

'It's for Oaxaca' fundraising campaign

MEXICO - The Give and Take of Charity: How Oaxaca changed me

Michelle Ortega

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The first time I saw her, I couldn't quite believe how a woman so tiny could fill up the room with her smile. She blasted past all my barriers, and zoomed straight into my soul with her blinded eyes, her tiny voice shakily proclaiming "Welcome, mija (My daughter.) Praise the Lord he's brought me a new friend today." And for the first time in a long time, I felt like I'd come home.

We all called her "Abuelita," (Spanish for grandma), not only because it was fitting, but mostly because no one knew her name. Not even her. An extremely poor but equally generous family had taken her in a few years ago. She'd been found on the side of a rural Oaxacan road one day, beaten, blind, and alone. She was old. So old that as a young woman she remembered life before cars and women before pants. Nevertheless, with a sly smile she'd proclaim that she couldn't possibly be a day over 70. And we'd all hold back a chuckle and politely agree.

Every so often, my family and I would go and visit Abuelita. She was hungry, so we brought food. She was poor, so we brought money. She was sick, so we brought a doctor. I can't describe the excitement and the joy I felt, baking her favorite bread and loading up the trunk of our car with all sorts of supplies... whatever we had at home to spare. A few rolls of toilet paper, an extra toothbrush, the dress I hadn't worn in months, some old blankets, a pack of antibiotics, a half emptied bottle of Tylenol, and a bag full of items from the pantry. The more we packed, the more enthusiasm we felt to see her brown leathery face light up like a kids on Christmas morning. My life suddenly had meaning. It was as if, no matter how much I screwed up at times, in this moment, my life meant something good. I was finally paying back a little portion, (albeit microscopic), of the wealth of compassion I'd myself received. And my heart would pound in anticipation.

But guess what? It never failed. Like always, we'd pull our car up the driveway. We'd cart our contributions past the barking dogs and the flies and the swirling dust. We'd walk into their tiny one room home, (which housed 6 people and always smelled of urine and old socks.) And there we'd find her. Lying weak and sick and old and tired on a bed made of wooden boards with a misshapen foam pad. I'd quickly push aside a rush of guilt for sleeping like a baby in my Sealy Posturepedic, as she'd look up in our general direction with her blind eyes, and between wheezes she'd say "Praise the Lord. God is good. He's brought me some friends today." She'd smile. From someplace deep inside of her where the shadows of life couldn't quite reach, she'd smile. From some stubborn, die hard corner within that was determined to keep hoping, to keep believing, to keep loving, she'd smile. Even on her death bed, as she tottered between the here and after, she wore this smile. It was huge. It was unforgettable the way that beyond all reason, Abuelita repeatedly chose joy. I walked into that house to change someone's day. And by the time I walked out of it, like always, she'd changed my life.

In the 5 years that I've been living in Oaxaca, I've volunteered for several small organizations which bring relief to Oaxaca's poorest. And I've walked into many homes just like the one Abuelita lived in, some even a bit more deprived. I was trying to make a difference in society. Heck, I was trying to change the world. But the problem was always the same: our groups were miniscule and unrecognized, and the needs of society not only surpassed, but ran circles around what we were capable of providing. I was discouraged, not only because I'd spent so many years seeing such extreme, heartbreaking poverty, but also because

I'd begun to wonder if I was even capable of carrying out what I knew to be my personal calling. You can't imagine how it haunts you: having the heart to give, the need being at arms length and often in the form of children, yet at the same time your hands are completely empty. Our groups were failing. Somehow, I was failing. The problem was just too massive and there was a serious burnout coming on.

And so, when I met the director of the Oaxaca Community Foundation last December, you could call it coincidence or fate, but I lean towards the latter. I was instantly intrigued with their work. Here you have a Foundation that has a decade-long history of making a serious impact in society at a high-scale level that most could only dream of achieving. They've changed the lives of 11,000 children and youth, 7,600 women, and 10,500 men. Not to mention the positive influence on society that each of these people has, in turn, brought to Oaxaca. Imagine 29,100 people like Abuelita, (ok- maybe not as keenly optimistic as her, she really was one of a kind), being given a reason to smile. That's a lot of smiles.

I've spent the last few months as a Oaxaca Community Foundation volunteer, and it's been an experience I will never forget. I believe in the Foundation, and in the people behind it. They have a common vision of bringing about long term changes that will impact the future of Oaxaca. I think this is where I was horribly mistaken before, and the most valuable lesson that the Foundation has taught me. At OCF, I learned that it's not about putting a band-aid on a wound that will not heal, or feeding a family today when they'll be hungry all over again tomorrow. Of course immediate needs are important and to be dealt with, but you must delve deeper. It's about enabling, educating, capacity building, strengthening. It's about healing that wound and guiding that family towards self-sufficiency. And without the action of civil society, it is hopeless. Without the participation of our own people, it is nothing more than a dream.

Sadly, our reality at the present moment is not an encouraging one. The recent crisis of Oaxaca, at a cost of US \$800,000,000 (that's 800 million!) has left the rich in bankruptcy and the poor in utter destitution. For a Foundation that was 70% locally supported, this is very bad news. For a society that was already the 2nd poorest of its country, it is fatal. You could become a part of what changes history. Don't let us fall through the cracks, forgotten and unheard. By contributing to our fundraiser, you would be giving Oaxaca Community Foundation the means to continue enhancing Oaxaca's progression. Thank you for helping Oaxaca.

Michelle Ortega is a free-lance writer at the present moment collaborating as a columnist for *Mujeres magazine* in Oaxaca. She has worked with several humanitarian groups in the United States and Mexico. Michelle joined Oaxaca Community Foundation as a volunteer in December of the former year where she is in charge of international communications, translations, grant-writing, and broadening OCF's support base.