

NEWS FROM SAPECO

Karitas in Mexico through Erik Friend

The years pass with increasing velocity! It seems just yesterday we were sharing “news from Erik in Cuernavaca.” Each year the scope and, we trust, the impact of this many-faceted work expands. That has been so in 2006 – and then some! We thought we’d offer you some glimpses, just a thumbnail sketch of the various projects, new ones that birthed in the last twelve months, and former ones that have grown.

COMUNIDAD – our Cuernavaca partner

Comunidad, a grassroots community development agency, has been our partner for several years. They administrate our work in La Estación. Our collaboration has become much more vigorous this year. Erik has joined the Board and we donate his time as a project developer and evaluator. He is also teaching courses in Outcome Mapping, a new, innovative and most exciting process for initiating, supporting and evaluating the impact of given projects – the foundational goal to transform persons and the quality of community. We are able to make Erik available on a pro bono basis an average of five hours a week.

MI UNIVERSO PEQUEÑO – ministry in La Estación



Tim and Susie Kunda were part of a family mission trip delegation in 2001. Their visit to La Estación, a huge squatters settlement in the railroad yard in the city, *broke their hearts open*. Wandering through houses crafted of bedsprings, scraps of wood, bailing wire and oil coated corrugated, awash in mud in the rainy

season and deadly hot in the summer. Tousling kids orange-tinged hair to see it crack at the touch, a sure sign of malnutrition. Watching pre-schoolers leaving to sell candy and gum at traffic lights. They found a small pre-school struggling for survival but bustling with kids and run by a dedicated group of Catholic sisters. In a separately funded project, they raise \$22,000 each year, which has tripled the enrollment, added safe and sanitary bathrooms, added three new teachers and a social worker, installed hearty playground equipment, added a daily feeding and vitamin distribution, and arranged for medical exams for each child annually. In another separate fund-raising effort this year we raised \$25,000 to build a two classroom addition to the pre-school. Erik, through Karitas, is also “on loan” to this project.

AUTONIMO MOVIMIENTO LIBERACION – trikes for the disabled



We shared a bit about this last year. Erik designed and built two models of recumbent tricycles, the pedaling, braking and steering configured to take advantage of the able muscle groups of a given person – for less than

\$100 (they cost upwards of \$1,500 in the States). The dream which, through the partnership of a German-based foundation, edges toward reality is to establish a mini-factory where trikes can be fabricated *by* folks with disabilities to be sold at subsidized prices to those with disabilities. The project has expanded to include employment readiness for the disabled coupled with identifying businesses willing to provide employment for them. Karitas “provides” Erik as an on-going consultant to this exciting and rapidly developing plan. (It is important to know that traditionally in Mexico those with disabilities are viewed, and view themselves, as “throwaway people.” This project has the potential to transform a longstanding cultural bias).

SAPECO – micro-economic development

This was our very first effort, and remains the mainstay of the work of Karitas in Cuernavaca. Frisan, the first worker-owner enterprise, has celebrated its fifteenth anniversary and is widely regarded as the finest transmission repair shop in this city of now nearly one million people. A lovely human-interest dimension – the partners at Frisan voted recently to donate a “salary a week” to other projects we are sponsoring. “You helped us get started, so we want to pass on that gift to others,” they commented. We continue to nurture the entrepreneurial spirit – establishing cooperatives, supporting new business start-up, and offering consultation, as needed, with businesses we helped create in the past. There are now well over fifty young men and women, as many as two hundred lives counting their families, living a different future than they could have ever imagined – from un- or under-employment at unskilled labor to fair wage work and/or small business ownership.

ERIK –the pastor

No, Erik has not earned a seminary degree, or become ordained (though he did take an on-line seminary course last spring and is investigating a seminary option in Costa Rica), but he reports he has more and more come to “feel like a pastor” – a sense confirmed by the number of people who have seemed to come to “see him as a pastor.” On a personal note: when a woman we all knew, on the staff at the center where groups stay that we host to Cuernavaca, died, Erik was asked if he would help lead a memorial service. As Betsy, Erik, Griselda and I drove to the center, I asked how many folks he expected. He guessed six or eight, no more than a dozen. More than fifty people gathered! They sat down and looked to Erik to “be the pastor.” And he did just that. We were do proud to see him open the service, read some scripture, offer a prayer and then, in the most gentle and encouraging of ways, invite those present to speak. After what could have become and awkward silence, one, then another, then still another spoke, until at least three quarters of those present shared – most unusual for Mexicans.

ERIK – a ready presence

A commonly offered suggestion, in and around Cuernavaca, is “Talk to Erik.” Or, sometimes more informally, “talk to the gringo.” Erik has become known as one with a willing ear, as an encourager of fresh ideas, a coach of those who have talent and initiative but need guidance, as one with a heart for people. Fifteen, ten or five years ago it would have been impossible to predict the activities profiled in this newsletter. The same is true looking ahead to 2007 and beyond. There is momentum on many fronts. I wonder what “new and un-thought of possibilities” will materialize in the year to come? It will be fun to watch and wait!

SEEKING YOUR PRAYERS, SUPPORT AND FINANCIAL COMMITMENT

Many of you have supported us financially in the past, some for over a decade, and we are grateful. Some of you are learning about this work for the first time. We hope to raise \$35,000 through this mailing. Our support base is broad – our strength in numbers more than a few large donors (though our major givers are most important and appreciated). We have no institutional or foundation support, though there are some congregations who participate. We will gladly send additional information about any of these projects, as well as our IRS tax exempt authorization letter.

A word from Erik

Compañeros,

Last night we had a Christmas party with the folks who are part of the Trike project, eight people with disabilities and their families, what a privilege for me to be able to take part in such an exchange. As we sat around and talked it occurred to me how wonderful it is to be honestly who we are, nobody could hide from their weaknesses there; I felt vulnerable but it was freeing. At the same time there was this spirit as we looked around the circle at each other; looking through the obvious disabilities we were seeing our gifts and potentials.

It has been another exciting year but a troublesome year as well. Our work continues to expand; we continue to strength our times with local organizations. Social organizations have always struggled with questions about how good of a job they are doing, what their motivations are, and how to make more of a difference in the difficult circumstances that so many Mexicans live under. My role has increasingly become one of accompanying others as they reflect on these questions; sometimes this means offering methods and tools for planning and evaluation, sometimes it means sharing ideas and advice, and other times it means *just taking time to listen.*

Mexico has seen more violence this year than for many decades prior, at least not during the 18 years I've been here. In May, violence broke out over a dispute between local government and flower salespeople in Atenco, a small village about 30 minutes from Mexico City, 3000 state and federal riot police went in to break up a road block set up by townspeople. About 300 people were put in jail, many accusations of rape included, and still some 30 remain behind bars. Soon after a teachers' strike in Oaxaca was brutally repressed by official state police forces as well as paramilitary groups apparently supported and financed by the state Governor. Many and frequent marches and protests of tens of thousands of people were

unable to bring any concessions from the government, finally federal riot police were sent in to “take the city back” and restore order. This popular movement is quite different than the Zapatista movement in Chiapas ten years ago in that this one came about spontaneously. I’m not quite sure where the leadership plans to take this or what they really want, or if they even know, or for that matter if there are truly any leaders. It is clear that there are hundreds of thousands of peasants who are no longer able to survive, they are excluded from the economic project, they have no voice, they have nothing to lose and they are desperately grasping at this opportunity to be heard. This is not going to go away, again a new presidential administration is telling them to shut-up and wait while the economy works out the quarks and starts to offer them some benefits. These people cannot wait, and they have no reason to believe anything would change for the better if they did. We should *just take time to listen*.

By listening we have discovered that there are many assets already present in the communities and the projects we work with, and we find that sometimes crises can be opportunities, and finally it becomes clear that diversity means that there are more possibilities than we thought existed! Many people here are looking for new ways to be society and community; it is exciting to be an active part of this process. As they say at the World Social Forum, “another world is possible, a world where all worlds fit.”

Mil Gracias for helping make this possible.
Erik Friend

For additional current events about Atenco and Oaxaca check www.mexicosolidarity.org