

Fighting a Different Kind of Poverty By Carolina Fernandez

It would seem that fighting illiteracy would be quite simple, really: send several dozen cartons of books into a village -- along with a teacher or two -- and the rest should take care of itself.

But matters of the heart are never that simple. And when you examine, firsthand, the plight of the illiterate at the fringes of civilization, fighting illiteracy becomes a matter of the heart. It was the softening of my heart, and the all-too-frequent lump in my throat, that caught me off guard more than I would like to recall when I recently made my first Alfalit mission trip to Panama. For I was completely disarmed by the quiet resignation and grateful, uncomplaining spirit of this humble people. Facing third world poverty, striking as it was, was a somewhat expected visual. But one is always surprised by the pricking of one's heart.



Our journey began calmly enough. Arriving at Miami International Airport at 5:00 AM sharp, we seemed much livelier once we all downed steaming espressos from an on-site coffee stand. Chatting excitedly until we boarded the plane, we had an uneventful three hour journey to Panama City in a brand new jet. We entered the lobby of the Cesar Park hotel, which, nestled amongst other high-rises in this cosmopolitan city, displayed the fabulous Spanish Colonial architecture and décor that I have come to appreciate during my brief tenure in Miami. My perspective on the magnitude of its grandness would change within forty eight hours.

Driving to the outreaches of civilization in this small country for the next two days proved the largest challenge to our group of ten. My initial thought, as I joined the others climbing into our large van, was "This can't be that bad. How large could Panama be, anyway?" On top of that, we all had such happy camper attitudes. But Roberto's face had a slight look of "just you wait," and I knew there was more than met the eye.



By Friday night we had traveled six hours to the remote edges of this country. By Saturday morning, aboard two awaiting four-wheel drive vehicles at the bottom of the mountain, we had navigated a dirt path studded with boulders, the likes of which scared me half crazy as I watched my husband - - using one hand to clutch his digital camera for the unbelievable footage we were both witnessing, and the other to clutch the edge of the

truck -- ride bareback style in the back of the open-air cabin, his bottom hitting the edge with every twist and turn. We landed smack in the middle of a village on top of Panama. The only visible sign of civilization was the dirt hut and tin-roofed open-walled shelter staring us in the face. Our arrival by jeep was greeted by several children, bare-footed and happy-faced, who appeared to have literally crawled out of the earth.

As Roberto embraced his team of volunteers - - literal foot soldiers for the fight against illiteracy - - the rest of us watched in amazement. Alfalit, the 42 year-old organization over which he presides, has already successfully laid the groundwork for stamping out illiteracy in remote areas of the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking world. They have the system down pat for training teachers in local communities, developing learning centers, and writing and printing textbooks and teaching manuals with an accompanying successful methodology. So successful is the program that it is recognized by UNESCO and has been awarded funding from the United States and Swedish governments, and project funding from UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on relief) to establish fisheries and rice fields.



Once out of the jeep, I felt compelled to check out the hut, having never seen one quite so primitive in my life. We all wound up in the kitchen - - just like in America - - where we met the oldest member of the family. Skinny to the bone, toothless, tanned and beaming, the grand matriarch of this Panamanian family quietly stirred rice on an open-air stove in a cast iron pan which had seen much of the same. Roberto, jovial as always, laughed as he walked over to lend her a hand, posing for a great photo op, while I quietly stood several feet away, hardly taking my eyes off the dirt floor which these children called their bed. The house tour was complete after seeing only a stove and a dirt floor.

We moved on to the shelter, playing with the wild roosters which grazed at our feet. Once there, a steady stream of children poured in, as if on some dramatic cue. With no running water or electricity, the only sign of mass communication - - to my ear anyway - - was the cackling of the roosters and the dim of the locusts. But arrive they did, and they settled quickly onto the concrete benches neatly lined by rows,



waiting anxiously for the gifts we would bear. Men unloaded cartons of books from the back of the truck, and Roberto started hand-delivering workbooks to the hungry children inside the shelter.



The first little girl, perhaps four years old, held onto that workbook as if her life depended on it. Of course, we all knew that it did. Her proud parents sat nearby, beaming at the prospect that their daughter would one day have the tools necessary to lead a productive life. This scene was repeated over and over again, until one by one, workbooks were delivered, along with teaching manuals and textbooks for all those in the “room.”

As this was going on, Betty Thorne, one of the volunteers on our team, and I unloaded the giant duffle bag, lovingly stuffed with clothing by Magda, the charming lady who runs our church’s used clothing shop. Betty and I held up garment after garment, all the while sizing up the children gathered around us like chicks to a hen, to see who would best fit into these suddenly awkward-looking clothes. They couldn’t appreciate the Irish linen blouse with the Ann Taylor tag that I pulled out of the bag. Here, t-shirts and cotton shorts were fashion de rigueur.



The next group we visited greeted us with the same exuberant joy, and they, too, seemed to bubble up out of the earth. Told to walk up the mountain and “turn left at the second mango tree,” we visited their stream, which we learned was the source of their drinking



water. The scum on the top made my stomach turn as I thought about the prospect of a billion microscopic bugs using it as their breeding ground. We viewed their fishing hole, dried up from the current drought, but holding promise of their food supply in a few months’ time. And again, we unloaded books and clothing. Here, I was able to distribute some handpainted clothing from the line I have been designing for over a decade. When I pointed to the label inside and pointed to me, confusion met understanding, and wide smiles spread across their sun-tanned faces.



As Betty and I passed out painted shorts, shirts, bonnets and caps, nursing mothers sat quietly with babes on their laps, watching the commotion with silent appreciation. Finished and crawled back into our jeeps for our final destination, Betty asked the giggling girls - - who by this time had crawled into our hearts - - to pray for us. I

expected a quick nod of their heads; instead, they pointed to us one by one, making us say our names aloud, so they could pray specifically for each one of us. That gesture in and of itself was perhaps the high point of the trip for me.

Our third and final destination of the mission was a visit to an indigenous Panamanian Indian tribe. They were already waiting for us, dressed in their native garb of brightly colored ankle-length dresses embroidered with *molas*. I would learn that this is the traditional craft of Panama, and that it supplies many families with the cash they need for survival. Indeed, several enterprising women approached us with small *molas* purses, asking for \$2US as well as encouragement for a job well done. It was at this final stop that we met several dozen volunteer teachers - - men and women. They had all traveled by foot; most had traveled shoeless. Some had walked the whole day previously; others had walked for two days and even a couple had traveled three solid days by foot in order to meet us. What a humbling greeting! It forced most of us to tears, seeking forgiveness for the complaining we had done about the



uncomfortable, thin-cushioned van we had grown to hate. These volunteers would carry cartons of books on their backs as they walked that same journey home. This group of volunteer teachers was surprisingly candid with us about their humble working conditions. When my husband asked them what Alfalit could do to make life easier for them, they quickly answered that having a horse to help in their travels would mean the world to them. A horse could be bought for \$200US.

Two of our volunteers immediately bought two. We also couldn't help but notice that all of the children were barefooted. Again, plans are underway to outfit them with shoes.

Three of us ladies by this time needed to visit the *banos*. We were graciously shown one family's outhouse, which surprisingly, was not that much different from outhouses I have seen - - and used - - elsewhere in the States. It was next to the bench where several women were already preparing that afternoon's banquet, yet not one enticing aroma emanated from the area, and it appeared unlikely that the couple roaming chickens could be cooked up in time.



We didn't travel to Panama to fight physical poverty. We went to fight poverty of the mind. Countless other organizations embrace missions to stamp out third world hunger, or to eradicate disease. But Alfalit embraces the mission: "*help a person learn to read so he can read to learn.*" We all left saddened to discover their lack of comfort, and guilty to comprehend our own excessiveness.

But I left heartened after witnessing sure signs of hope. For this warm and humble people did not suffer from the one thing that plagues many of the wealthy of my land: poverty of the heart.



Alfalit Panama mission trip volunteers, from left to right:
Ivette Araugo, Andres Asion, Ernie and Carolina Fernandez, Betty and Robert Thorne, Roberto Perez, Margarita Davalos, and Caryl and Brian Andersen.

One of the shelters used to teach children and adults how to read and write using the Alfalit methodology.



Andres Asion talking to the founding member and patriarch of one of the communities we visited.

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