



Buenos noches, amigos!

Today I had the honor of participating in the effort to supply Mayan weavers who lost their homes, clothes, and weaving things in the mud slides with what they need to weave traditional huipiles, or blouses. Susie, the American woman who came up with this idea and is making it happen, was thrilled when I volunteered to help. A pickup truck had been stuffed full of huge sacks of thread, plus wooden warping boards, which are about five feet long, and thread winders, which stand about two feet high.

The truck was so full that nobody could squeeze into the back, so we called for a taxi, which is a golf cart like vehicle. The truck and the taxi bumped over the rocky road to the Alberques, which are the temporary shelters for families who lost their homes. They consist of plastic sheeting tacked to wooden posts. Row after row of them fill an empty field, like army barracks.

As we entered the Alberque children ran to jump onto the taxi and women began following us. We decided to set up shop in what looked like an abandoned stable, with a corrugated steel roof on posts over a cement block frame. An older woman took charge of the growing crowd and got them to stay outside, leaning on the wall and watching as we unloaded the truck and lined the supplies up so that each weaver could progress from getting thread, to a loom, and so on.

The women receiving supplies ranged from 13 year old girls to wrinkled, bent abuelas, or grandmothers. Of course many carried a baby in a sling across her chest or her back, while toddlers and older children ran in and out.

I was struck by their patience. We had a list of over 100 weavers, and my job was to call out each name. Since most of the names had at least one name in Tzutujil, I was thankful that a young woman had come to help and could pronounce those for me. After a while I became comfortable pronouncing 'X' as 'sh' and so on.

For the first couple of hours very few women responded when I called their names. Each weaver has to sign or give her thumb print, her cedula, or identification information, is written down. This is partly to fulfill the requirements of a grant from OXFAM but also to be sure that the right person gets the supplies. The need is so great that Susie has had to pare the list down to those most in need, who are the ones who lost everything.

In spite of the mud slides, the women wore such beautiful clothes, each one lovingly crafted to suit her own tastes. Flowers and birds are the usual embroidery, but I saw bunches of grapes around the neck of one huipil, and sometimes fish, butterflies, or other things.

The process was organized but still sometimes confusing, with women having similar names, or someone wanting to get supplies for a relative, which cannot be allowed. Susie managed to calm people whenever tension heightened, soothing with a smile, a touch, kind words. She took a list of those who wanted supplies but were not on the official list, even though there are not enough funds to supply them all.



In spite of standing for over five hours in the dust, without any food, I felt joyful to be there. The best part was seeing the women bring in the huipiles they had made with supplies they received previously. Susie takes a photo of each woman and her huipil for the grant documentation. The women had such big smiles as they held up their work. And what gorgeous work it was!

Our final task was to distribute warping boards and thread winders to groups of women, because they cannot provide each woman with her own. So five or six women would group together and Susie would take a photo of them with their equipment. As I watched them leave carrying their warping boards on their heads their steps seemed light.

As I looked at the children, with their beautiful brown faces and black eyes, I wanted to hug them all, in spite of the snot and the dirty faces and clothes. They each deserve to have a decent life, and right now their future is in such doubt. Nobody knows whether the families living in the temporary shelters will get permanent housing, and if so, where they will be. The geologists say that it is dangerous to return to where the slides hit, but that is their land and land is very precious here.

Gotta go for now. As before, feel free to pass this message on to others who may be interested.

Best wishes,
Laura Wishik

