



## **Annual Report 2020**

### **“The year that was. The year that wasn’t”**

#### **Introduction**

As with every other living and non-organic entity on the earth, our foundation was profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that were both positive and challenging. When the year began, we, like everyone else, had no notion as to how we would evolve over the days and months to follow.

The year began like any other. We ran our summer camp in La Carpio for the children, proceeded with our sports program and looked forward to the presence of many volunteers during the coming times. Our food distribution program continued as it had previously, with donations of food seven days a week from Auto Mercado to many families.

When news of a virus began to spread, we realized that things may have to change. As always, we were aggressive, creative and flexible as we determined how to maintain our organization so that it could continue to serve the people of Costa Rica.

Immediately, our government acted and shut down the whole country for weeks. We received special permission to continue the food distribution with Auto Mercado. Thanks to our quick action and Auto Mercado corporate policies of protection for its employees, we began to use face masks, thoroughly and regularly wash our hands, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, and keep social distance from others. It was instinctive and immediate – we must have had an inkling that our survival and that of all the people we serve was at stake.

For many weeks, we were often the only car on the road. We carried the permission letter in our vans and wore face masks at all times. When stopped by the transit police, we simply showed our letter, and instead of penalizing us, they congratulated us for the work we were doing. At the time, I thought nothing of this. Looking back now, I realize how blessed we were to be able to continue serving our community.

In our centers, we halted all direct contact with the children. However, our teachers devised a system of contact through WhatsApp and kept in contact with all the children we serve. The Ministry of Education of Costa Rica quickly developed at home study guides for students so they could continue their classwork and advance through their school year. Since none of our students have a home computer, our liaison work with them through the telephone was essential.

Our sports coach lives in the community and was therefore able to meet with the boys in a careful and controlled way and was available to individuals on a daily basis. Although he could not train with them for several months, he did keep up with them, especially keeping track of who was grieving or needing food.

We were able to host two volunteer groups this year. In January, a group from Adelphi came to work with us and, as luck would have it, they were nurses. I had an impactful experience just before they came here in which I held the hand of a man who had just been hit by a car as he passed away. During this moment, I had a strange rush of experiences. It was night, with a full beautiful moon and I sang a song to him, "Stand by Me". I felt his body leave and surround me. So as part of my orientation seminar with them, I said these words, "You may not understand it well now, but sooner or later, you will be accompanying someone on their final minutes as a human body. Your actions, words, and self care will be essential to the evolution of the human condition because you will have the power to comfort and console them, to ease their fear and pain.... or to leave them to their own devices as you tend to the more physical part of their transition. Do not be afraid to take on this sacred diligence. It is as important as any other task you will have." This song became our go to words of encouragement and reminder of our true role.

The final group of the year was in March with the ex-combatants from Canada. They were able to complete the construction of the house they had started the previous year and refresh our bond as partners in our poverty alleviation program. I was once again reminded of how the scars of war are not just physical.

Then, as the cancellations began, the future of our organization became shaky. But, we knew that we would prevail and went fearlessly forward. Our donor, Gary Kaplan asked, "What are the bare bones that you need financially??" "A way to pay our teachers, our soccer coach and the rent on the building we use," I answered. So, he stepped up and sponsored all four of these things every month. And so, each of our programs evolved and became stronger during the year.

When the Ministry of Health required stay at home orders for the whole country, we aggressively and creatively found ways to keep our programs going while meeting the government requisites. We immediately began required mask use, hand washing, sanitization, and social distancing. We modeled it and taught it to everyone.

## Stages in Poverty Eradication

### Etapas de la Erradicación de la Pobreza



This image of our spiral model of development stayed with us throughout the year. Everything we did was measured by our loyalty to this idea. Life is a spiral, we are all part of it and if we just keep checking our activities to make sure we are moving along in this spiral, we will remain steady. This particular image was developed by one of our virtual volunteers from the University of Michigan who, with their regular calls, helped us to feel connected to the outside world. Virtual volunteers...what a concept.

### **Food First**

Our Auto Mercado program grew to become survival for thousands of people a month. Through the donation of the food, we accomplished the following:

- Weekly distribution of over 650 fruits, vegetables, breads and desserts to people living in La Carpio and Leon XIII.
- Weekly distribution of over 150 food items to a daycare center in another community. This was the only food they had to count on during the week.
- Weekly distribution of over 20 basic food baskets including rice, beans, salt, oil, pasta, soup, milk, sugar, laundry detergent, toilet paper and drink mix for at risk populations, including the elderly, CRHF collaborators, and refugees.
- Weekly distribution of 30 surprise packages with special items like chocolates, olives, European cookies, spreads, cheeses, and unusual food items donated by

Auto Mercado. These baskets were fun to prepare and distribute because they contained things not normally found in LaCarpio.

- 240 hot lunches served per week.
- 40 hot lunches served to Nicaraguan refugees per week.
- 40 basic food baskets prepared and delivered to refugees and homeless individuals per week.
- 250 bread donations to people in quarantine per week.
- Daily food donations for 1,000 animals at the Zooave Rescue Center. These foods —bananas, smashed avocados, wilted lettuce, brown bread with seeds, bruised tomatoes— were not visually attractive to our beneficiaries. 2 boxes per day were delivered to the animal shelter.

We worked every single day, seven days a week. As the weeks went by, we grew from a small group of collaborators struggling to survive the situation themselves, to a thriving small business enterprise. People who could and were willing provided us a



Safely distributing fresh food baskets

donation of \$5 per food basket or bag. We now have two paid drivers and myself as a volunteer, two coordinators of fruits and vegetables, one coordinator of bread distribution, one coordinator of chicken and dessert distribution and three volunteers with food basket delivery. We have a full time cook and a full time cleaning person, each earning enough to pay their rent and utilities. The van drivers earn enough to cover their gas and car maintenance. It is a completely self sustaining program. We have developed a simple but effective accounting system that can be used and understood even by our non-reader coordinators. We model courteous and calm behavior to all who come to us for food and are hypervigilant about the protocols for health and hygiene.

As a year end activity, we went to Auto Mercado, serenaded them, and presented the workers with a small gift of appreciation. There are no words grand enough to describe how much they have done for so many people and in such a respectful and protected way. They “stood by us” every single day of the year. So, we serenaded them with that song.

## **Housing**

Our families were living in a low-income situation to begin with. When they lost their jobs due to the pandemic, housing became even more difficult. In addition, refugees from Nicaragua were not used to paying rent, since most of them had a small plot of land on which to build their small shack and survive.

We helped to ease the housing situation for many people. We gave small stipends to those who were in arrears on their payments, upgraded houses with leaky roofs and walls that were falling down, bought a house for a single mother with seven children, and gave rent relief to people who were at risk for eviction.

## **Health Care**

Next door to our center in La Carpio, there is a Christian clinic. We coordinated with them to help pay for doctor consultants when needed. We also donated medication to them when we were able. They see approximately 30 people a day.

## **Health Education**

We promoted and taught people about how to take care of their own health. While waiting to receive their food, we used the opportunity to teach about healthy eating, hygiene and self-care. We distributed toothbrushes and soap, modeled extreme health measures, promoted the use of vapor breathing with any number of combinations of things —cinnamon, garlic, ginger, anise, aloe, mint, eucalyptus. I did this three times a day and talked about it with visitors. Daily routines, like frequent showering and wearing clean clothes and masks were discussed. We also shared our fears and gave each other confidence.

## **Education**

Through the creativity of our teachers, we were able to provide and support education for 700 children. We did special events during the year like mask-making workshops, celebration of Independence Day through the WhatsApp group, celebration of the Day of the Afro, Caribbean Day of the Special Needs Child, and a talent show.



Celebrating Mother's Day with our school children

We provided sessions on grief counseling for children who lost loved ones either due to illness, COVID, or violence. Our message was clear and simple...the loss hurts, accept the pain, be together, and the loved one will always be with you. We distributed stuffed animals to comfort children who were grieving.



One of our grief counseling sessions

Rainy Day boxes —boxes with activities to do at home— were given to over 500 children. These boxes helped children rediscover their creativity while being stuck at home.



The children with their Rainy Day boxes

Small group tutoring sessions allowed the children to complete their Ministry of Education objectives and all our kids were passed to the next grade level. Several received diplomas for their studies.

We continued with our Montessori program with individual children, and we were able to continue to learn about this important educational system.





One of our children during a small group tutoring session

### **Sports**

Pedro, our soccer coach, became increasingly important during this year. He was available to the early 100 youth in the sports league and counseled the boys through their fears, doubts and grieving process. He re-initiated the training program with small groups at the soccer field we have created. The boys kept the area clean and were able to use this facility without any problems. As the government began to lift more restrictions, Pedro took them in his newly acquired van to different soccer fields in the area. We have converted the downstairs part of our Model Education Center into an office and meeting space for Pedro and the boys.



Boys Soccer Team

### **Small Business Enterprises**

We were able to help set up 40 small businesses so that people could become financially independent. This included sale of recycled items, tortilla making, sales of corn on the cob, hot soup, other food, masks, and care of the bed ridden elderly.

We found that with a very small investment, people are able to create, market and sell products they have made.

Our sewing ladies lost their contract with Café Britt since the souvenir shops were closed. But, we have developed a wonderful sewing project which we think will be self-sustaining. A volunteer, Brenda Hicks, has created beautiful, functional, hygienic masks and has taught the women how to make them. So, we will be meeting with local hotels and businesses to see if they will buy from us both for their souvenir shops and their own employees.



### **Empathy, Compassion and Dignity**

As we went through the year, we counseled hundreds of people who were suffering. We walked a mile in their shoes, showed them a glimmer of hope and helped them to overcome their fear of so many things. Many tears were shed in my office as men, elderly, single mothers, frightened children, and grieving relatives came to me. My philosophy was to listen with the heart, respond with the mind, and act with the hands. I always gave them a practical component...what to do to ease your situation.

Our refugee program met once a week throughout the year and the sessions with them helped them to get through their dark days and be able to think more clearly.

In our weekly sessions, we always did an art project. We have produced a bilingual book about the refugee situation, a play about their experiences, and a Museum of Poverty. This museum will be a virtual interactive experience of what it is like to live in the state of refugees.

I continue to sponsor two boys in prison. The twice daily phone calls from them help them to process their fear, illness—they both got COVID-19—and mostly loneliness. No visitors have been allowed in the prison for more than a year. I cannot even go to leave things for them since I am now an adulto mayor.



We participated in the process of mourning for two women who were killed by their husbands during this year and are brainstorming techniques for women to warn each other about potentially dangerous situations.

As the year progressed, fear grew, anxiety was lurking everywhere and peoples' dark side emerged. Our team stuck together and dealt with both our own and others' dark nights of the soul. And, as has been predicted, we are seeing the light of God in everyone. Our patience and interconnectedness has seen us through. Not one of our collaborators or their families fell ill. I was in perfect physical health all year long except for two times when exhaustion overcame me, and I needed to take a few days off. I have an incredible doctor who knows me well and when I called him with a hoarse voice he said, "No Carpio. No car. No telephone. No visitors. Stay home in your bed. Take these pills. No hospital." I knew it wasn't COVID-19, but the fear is always there, so I took the test and passed. I was as good as new after only three days.

### **Administrative**

As can be imagined, this was a challenging year administratively and financially. However, we were incredibly moved and grateful for the hundreds of small donations that came through for us. Strangely enough, I was never without funding to do what was needed at any given moment. The expenses of the organization —car, phone, internet, rent— were met. Because we had no volunteers, our income was cut to nearly zero. But, we did not have any grand construction projects and no hotel, bus, or park entrance fees either. We had the gift of time. Although we were busy with programs and local community support, we did not have to organize schedules and activities for volunteers. So I was able to organize, reflect on, and review all the past years' activities, paperwork, systems, and to think through the future of our organization. It was a miracle that our organization survived and actually thrived as a result of this situation.

### **Year End Activities**

How to celebrate a Christmas season in a pandemic without putting any of our beloved participants at risk? We began making our list of beneficiaries in October just in case it wouldn't be possible to celebrate Christmas. In early November, we called the place we have had our Christmas event every year and were told that they were closed. We tried many other places to no avail. So, we decided to create a festive environment in La Carpio itself. Since the children were used to being in our centers, knowing about protocols and that our staff is always careful, we decided to have a party for every subgroup at our own centers. Once again, Gary Kaplan and his assistant Natasha came through for us and created a wonderful event complete with gifts, candy, food, a clown show, superheroes, singing and even a Santa parade through the streets. To respect the amount of people allowed in a space at a given time, we actually did eight separate events. Our group gave a thank you presentation to the volunteers and Gary himself completed a rendition of "Stand by Me", a gift for everyone and some heartfelt words.

The greatest celebration of all was when Gary hosted all the soccer boys at his property on the beach. It was a dream come true for all these boys to be at the beach, in the pool, playing soccer in the large yard and eating all they wanted for one whole day. It was so good for them to live for one day...what may be possible for them in their lives. You never know.

### **Special Projects**

With a grant from the Swiss government, we were able to rebuild the bridge over the Chirripo River where the Cabecar communities live. This grant was applied for and received by my son, Francisco, who just finished his Master's degree at the University of Peace. We worked in conjunction with the local indigenous association to completely revamp the bridge.

With yet another grant created by Francisco, we got the funds to upgrade or build five different clinics in the Cabecar Reserve and will now be working on the creation of three aqueducts. We gave out basic food baskets and masks to the indigenous people living on the reserve.

The construction of a house on the finca for use as a camp, retreat center, or temporary housing solution for homeless was another extra project this year. We were able to provide a place to stay for two families without a home.

Peace Pilgrim project promotes the teachings of the Peace Pilgrim who is a woman who criss-crossed the United States for 25,000 miles teaching people about how to live in peace with themselves and the world around them. This project is creating a safe space for a statue of Peace to be displayed in a beautiful garden with plants, trees and rocks from the Rio Chirripo. We hope to publish a book written by Peace and to create a pamphlet explaining her work in both English and Spanish. We thank our long time friend Jean Patterson and family for the funding for this project which is on hold for the moment until the pandemic slows down.

### **Dreams for 2021**

“We can plan...but only circumstances will guide us.”

- ★ Finish the water aqueduct program for the Cabecar Reserve with the Japanese Embassy. Strengthen our relationship with indigenous groups.
- ★ Plant food crops on the finca.
- ★ Continue the Auto Mercado food program.
- ★ Continue with our virtual/hybrid education program with an emphasis on strengthening reading, critical thinking, and writing skills. Our kids are passing their grades but they don't know how to read well or how to use reading and writing as a tool.
- ★ Provide English classes for everyone.
- ★ Continue soccer and basketball training and, if possible, games with other teams with our soccer boys.
- ★ Teach 20 boys to drive and to learn about the mechanics of a car.
- ★ Continue our refugee program by working toward a common goal. This will include a presentation about the state of refugees.
- ★ Paint houses in La Carpio with our soccer boys and collaborators.

- ★ Bring plants and beautiful flowers into the community.
- ★ Publish the books and create the virtual museum.
- ★ Create a school for parents to strengthen their academic skills and possibly get them enrolled in elementary school.
- ★ Strengthen our small business program.
- ★ Promote the women's products online. The initiative will be called "Four Hearts Arts" from our hearts and hands to your hands and hearts.
- ★ Work toward legislation and activities that will promote healthy gender relationships and put an end to femicide and child abuse.
- ★ Stay healthy and grow spiritually. Be prepared to not know what to do. But do something wise.

We face the year 2021 with great hope and light, understanding, empathy and compassion for all of the earth...nature, each other and ourselves.

With gratitude beyond words to all of you who supported our mission, our goals, our activities and our challenges during this most unusual year.

Thank you for loving these wonderful people as much as we do.