

# Saludos from “La Familia Foster”

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June 2008

Dear Family and Friends,

This will be our last newsletter from El Salvador as we are coming home to the United States in just two weeks. Although we are really looking forward to reuniting with people at home, it is very hard to prepare to say goodbye to the friends we have made here in Las Mesas. Chesna has told several people that she would like to lift the whole of Las Mesas, trees, houses and all, and bring it with her, and I think each of us shares this wish to live in both places. Each member of the family is contributing to this newsletter so that we can share the experience with you one last time while we are still physically here, although I believe a part of our spirits will always remain in Las Mesas. We have felt very loved and supported by people at home throughout this past year, and we want you to know how good it has been to have that connection with you. We hope you enjoy hearing our stories, and we look forward to seeing you all again soon.



Mayan ruins at Copan, Honduras, during our last visa trip in April

## Update of Construction

Though it's spring in the US, the rainy season has started here. From what we are told, with the change of seasons the number of earthquakes increases. Well, we have a month

left here in El Salvador and with our friends here in Las Mesas. It's a hard thing being torn between the joy of returning home and the pain of leaving friends here. Everyone in the family is feeling it. If keeping busy helps we shouldn't have a problem because for the next 2 weeks it

will be hard for us to take a breath. There is a lot of work and fun to be had.

As you know Daemian was working for FUNDAHMER and with the community to utilize the funds provided by St. Matthew's Church and others. As we wrote in our last update and you saw in the photos, the work was completed for Semana Santa (Holy Week). As Mary mentioned in our last email the community is very happy with the results.

Daemian had been working with some of his friends from O'Brien & Gere to design a number of rainwater catchment tanks for the community, which will allow them to store rainwater during the rainy season and then utilize it for their daily needs during the dry season. Well, the design had been completed and the materials list created and quoted in the fall of last year. The only thing we were waiting for were the funds to proceed. Upon locating a possible source for the funding it was time to start work so we began obtaining final quotes for the materials. As you can guess from what is going on with gas prices and other costs in the US, the prices had risen since they were originally quoted nearly 6 months ago. The prices had increased almost 25% over the original quotes with contingency, and worst of all, it was impossible to receive a quote that was good for more than 24 hours. This was a major setback, but not one that was impossible to overcome.

We had a meeting with the community on a Saturday and confirmed with them that they were committed to perform the manual labor to construct the 90,000 gallon tank by the school. They had already performed most of the excavation required (4156 cubic feet in hard dry clay) and were ready to perform the construction work. It was agreed the materials were to be purchased the following Monday.

*And then came the rain!* On Saturday night at about 8:15 it started to rain, not the kind of rain that lightly falls on the roof and is pleasant to

listen to, but the kind of rain that falls for maybe a half hour during a strong summer thunderstorm in the US. The kind of rain that requires one to pull over and wait to drive if one is driving a car. Well that was the type of rain that we had for hours that Saturday night prior to the beginning of our construction phase of the tank project. It would rain hard for an hour then lighten, then hard again, then lighten. At ten o'clock, Daemian was concerned, at midnight Daemian was disturbed, at 2 pm Daemian was frustrated and by 4 am he was resigned. Daemian did not sleep well, if at all that night and not because of the immense noise that the rain made on our corrugated metal roof or because of the thunder, but because Daemian slowly saw the opportunity to construct the tank this season slip away. The rain ended plans for the construction of the tank until the next dry season because the concrete trucks required to pour the tanks would not be able to reach the town if the roads were not in "perfect" condition. With rain comes mud, and thus the road conditions deteriorate rapidly.

Daemian didn't take a minute to breathe before he dove headlong into another project. FUNDAHMER had been talking with the community of Las Mesas about a project for replacing the leaking roofs (20+ year old corrugated metal roofs) and for building a number of houses to replace those which were made of lamina "corrugated metal". With the tank project delayed there were funds and time to perform this work. The community met with FUNDAHMER to discuss the details of a zero interest loan program to build the houses and replace the roofs. The community was enthusiastic. The quotes were acquired rapidly and the materials purchased. We just received the last of the materials 2 week ago. Construction of the first of 5 houses began June 5, 2008. Each house is anticipated to take 10 days to construct with the help of the community. Today we placed the roof on the first house. As you will see from the photos to

come later even the children are helping to carry materials to the housing sites.

The hope is that all the work will be done by the end July. Our family has been helping haul cinder blocks and other construction materials and Daemian will be helping with the roof replacement and the house construction up until we depart at the end of June.

## **The Never Ending Work of the Teacher**

Mary continues to work with the adult education program that she helped initiate at the beginning of the year. The students are really enthusiastic about learning, and a real camaraderie has developed among the participants. We have classes every weekday afternoon for two hours, and these classes have also served as a space where people share stories about their lives, including their experiences of the Civil War here in El Salvador. Mary has come to see these story sharing times as very significant for the people here, who have not necessarily shared these stories with each other before.

Last month Professor Raymundo, the school's director and 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher was rushed to the hospital with appendicitis. His appendix had ruptured and he had a very close call. Happily he is recovering very well. His absence under normal circumstances would have left the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students without a teacher for a month. The Ministry of Education does not provide a substitute for periods less than 30 days, and knowing this, the Ministry of Salud (Health) provided Professor Raymundo exactly 29 days of rest after his surgery. However, the community asked Mary if she would be willing to substitute teach for the time the other teacher was out. Mary agreed and is now a public school teacher in El Salvador.

School here is different in many ways than school at home in the United States. For one

thing, children go to school for half the day, and many walk up to several km to get there. Fortunately for us, we live very close to the school, close enough to hear the noise of recess from our house, in fact. The school serves about 60 children from preschool up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and three teachers share this work. One teacher works with preschool, kinder and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, another with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, and another teaches 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades. The school has very limited supplies in general, but they do have textbooks for each student published by the Ministry of Education in the subjects of Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies. Teaching here has been challenging, frustrating, or rewarding, at different times.

Most of the time Thandiwe, Chesna and Aidan go to school with Mary and audit her classes while Daemian is working or traveling to San Salvador. The kids have really enjoyed this time to be part of the school with their friends, and will doubtless have stories to tell you about this when we return. When they are not at the school with Mary in the morning, Daemian is teaching them math at home. As you can imagine Mary's schedule has been filled to the brim and if she does not maintain a ready supply of coffee at her finger tips, she falls asleep on her feet.

Needless to say we all pretty much fall into bed at night after our rainwater bucket baths. We all agree that the one great advantage of the rain is that there is no longer a need to haul water.

## **Chesna chimes in**

It is nice here. We play "Ladrón Librado", "Bees in a Nest", "Mica", "Ratón y Gato", and "Escondelero". Those are what children play here.

We have to speak Spanish. We will have a secret language. We will speak Español con una

amiga in the U.S.A. because she speaks both English and Español.

We live right in front of the church. We get to go to the school with Mom. They have a big field to play soccer and other stuff. When we want to have fun we blow on Growltiger and he chases us.

We love El Salvador and can't wait to come back.

## Thandiwe's timeline

It is June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The temperature today is 80° F. Today is a sunny, cool day. Yesterday was my birthday and there are 15 more days until we leave Las Mesas and go to FUNDAHMER. We will stay there for two days, then we will leave for the airport. From there we will fly to Nicaragua and wait in the airport for 6 hours. Then we will fly to Costa Rica. We will wait there for about two hours, then fly to JFK. See you soon!

## Aidan's Adiós

Dear VMM,  
I have been having so much fun in Las Mesas but I can't wait to come back to VMM. How is VMM? What are some of the different trips? I'll see you in a month. See you in June.  
Goodbye VMM, one more time. No, one very last time. No, just one very last time. Okay, that's enough. No, just a very, very last time. Okay. Goodbye, VMM. Goodbye, VMM.  
Love, Aidan Li Foster

## Perspective

As we prepare to leave El Salvador and return to the United States I find myself wanting to step back and understand what we have experienced. It is very difficult for me, personally, to put life here "in

perspective" because it has been our everyday life for the past 9 months. We have awoken to the sounds of the roosters every morning, and spent our days with the people of Las Mesas. While we have shared many daily activities with our neighbors, such as fetching water and caring for our children, there have been many activities which are not part of our daily lives. For other families the day begins with milking cows, feeding animals and grinding corn for tortillas. Our work has not been farming, but supporting the community through Daemian's engineering skills and my education skills. We have homeschooled our children, so they did not attend school with their friends, but afternoons were spent laughing and running together. What I am realizing is that we have been welcomed and have shared our lives with the people in Las Mesas, but that the nature of being a temporary volunteer is that a goodbye is always ahead, and that we can never completely know the experience of our hosts because we have different histories.

The history of Las Mesas goes back to El Salvador's civil war when thousands of survivors of the army's attacks on civilians were given refuge in the churches of San Salvador. Many people lived in these "refugios" for up to five years, awaiting a safe place to live. A Jesuit priest, Fr. Joaquin Lopez de Lopez bought the land of Las Mesas and brought about 40 families to make a new start there. The people formed an "ecclesial base community", following the example of Jesus in the gospels, and worked cooperatively to clear land and build homes for each family. This took years, and the development continues. Fundahmer, the organization with whom VMM placed us, is the organization that has been supporting many ecclesial base communities in El Salvador since the war, and so our work has been to accompany the people in their continued efforts to improve the lives of all

in the community. Today about 20 families live in Las Mesas.

What I have been most blessed by during my time here in Las Mesas is the natural confidence people have shown in offering their stories to me. It is often the stories about real people that help us understand best the reality of historical events such as the Salvadoran Civil War, and the reality that persists. I want to tell you about one person in particular who is very special to me, a person who is both strong and gentle at the same time, and whose story is inspiring.

## **Saturdina**

Saturdina is 76 years old and as tall as Chesna. When I first met Saturdina I was most struck by her huge smile and the sudden embrace this diminutive old woman pulled me into, saying, "Que Dios te bendiga, Senora" (God bless you). Saturdina has a beautiful face, wrinkled and weathered, at the same time childlike and wise. She speaks slowly and very carefully and gestures with her hands often. She has told me much about her life over the time we have known each other, and although I'm sure there is much I don't know, I can share some of what she has told me with you.

When Saturdina was a young child teachers came to look for children to register for school at each house. Saturdina's parents hid her under a bed and told the teachers that there were no children to register. They told Saturdina that she didn't need to go to school, but to learn to keep the house. Saturdina never did attend school and says to this day that all she has ever done is stay in the kitchen and cook. This changed in January, however, when Saturdina started attending the adult education classes we hold at the school. She surprised everyone when she said she wanted to attend, and

probably has one of the best attendance records of the whole group! She is learning to read and write and has inspired all of us.

Saturdina grew up and married and had 7 children. Her husband was a catechist and had to go into hiding when the conflicts started because the government saw anyone teaching the poor about justice as a threat. As the conflict escalated conditions became very bad in Saturdina's community, so that finally they did not have enough food, and her two-year-old daughter got sick and died. Saturdina's teenage daughter decided to go help her father and that was the last time she saw her. Her husband, brother-in-law, daughter, siblings and neighbors were massacred. Saturdina fled her home with her children, describing how the planes and helicopters were continuously flying overhead, bombing the area as they ran. Somehow she survived and made it to a "refugio" where she lived until the people were able to move to Las Mesas. She never returned home.

Today Saturdina lives with her daughter Juana, three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Nearby live her son Ines, and his family. Saturdina also has two sisters living, one of whom I was blessed to meet. Saturdina works from morning to night, preparing all the families meals. One of the most incredible sights our family has witnessed here is Saturdina carrying the enormous bundle of kindling on her head to stoke her cooking stove. She goes up into the woods with her machete, hacks a pile of dry wood into three foot lengths, ties it all up, and carries it all the way back to her house. To see her tiny figure beneath the giant bundle of wood takes my breath away. She doesn't look strong, but she is incredibly strong.

Saturdina's greatest strength, perhaps, is her faith. Like many people here, she peppers her conversations with expressions about

God and his will, such as "Primero Dios", (God first) and "Si Dios quiere" (God willing). She often places her palms together in a prayerful gesture and looks to the sky as she says this. Saturdina recognizes the evil she has witnessed, but shows not a trace of bitterness or loss of faith. I finally asked Saturdina how she can have such trust in God after living through so much tragedy. She told me that God blesses us with each day of life as a gift and she thanks God for each day as if she is again receiving this unwarranted gift. Juana, her daughter, reflected how this life, that seems so long right now, will only feel like a moment compared to our eternal lives with God.

I will miss Saturdina and her whole family. I am grateful for the trust they have shown in me, and the welcome they have given our family the whole time we have lived in Las Mesas. As we leave and I try to reconcile what we have experienced with our "normal life", I will try to learn to begin each day thanking God for another day of life, and to use that gift for His will.