

1061 words  
Making a Difference

By Martha Rollins

The Community at the End of the Road

Exactly 10 years ago I made my first trip to a small isolated community at the end of the only road into the Simiriñak Indigenous Territory on the banks of beautiful but wild Rio Pacuare. That trip was documented in the ARCR magazine El Residente. This Cabécar community had no electricity, no internet, no running water and very little food. The schools had very few school supplies and no text books. A few horses riddled with ticks fed in what now is a modern soccer field. Many governmental and corporate donors as well as individuals have helped us to focus a spot light on this community. ICE provided electricity and internet while MEP provided computers and training for teachers and children. The number of children in school has more than doubled. The kitchen has been modernized. ARCR and Post #10 of the American Legion have supported the project consistently with donations and publicity.

On Saturday December 15, 2018, over 170 Cabécar people gathered to meet our team at Escuela Paso Marcos, the school I first visited ten years ago to deliver books for the children. This community includes the Simiriñak and Paso Marcos indigenous groups who live in the Talamanca mountain range beyond Turrialba. The fiesta was held to celebrate the formation of a new Association and the construction of a new gathering place, built by members of the community, with our help by paying for cement for the center's floor. Some Cabécar families walked for more than five hours through the uninhabited mountains to attend. We were welcomed by Richard Segura, a long time friend and leader of the new association at Paso Marcos, Proyet Pacoci, and Albin Anibal Mayorga, the director of Escuela Paso Marcos.

This visit was financed by donations from the Association of Residents of Costa Rica (ARCR) and Post 10 of the American Legion. Team members included: Terry Wise, ARCR Board member and member of Post 10, my husband Roger Rollins, a board member of Post 10, and Terry Renfer, the President of the Board of Directors of ARCR. Also in the group was Anita Salazar, a veteran of prior trips, and her two young nieces, 13 year-old Angelica Salazar Mora, and 21 year-old Diana Gonzales Chicaiza as well as Juan José Benavides (Trino) a singer and guitar player. Two medical doctors, Dr. Andres Garcia and Dra. Mariam Soto met us in Turrialba. Also included in the team were two indigenous Cabécar leaders and friends, Gamaliel Molina Diaz (Gama) who is from a different Cabécar community in the Talamanca Mountains, closer to Limón and Betty Vargas Fernández, niece of former indigenous advisor to MEP and for seven years the Directora of Escuela Sikua Ditsö in Simiriñak.

The trip began early and we departed San José at 5:30 AM and headed to Turrialba. We soon arrived at our staging location, the Wagelia Hotel, where we left our overnight luggage. After a breakfast in a soda on the outskirts of town, we set off for Simiriñak and Paso Marcos in a 4X4 SUV and two pickup trucks.

We were fortunate to have beautiful weather on this trip and the road, which ends at Paso Marcos, is much improved since the first trip ten years ago. At that time we hiked for four hours on footpaths with two heavily loaded pack horses, crossing the Rio Pacuare on a rope bridge while fording the horses after first unloading them, then re-loading them up again on the other side. Now-a-days, since ICE brought equipment in a few years ago to wire the school for electricity and provide internet service, the road is much improved.

After arriving at the school everyone feasted on delicious arroz con pollo, frijoles molido, chips, and té frio. The food was supplied by our team and prepared by the school cook, a smiling indigenous woman who giggled mightily when teased about catching a gringo husband with her good cooking!

After the meal Trino entertained the waiting line of families with children while the two doctors set up shop in a classroom, which also contained gifts we had brought along for the children.

When they were ready, the doctors began examining each child. They saw a total of just under 100 children, which included 72 students, plus babies and young people not in school. Illnesses diagnosed included ear aches, sore throats, parasites, and asthma, as well as dental problems. Diana kept records as the doctors wrote out prescriptions to be filled by the CAJA. After each examination was complete, Betty distributed an orange and an apple to each child. We had brought the fresh fruit at the request of the community.

Richard, our host, then distributed the gifts that the wonderful staff at ARCR had purchased for the children, along with baseball caps donated by Post 10 member George Sellers. The gifts we brought had been selected for age and gender for 72 students, and we were counting them with some trepidation because of a larger number of children than we had anticipated. We were relieved when we uncovered a bag marked "Extras" and knew that we had enough gifts for all the children. Thank you ARCR staff! After each child had received their gift, Angelina helped me pose each child for a photo.

An additional delight was that we had a wonderful follow up to four years of support for five orphans who live nine hours away, by foot. Terry Wise and our indigenous pre-school teacher friend, Yesmi Chaves, had arranged for them to be brought down to the fiesta by motorcycle. The doctors were able to also examine them and arrange for treatment for asthma and parasites. It was such a pleasure to finally meet these lovely self sufficient young people!

In the late afternoon we reversed our trek and returned to the hotel in Turrialba. It was a tired team who laughed and discussed our experiences over dinner, and again at breakfast the next morning, before departure for San José. All team members, including the two young girls and our admirable hard working doctors, want to be a part of any return trip. Gama has made firm plans with other Cabécar leaders for sports competitions, using traditional indigenous games, to be held next year between the different groups. It will be another fiesta to look forward to at Paso Marcos, our lovely isolated community at the end of the road!