6 percent interest.

The board accepted.

Lori Macklin, a Port Townsend resident and former country representative for World Relief in El Salvador, which works with A-Brazo, returned from Santa Elena earlier this month to share with the church the reaction of the villagers to the news that they'd be receiving homes.

Their "dead-blank stares" said enough, Macklin said. "They were probably thinking, 'Who is this stranger and why?'" Within a few days, the townspeople became more animated about the project, she said.

A 37-year-old man named Chepe was practically "shrieking" with delight after he heard the news, Lori said. The handicapped resident is deaf and mute and spends much of his time indoors, alone. A hand-signer translated to Lori the reason for his ecstatic shouts:

"He has always feared that the roof would cave in while he is alone, and that no one would hear him call out for help," Macklin said.

Nearly all the building supplies for the \$4,000 homes have been purchased.

A-Brazo crews are scheduled to begin construction in October at the end of the six-month wet season. Santa Elena residents will be directly involved in the process and receive construction training by A-Brazo.

The new homes will be made using rebar and cement-block walls, a metal roof and concrete or tile floors. The layout will include two bedrooms, a covered patio, and a corridor leading outside.

For the people at the project's center, it's been life changing.

"It's the most amazing thing I've seen in 30 years as a pastor," Slater said. There was nobody who said this can't work. It had its own energy from the beginning."

"I've never seen something as expansive and visionary as this project," Lori said to the church congregation July 6. She told them of a Santa Elena man named Don Victor Rivera, who approached her the day she told the community about their gifts-to-be.

Rivera said he had a dream the night before that a "muchacha" would come to the village and tell them they would all have new houses soon. Skeptical, Lori asked Don Victor's wife about it. She confirmed and said her husband told her of the dream around 5 a.m. that day while they took the cows out to pasture.

Although this project has gone overwhelmingly well, Slater said, the international relationship has had its share of "bumps and scrapes" along the way, he said.

In 2006 First Presbyterian and Santa Elena had a falling out after the church learned a community leader in El Salvador "was being more fair to himself [with funds] than to others within the community," Slater said.

"We bought their only computer for the school, and he took it when he left."

It wasn't until the chance arrival of Chris and Lori Macklin in Port Townsend later that year that the faltering relationship was eventually restored and the church wanted to try again.

The Macklins, who had lived and worked in El Salvador for four and a half years, heard about the church's "dead end" and gathered with members to talk about the possibility of working with A-Brazo.

"The thing that's cool is that most churches would be put off," Lori said. "But they kept trying. The [people of Santa Elena] are really impacted by that."

Having the help of people who have lived and worked in Central America has made the process smoother and more rewarding for the congregation, which wants the project to be more than just a "here's the check" situation, Slater said.

The church is adamant on "doing it as partners," he said.

"We want folks there to feel like friends. Our wealth doesn't make us any better."

One way of doing that is by letting the people of Santa Elena give back as they can.

A-Brazo founder Hilda Bojorquez and staff member Amy Wagner meet regularly with the 19 families and are setting up a "community bank" where residents can bring payments for their future homes, even if it's just a "bag of beans." Whatever families can afford to contribute to the bank will be put back into the community in later projects.

Church members David and Geri Eekhoff communicate with the A-Brazo staff at least three times a week to update, and keep updated, on Santa Elena.

The church plans on taking a hands-on part in the building process by having at least two work groups there in October and November when housing construction begins, Geri said.

A-Brazo is the brainchild of Hilda and Raul Bojorquez, who founded the organization after seeing the severe need for reconstruction and disaster relief following the 2001 earthquakes that rattled Central America.

According to a-brazo.org, the organization's vision "is that all people of El Salvador have dignified shelter, legal rights to their land, knowledge and ability to protect the land, and access to basic services." The group specializes in construction, disaster mitigation and community development.

The village of Santa Elena is one of the few rural areas fortunate enough to have electricity, brought in the late 1990s, and a school, built by USAID in 2004.

The 19 families in the community share use of a handful of appliances.

The single road that leads to the village was no more than a scarred dirt path until it was paved a few years ago, Geri said.

Access to clean water is limited to two wells, but local government municipalities are pushing for the installation of water cisterns, or reservoirs, a process that project organizers hope coincides with housing construction, Lori said.

The community of Santa Elena was started in 1985 by fleeing Salvadoran refugees displaced by the country's turbulent civil war from 1980 to 1992, which resulted in the deaths of more than 75,000.

According to worldbank.org, in the last 15 years the country has shown encouraging economic gains and a gradual drop in its high poverty levels.

But a poor infrastructure for quality water management, as well as a startlingly high crime rate (one homicide for about every 1,800 people in 2006), has tainted the country's national image and outside investment interest as well as undermining internal security, education, employment and property values.

A growing socio-economic gap has been a continuing source of contention in the country since the early days of the 12-year war.

"It's a delicate task working with North Americans and Central Americans because there's such a disparity," Slater said.

But ask anyone involved with the project, and they'll say they are more than willing to take a few chances for their friends a world away.

"The need is so glaring," Slater said. "Churches just aren't risky enough sometimes - but not this time."

As of July 21, \$28,722 was paid off on the Santa Elena project loan, Slater said. The six-month, no-interest, \$2,000-back deadline is Dec. 3, 2008.

Anyone interested in donating to the project can contact Slater at 385-2525.