

# Horizons

SPRING/SUMMER 2008

## NEWSLETTER

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## The Flight From Home

**As income gaps grow in Central America, people risk their lives to leave**

By Bill Fairbairn  
Program Co-ordinator,  
Horizons of Friendship

José Rivera's<sup>1</sup> body would remain for over five months in a morgue in Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca – a thousand kilometres from his grieving family -- before he was finally repatriated to his home in El Salvador in April.



José's grieving mother meets the El Salvadoran air force plane bringing her son's body home.  
PHOTO: EDH/Franklin Zelaya.

In his late twenties, José was the brother of a close friend of Horizon's partner organization "PASSOS".

Last October, José attempted to flee north in an effort to escape the grueling poverty in which his family lived, and seek a brighter future in the United States.

His journey would take him to the Pacific coast of Guatemala.

There, with more than twenty other Central American migrants – each one as desperate as himself – he paid a "coyote" (a human smuggler) thousands of dollars to board a small crowded boat and head north.

The next day, as the heavy seas churned with the 200kph winds of Tropical Storm Kiko, the boat capsized off the Tehuantepec Isthmus in southern Mexico.

At least twenty-four people drowned, while others remained missing. Three people survived, among them a Guatemalan woman who stayed alive by clinging onto a barrel.

Like José, an increasing number of women and men from the region are leaving their homes and families and risking their lives to make the trek north to the United States and Canada.

Those who survive the journey must face a whole set of new challenges.

Often without any legal papers or authorization, they try to eke out an existence in a strange land to send much needed "remittances" back home to support their families.

Throughout the region, remittances have represented a

key source of income for large sectors of the population.

In El Salvador, money sent by migrant workers now accounts for

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<sup>1</sup>Not his real name

16 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and represents more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the total value of the country's exports.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>International Federation for Human Rights, *United States – Mexico: Walls, Abuses and Deaths at the Borders*, March 2008, p. 9.

While global economic figures for the Mesoamerican region reveal an increase in the GDP – in large part owing to the remittances sent home – poverty levels remain extremely high.

Sadly, more than twenty years after the signing of the agreement laying the foundation for peace in Central America, the economic and social roots that gave rise to the civil wars, shaking the region in the 1980s, remain in place.

According to a recent report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), over half of the population of Central America lives in poverty.

Across the region, more than one in every two of those who are poor live in “extreme” poverty. Even if each household were able to spend all their income on food, they still couldn't meet their basic nutritional needs.

And the situation threatens to deteriorate even further with the economic slump and a crackdown on immigration in the United States. Undocumented workers are finding it increasingly hard to send remittances home.

Exacerbating this situation – one that partners of Horizons have referred to as a “pressure cooker” – is a growing gap in the income distribution levels within many countries.

Latin America as a region has the most unequal distribution of wealth in the world, a situation that is most acute in the sub-region of Mesoamerica.

According to *Forbes* magazine,



**“I was struck by the visible absence of a generation of young adults.” Fairbairn said of the Caribbean coast of Honduras**

Mexico now has more billionaires than Switzerland.

Yet the same economic policies of trade liberalization that have benefitted some Mexicans have had a devastating impact among millions of farmers.

*“Latin America as a region has the most unequal distribution of wealth in the world, a situation that is most acute in the sub-region of Mesoamerica.”*

They have found themselves displaced from the countryside and forced to emigrate to cities in the north of Mexico or to the United States.

Deepening levels of economic inequities and social exclusion are tearing at the social fabric of entire communities.

On a recent trip to visit Garifuna communities on the Caribbean coast of Honduras, I was struck by the visible absence of a

generation of young adults – principally men, but also women in the 20-40 year range.

Our partner CEGAH said that every week, young people were leaving the communities hoping to make it to the United States,

leaving their young children behind with the grandparents.

In this difficult context, Horizons and our partners in the region believe that people have the basic right to live with dignity in their own country.

We will continue to press for this fundamental right by supporting sustainable, human-centred development that helps give people other choices than that of risking their lives to flee north.



**A recognized expert in the field of human rights in Latin America, Bill has over 20 years experience working with non-governmental agencies in the region. Most recently he co-ordinated the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean at York University. He joined Horizons in June, 2007.**

**Horizons of Friendship works with 22 partners on sustainable projects initiated by local communities. They address a variety of concerns – livelihoods, indigenous peoples and women's rights, health, education and the environment.**

# NEW REGIONAL PROGRAMS:

## Ending Violence against Women

Violence affects girls and women throughout Central America at home, work and on the street. The cases are horrific: a woman decapitated, another raped. Femicide, the systematic killing of women based on their gender, is drastically increasing throughout Central America and Mexico.

More than 1,000 women were murdered in 2006 alone in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Horizons is adding its voice to the families and women's and human rights organizations who are drawing attention to the lack of government action to protect women, investigate and bring suspects to trial. Called **The Regional Project to End Violence Against Women in Central America**, Horizons launched an innovative collaboration with Central American feminist organizations, research centres, and grassroots groups this March.



At a rally in San Salvador a sign reads: "Women Defend your Rights and Say No to Violence and Poverty"

The initiative consists of a study on femicide in five Central American countries whose results will be presented to government and social leaders. At the local level, women are training as social promoters to lead violence prevention campaigns. These actions will help make life without violence a reality for many women and girls.

Horizons of Friendship is honoured for the significant financial support of the following: **Solstice Foundation, OPSEU, CAW, Queen's University SALSA Group** and Board member Cathy Wenuk's special appeal.

You can help with an online donation at [www.horizons.ca](http://www.horizons.ca).

*"It is time to take action to break the silence and work across borders to defend women's rights," says Patricia Rebolledo, Horizons' Executive Director.*

## "The Overlooked Epidemic": Combating HIV/AIDS in Central America and Mexico

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Central America is serious, complex and growing. As of 2007, UNAIDS reports that 1.6 million people were living with HIV in Latin America with the highest rates occurring in Central America and the Caribbean. Often referred to as "the overlooked epidemic," the situation has gone largely

unnoticed by the global community. However, within the region, there is a growing network of citizen's organizations working diligently to address the pandemic.

With an eye towards this summer's International AIDS Conference in Mexico, Horizons and its partners have launched a three-year regional project to support citizen's organizations in the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. Horizons' partner **Humanitas** of Costa Rica is managing the project.

It seeks to strengthen the capacities of local organizations in ensuring national governments assume their commitments in the "San Salvador Declaration" – a binding agreement signed by the Central America presidents. In it, they agreed to undertake

coordinated national responses in HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention.

A regional response will need to address the deeply rooted phenomena of machismo and homophobia, which fuel the spread of HIV/AIDS, together with issues such as migration, poverty and the growing "feminization" of the epidemic. It will have to grapple with the rich cultural diversity in the region and the effect the disease is having on indigenous communities and those of African descent.

Horizons thanks the following organizations for their financial and moral support for this initiative: **Caritas-Germany, the United Church of Canada** and the **Primate's World Relief and Development Fund**.



Yadira Bonilla, Co-Director of Humanitas, Costa Rica which is managing the HIV/AIDS project.

# Horizons' Learning Network

## Shared Experiences Mean

By Rona Donefer  
Foundations & Program  
Development Officer

"We are all writing a poem to our daughters, what we wish for their lives – how we want them to be strong, true to themselves," explains Silvia Moreno of El Salvador.

Spread out with markers and poster paper are 16 Central American leaders – Mayan men and women from the highlands of Guatemala, Afro-Caribbean women from Honduras, outreach workers from rural Honduras and from El Salvador's city slums, and former Salvadoran refugees now rebuilding their lives in Pacific coast villages.

All Central Americans – sharing the narrow isthmus of land that bridges North and South America with its turbulent history and legacy of poverty. What brings this very diverse group to a retreat in El Salvador writing poems about their daughters?

They are in a workshop organized by Horizons of Friendship on gender equity, part of our **Learning Network**.

It gives grassroots organizations from across Mesoamerica an opportunity for dialogue, debate and peer-learning.

Members enhance their skills, and knowledge, then lead community-run programs in health, agriculture, education, and human rights promotion. Thus, they find viable ways to reduce poverty and inequality.

Thirty-five years of experience addressing poverty and inequality in Mesoamerica have led Horizons to adopt this people-to-people model of social transformation which it organizes among its 22 partner organizations.

At the gender equity workshop, participants describe how they were raised as boys and girls. They move from the personal to the collective – how they can lead their own communities to a more equitable sharing of power and responsibilities.



Participants at the Gender Equity workshop in El Salvador: "a more equitable way of sharing responsibilities and power."

### The Learning Network at Work in Honduras and El Salvador

In February, another Learning Network opportunity brought men and women campesinos (small-scale farmers) from Honduras and El Salvador to an exchange in Costa Rica.

"Sharing successful experiences has a deeper impact than reading or attending presentations," says Horizons of Friendship Program consultant José Luis Alvarez. "This exchange had a ripple effect among visitors and hosts alike."

For example, a visit to the Women's Environmental Co-op Florencia de San Carlos ignited the group. The co-op collects, sorts and transforms solid wastes. "These women helped influence policy on the environment!" says Meanee Andino of Honduras. José Daré Ramirez of El Salvador asserts, "We should encourage recycling in our own communities."

After the Costa Rican exchange, participants reported to their communities and planned ways to carry out some of the sustainable agricultural practices they had seen.

Here is how their stories unfolded.

### Rural Honduran Women Gain Skills in Sustainable Agriculture

Melanee Andino along with four other Honduran campesinas couldn't wait to tell the other women organized into "Friends and Co-Workers Circles" about the success and simplicity of the ecological agricultural practices they saw in Costa Rica. She knew they could be adapted to the small business run by the women within their self-help groups.

In Honduras, Horizons of Friendship is supporting the work of partner **Simiente Foundation** with rural women of South



Honduran woman working in her family's tomato and corn garden.

# Work Creates a Ripple Effect: Economic Opportunities

Western Honduras to improve their economic situation and increase their community participation.

This year, **Simiente Foundation** is helping the women learn more about eco-friendly agriculture. Horizons will assist them with the purchase of seeds and equipment needed to get 70 women and their families started on applying the new techniques.

Sustainable agricultural practices will show that families can make a living from their land in a manner that is harmonious with environmental conservation.

This is particularly important for the men who have been pressured to use chemicals, leading to deepening debt and dependence on big corporations at the detriment of the local water, soil and plant resources.

They will diversify crop production, conserve water, build green houses, use vermiculture, and establish a conservation forest area as an education centre and an income-generator.

Each family's plot will become a focal point. Neighbours will see how sustainable agriculture is done. They will pass this knowledge along from campesino to campesino.

## Communities Protecting the Environment in El Salvador

María Felix Mejía of El Salvador returned from the exchange impressed by the way Costa Ricans lead local campaigns to raise awareness of the environment.

She represents another of Horizons' partners, **ACUDESBAL: The Intercommunity Association of Communities Working Together for the Economic and Social Development of Bajo Lempa.**

Bajo Lempa is an impoverished coastal region.

Like Maria, most of the 1800 families are refugees who fled their homes during the 12-year armed conflict and have re-settled in a new area. However, their villages sit on the flood plain of the Lempa river. Annual flooding brings polluted water which contaminates drinking water, causing illness.

Horizons is currently supporting ACUDESBAL's efforts to strengthen community leadership and coordinate an environmental stewardship campaign centred on water



The annual floods in Bajo Lempa depicted by local people in a mural in their community centre.



ACUDESBAL youth theatre group performing on social issues

conservation and waste disposal. As the government does not provide a waste disposal service, it is up to the community to do it themselves.

"What I saw in Costa Rica has really motivated me to believe in ourselves – we can work together to make a cleaner, safer environment for our families," concludes Silvia Moreno.

From Costa Rican co-op members to rural Honduran women and resettled Salvadoran refugees – the ripple of peer learning continues to resonate across Central America – bringing hope and confidence to people's lives.



Rona with a group of St. Mary's Secondary School students in Cobourg. Rona joined Horizons in 2005 from Guatemala where she worked with national and international NGOs for ten years. She holds a Masters Degree in Education from McGill University.

# A Country of Contrasts

## Horizons' 2008 Exposure Tour in El Salvador



*Kathy Mitchell of Cobourg and James Clarke of Guelph were two of the 19 participants on Horizon's most recent tour. Kathy is the Admin/Finance Co-ordinator at Horizons, and a stellar amateur photographer. In this article, she combines her talents with those of James Clarke, a Justice of the Superior Court of Ontario, a published poet and author and, also, a long-time supporter of our organization.*

In the midst of a landscape scarred by war and natural disasters, and a political environment marked by corruption and greed, we encountered an unexpected and heartening spirit among the people of El Salvador.

On our first full day in the country, we visited the colonial town of Suchitoto. Close to the Honduran border and the volcanic mountain of Guazapa, the area was the seed bed for many guerrilla sympathizers during the twelve-year civil war.

The pockmarks from stray bullets from the war still mar many public buildings. The town's natural beauty co-exists with its unsettled history.

Examples of human courage abound. We met Benjamin Cuellar, Director of the Human Rights Institute of the University of Central America who matter-of-factly replied "Yes, my life has been threatened.....several times," when questioned by one of the group.



**Carolina and her son at her hillside garden plot with its new, gravity-fed irrigation lines.**

We were introduced to the director of one of Horizons' partner organizations, a health provider and promoter who spent twelve years in the hills of Guazapa as a young guerrilla medic helping wounded on both sides. Captured by the army, he was detained and tortured.

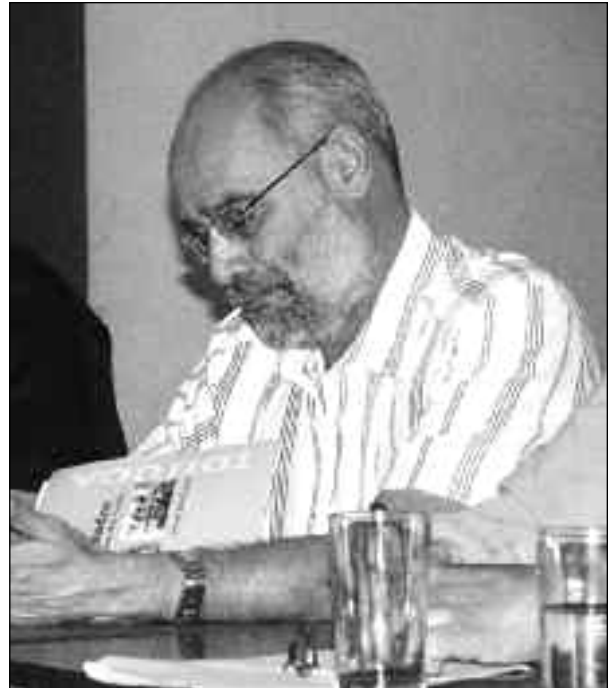
Eventually, he was able to make peace with the past. Years later, in the streets of San Salvador, he met the man who had tortured him. He spoke movingly of the power of forgiveness.

The commitment of these passionate and optimistic people to improving the lives of their fellow Salvadorans was evident.

Our next visit was to a project Horizons supports through its partner FUNSALPRODESE. It illustrated the importance of clean water. The construction of dry latrines designed to protect the scarce ground water from contamination by human waste was slowly improving the garden plots.

These remote areas do not have sewage systems and waste management plants. As a result, the basic amenity of an outdoor latrine that composts waste has made a dramatic difference in the lives of the campesinos. The more elaborate gardens have irrigation systems constructed with gravity-fed water lines.

They allow Carolina, a young mother of two, to grow produce



**Benjamin Cuellar, Director of the Human Rights Institute, University of Central America. As a human rights advocate, his life is in constant danger.**

which can be sold to support her family. She walked us through a wooded area to her garden plot on a hillside.

With obvious pride, she pointed to various crops that she had nurtured from seed and transplanted from trays to raised beds – skills she learned in agricultural training sessions, part of the work of "FUNSAL".

The difference that the knowledge and the access to ample clean water have made in her life was not difficult to see.

In the Bajo Lempa area, we met with members of a new partner, ACUDESBAL, who introduced us to several former combatants in the civil war. They are developing opportunities for education, self-governance and employment on the land that had been granted to them as part of the post-conflict settlement.

Regrettably, their efforts to build a better future for their children were being undermined by a government that now views their presence as an obstacle to the development of these lands for the tourist industry.



A former civil war combatant now works to develop education, employment and self governance opportunities.

Our exposure to El Salvador was a study of contrasts; the shattering poverty of the majority and the obscene wealth of the few; the steely stares of armed guards at nearly every doorway or gated community, and the gentle, tearful tone of the young sister who related the story of Archbishop Oscar Romero's last days; the peace and tranquility of the Centro Ayagualo, our home away from home for most of the ten days, and the blare and congestion of the streets in San Salvador.

This was Jim's third trip to Central America. It was my first. These were ten days that changed my life forever, opened my eyes and heart to the plight of my brothers and sisters struggling in a world so far removed from the privileged existence I have always known as a Canadian.



## Salvadoran Educator Talks to Youth About Violence Prevention

"Youth are not born violent, they become so in a violent context" Transito Ruano of El Salvador passionately tells Toronto inner-city youth. Transito is Director of the PASSOS Training and Education Centre of El Salvador.

She knows all about the connections between youth, poverty and violence. PASSOS runs the School for Youth Violence Prevention in the urban slums of El Salvador, one of the most violent countries in Latin America.

Horizons supports PASSOS efforts to train outreach workers to offer positive, community-led alternatives to at-risk youth.

Transito's words echoed a growing concern among Canadians who were inspired by her advice. Everywhere she went, she repeated her message that repressive measures do not work in preventing violence. "We have to concentrate on preventive



Transito Ruano with Blacus Ninjah of Action for Neighbourhood Change in the Jane-Finch area of Toronto

measures and policies that guarantee the integral protection of children and youth and assist them to play a constructive role in society."

Last November, she spent two weeks travelling throughout Ontario.

She spoke with high school students in Cobourg, Port Hope and Toronto. She gave presentations at the University of Ottawa and OISE, and met with

representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs and CIDA in Ottawa. She received a warm welcome from Horizons' volunteers and supporters.

Each year Horizons of Friendship organizes speaking tours, bringing leaders from our partner organizations to meet with people throughout Canada. These tours enhance mutual understanding and develop strong ties of solidarity between people from the North and South.

### 2009 Exposure Tour to Honduras

**February 18-27**

Visit important historical and cultural sites and learn about community development and social justice in Honduras. If you are interested in finding out more, contact us at 905-372-5483 ext. 10 or at [info@horizons.ca](mailto:info@horizons.ca)

### Homes, Gardens & Music Tour

**July 6, 2008**

**1:30 p.m. to 5 p.m.**

Join us for a summer afternoon of garden and home tours in Cobourg and countryside.

Live concerts and light refreshments.

Tickets \$30 with a \$22 tax receipt.

Contact: 905-372-5483 ext. 19 or [info@horizons.ca](mailto:info@horizons.ca)

# New Ways of Giving

Horizons of Friendship supporters are thinking of new ways to give meaningful gifts to their friends that will have a major impact for Mesoamerican families.

In Ontario, board members of a provincial organization are planning a retirement surprise for a colleague who will soon be leaving them. Their novel idea? Donations in her name designated to the **Regional Project to End Violence against Women in Central America**.

Here at Horizons, Board Member Cathy Wenuk sent out a special appeal. Instead of presents to celebrate her 50th birthday, she asked her friends to donate to the "femicide" project in Central

America. Cathy's request raised over \$3,500 from her generous friends.

Horizons of Friendship counts on the commitment of concerned Canadians like these to sustain our self-help programs among poor people in Central America and Mexico.

The funds we raise from individuals, unions, community groups and foundations are matched three to one by the Canadian government via CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency). This means your donation, in effect, triples.

This is another reason your gift for a retirement, birthday or any

special occasion has great significance!

When you are thinking of a gift, think of us.

*You can make a donation quickly and*

*securely with your*

*Visa or MasterCard*

*from our web site*

*– [www.horizons.ca](http://www.horizons.ca) –*

*through CanadaHelps.*



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To receive this newsletter via e-mail, tell us at [info@horizons.ca](mailto:info@horizons.ca)

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Notre Dame  
United Church of Canada  
Voices on the Border

**And numerous foundations,  
faith-based groups, community  
organizations, unions and  
individuals.**



**Join HORIZONS OF FRIENDSHIP and help to bring about social justice in Mesoamerica  
Together we can build strong communities. Please join us today!!**

I want to support Community Development by joining Horizons' Sustaining Donor Plan. I authorize Horizons to receive monthly tax-creditable donations from my specified account in the amount of:

\$15 (50 cents a day)  \$25  \$40  \$75  \$100  \$\_\_\_\_\_ (other)

Beginning in the month of \_\_\_\_\_ (Please enclose a cheque for your first donation)

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