

SAPECO
A micro-economic development project
Cuernavaca, Mexico

BACKGROUND

Erik Friend accompanied his family on an extended sabbatical trip to Mexico in 1978. Something about the people and culture touched him. In the winter of 1986 he went on a fact-finding trip to Nicaragua, and he was touched again. He enrolled in a semester program through Augsburg College in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The plot thickened. Finally his senior project in college was a business plan to develop a worker/owner cooperative in Cuernavaca, in the automatic transmission field. Though merely hypothetical in intent, his professor encouraged him to take the next step and carry out the plan. He did. And “the rest is history” as they say. That was 1988.

From 1988 to 1993 Erik worked with two businesses: FRISAN, a transmission parts store, and FRISAN AUTOMOTRIZ, a transmission repair shop. The goal was to prepare that group of six young men and women to become worker/owners, which they did in the spring of 1993. A third enterprise was initiated in 1994, ESTRELLA AUTOMITRIZ with its accompanying parts store. There were now four budding cooperatives. Several models for the work were emerging. The work was ready to expand.

IN THE LAST DECADE

Since 1995 a total of ten businesses have been established and are in various stages of development under the sponsorship of SAPECO, involving over sixty young peasant men and women. Additionally, Erik and other SAPECO staff are available for small business consultation, and have been a source of encouragement, expertise and some financial assistance. Erik, working through Caritas, has recruited an expanding number of individuals and congregations who offer: (a) financial support as contributors to the work, (b) consultation input, based on their own business experience made available to and through Erik, and in some cases directly to the Mexican worker/owners, and (c) financial partnership offering low interest loans to the developing cooperatives.

INTO THE FUTURE

The focus on SAPECO remains small business development with an emphasis on worker/owner cooperatives. But as the reputation of SAPECO broadens, requests for assistance have become delightfully varied. Working through Comunidad -- a grass-roots, community-based resourcing entity in Cuernavaca, which has in turn partnered with Caritas -- Erik has become involved in Mi Universo Pequeno, a pre-school in a squatters settlement, as well as several other similar projects. A small group of deaf women who were initiating a paper-making business sought SAPECO and Erik’s consultation. Working with a man with cerebral palsy, Erik designed and built two prototypes of recumbent tricycles for physically challenged people, a project awaiting a graduate student in engineering to join the team and a possible grant from an Italian foundation.

The current annual budget for SAPECO is \$32,000.

Make checks payable to Karitas, a charitable and tax-exempt

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Dear Solidarios,

Greetings in this most special of seasons. I trust your Christmas was wonderful and that 2008 will overflow with blessings and joy. Find enclosed profiles of two of the several projects that Erik coordinates for Karitas in Cuernavaca, two that are particularly exciting and effective. The year past was filled with steady expansion of the mission, and some delightful surprises.

Erik's work with SAPECO continues to be foundational: worker/owner cooperatives, small business development and fair wage employment. There are at least forty young men and women who have caught the entrepreneurial spirit and are creating futures they could never have dreamed of, affecting, of course, their families, over one hundred persons in all.

Erik recently became president of Comunidad, our sister organization in Cuernavaca, where he can bring his skills and experience in both Outcome Mapping and Appreciative Inquiry, new and innovative planning and evaluation processes. He continues to work with college and seminary students through the Lutheran Center of Mexico City as translator, speaker and group leader. And, in a most beautiful and profound, if unofficial and informal way, Erik is a pastor.

Erik, SAPECO and KARITAS have, steadily, become more and more trusted as durable and committed friends, sources of creativity and encouragement, as partners in personal and economic development for the long haul. Trust builds slowly in Mexico, but its roots and foundation run deep. A young man put it simply and aptly, "Erik, you and Karitas are really 'there' for us!"

Most extraordinary and most touching is the work of ALEM, the twenty young men and women with disabilities you are introduced to in the attached sheet. In a story too long and complicated to tell, a German Foundation, having promised \$55,000 in grants, had to withdraw that commitment due their own financial difficulties, creating a major and unexpected additional fund-raising obligation for Karitas.

Last year our goal was \$35,000. Our goal this year is \$70,000. Therefore we need both to expand our donor base and inspire increased giving from our present partners. Remember, one hundred percent of every gift is tax deductible and goes directly to the work without any deduction for administrative or fund-raising costs.

Faithfully, Howard Friend