

The Behrhorst Ripples

A 2007 Story Gathering Project





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(with Dr. Behrhorst)
Antigua, Guatemala

I met Doc when Luisa and I were Peace Corp volunteers in 1965 and 1966. Doc was known in Chimaltenango and the highlands as someone who really knew and had connections – trust, really - with the Kaqchikel. Any new organization in the area came to Doc for advice about which towns to work in, whom to contact, and projects needed.

After the 1976 earthquake Doc's influence on the community grew. Funds had been provided to rebuild the clinic and it became a center of activity during the area-wide reconstruction activities. Doc and friend Cedric hosted Sunday pancake breakfasts, which became a regular informal meeting of the NGO community. Through such events Doc shared his philosophy and knowledge with many of the NGO organizations working in the highlands. This was an example of how Doc made himself available and always took time to share with people and listen to their ideas.

Doc hired me after the civil war to go look for the 40 health workers that were no longer coming back to the hospital for their ongoing training sessions. It was not known how many were dead or had fled due to the violence. On his motorcycle I ventured up the highland dirt roads, many made impassible by the army. To prevent army movements, guerrillas had dug trenches across roads and felled trees. I had a list of the health promoters' names and villages. I found devastation - 40% of the villages were abandoned and 40% severely damaged. The abandoned villages were hidden by weeds taller than the homes. The villages had been abandoned so quickly that I found pots and food still in the hearths.

Then out of nowhere a bedraggled group of about 50 Mayan men, women and children appeared, walking down the road. They were barely clothed, most were starving and suffering from wound infections, conjunctivitis etc. They told me they were coming back to their village.

Stunned that in their weakened condition that they could even walk, let alone start their ruined life in desolate villages again, I asked "What can I do to help you?"

“Seeds,” was the answer. It was August, they wanted to get a crop of vegetables in to sell at the Comalapa market. They did not ask for food or medical help. Just seeds. They were farmers and they knew what they needed to do to start over again.

I went back to Chimaltenango and Antigua and fundraised, bought seeds, spoke with Doc about medical help. Surprisingly, I didn’t feel overwhelmed as much as I felt compelled to help. I kept telling myself, “Let’s see what we can do.” That’s just how Doc dealt with situations, too, with an open attitude toward possibilities and solutions to problems.

Thus, in a short time, by 1982 a new organization, PAVA, was born as an emergency response to the devastating needs. A few others and I founded it, at Doc’s encouragement. Our first office was right in the Behrhorst hospital. PAVA’s approach was vintage Doc: help people help themselves. And it is what the people themselves wanted, seeds which they could plant so that they could work their land once again.

PAVA today is a strong organization which supports community projects, such as agricultural and water projects, that are chosen by the people. We help communities to access governmental funds, with PAVA providing technical expertise and supplemental funding. The community members provide the labor on the projects. PAVA is one of many “ripples” of Doc’s efforts in the Guatemalan highlands.

2021 update: Today PAVA focuses on rural education, including building village libraries and awarding student scholarships.