

Pittsburgh nonprofit brews up aid for coffee cooperative in Nicaragua

Sunday, January 25, 2004

By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

TELICA, Nicaragua — At the top of his world, a scarp of high grasses parted by a foot-wide path, Rene Gaitan can see El Salvador to the north and Honduras north and east. Late afternoon sun and the dust of the dry season mix to paint the sky, volcanoes and foothills in the distance.

In the peachy hue of last light two weeks ago, Gaitan, a round-faced man with a shock of straight black hair, led a group of visitors from Pittsburgh to take in the view from 2,000 feet up. It was a postscript to a long day and an unlikely adventure that had begun two years before.

In January 2002, the banks were about to foreclose on El Porvenir, this 640-acre cooperative coffee finca, or farm, in northwest Nicaragua. A rustic wooden warehouse held a 30,000-pound harvest in want of a market. Gaitan, the co-op's vice president, listened stoically as Donna Tabor, a former Pittsburgh TV producer and Peace Corps worker, told them, "We can sell your beans."

Such confidence is characteristic of Tabor, who lives in Nicaragua. But when she presented the idea to Building New Hope, the Pittsburgh-based nonprofit she works with, its co-founder Barbara Wein took a deep breath and wailed, "How are we going to sell 30,000 pounds of coffee?"

On the morning of May 7, 2002, a 20-foot truck pulled up to the loading dock at the La Prima Espresso Co. roastery on Smallman Street in the Strip. John Notte, La Prima's roaster, had met Tabor the year before when she was in Pittsburgh for a visit.

"I'm a coffee man, and these farmers are coffee men," he said, explaining his motivation to help. "I didn't want to just write a check. I wanted to be part of something."

What Notte and La Prima's owner Sam Patti agreed to be part of was a project to roast the first 2,000 pounds of the harvest for free, the rest at cost, and to sell it in their coffee shops, remitting more than half from the sales to Building New Hope. Meanwhile, the nonprofit shot off an initial payment of \$3,000 to El Porvenir to keep the banks at bay.

These have been dire times for small-scale coffee growers. The mass-market price for the raw product dropped below the cost to grow it several years ago and has not risen. Moreover, U.S. price supports, with which Vietnam has emerged as the world's No. 2 coffee producer behind Brazil, have exacerbated a worldwide glut. More than half a million people in Central America alone have abandoned farms, and many people are truly, slowly starving.

The 43 families at El Porvenir share the anxiety of another lean season. But the cooperative and the nonprofit arrived at an encouraging milestone this month.

Wein, with a small entourage that included Notte, made the two-hour, bone-jarring, four-wheel trek up what in few spots only vaguely resembled a road to hand deliver the last payment.

At a makeshift ceremony to mark the occasion,



Amy Langham

Barbara Wein of the Pittsburgh-based nonprofit Building New Hope relaxes with farmers while visiting the El Porvenir coffee farm near Telica, Nicaragua.

Gaitan and Eugenio Laguna Gutierrez, the president of El Porvenir, sat at little school desks with their guests on a covered concrete porch amid the ballyhoo of chickens and roosters.

"Everything you have sent us has gone toward our debt, which is now a very small amount," Gaitan told the group. He said the farm incurred much of its debt to repair property after Hurricane Mitch in 1998. "The policy of the government here is that the poor person does not exist. Had it not been for your effort, there would be 43 more families in the streets.

"We know you made a sacrifice to come here," Gaitan said. "Access is difficult, and, this is Nicaragua." He smiled at the chuckles that conceded Nicaragua's status as a tourist destination.

"It was a leap of faith on both our parts," said Wein. "But when John committed to roast the beans, how could we say no?"

Wein founded Building New Hope in 1992 with her husband, Jorge Portillo, a native of El Salvador. They initially set out to help civil war refugees repatriate in El Salvador, in a village the returnees named Nueva Esperanza - New Hope. Since then, with Tabor on the ground and vigorous in the cause of Nicaragua's betterment, Building New Hope has helped construct and support schools, small businesses, a women's clinic and water systems in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

El Porvenir currently has no other market but the one Building New Hope has struggled to open for it. Before the coffee crisis, it had a Nicaraguan buyer and got by well enough.

Because it is grown organically, the coffee commands at least \$1.41 a pound by fair-trade standards, which call for paying democratically run farms beyond cost so that they can eventually sustain themselves. On the mass market, for which most coffee is grown cheaply on large farms, the price to farmers is about 48 cents.

The year's harvest was being pulped, fermented and culled during the Pittsburgh group's visit. In the

dark barn, the beans moved through chutes and conveyors in a clatter of old-fashioned sounds, like horse hooves on cobbles; but if it appears ancient, the process is efficient: Gaitan said the machines can handle 30,000 pounds in one day.

The community center is dominated by three white-frame, red-roofed buildings. They house the industrial and business operations, the classroom and the clinic when doctors visit six times a year. Modest by First World standards, the complex dwarfs the homes. These are huts with dirt floors with clothes drying on roofs of woven palm fronds. The farm has no electricity, one vehicle for hauling the crop and no running water. The residents depend on the rains of May through October to collect sufficiently in two huge tanks.

Few options beyond coffee exist here. Coffee is a perennial, and the trees that shade it are critical

to its quality, though not much good for other crops. Diversification would require a different setting, and El Porvenir has proved tenacious in its emotional investment. It marks its 20th anniversary on July 4.

"At the time," Gaitan said, "we were about 23 families. We were living in a phase of revolution."

The land owner had incurred a debt of \$18 million cordobas, or about \$1.2 million by today's exchange rate. Rather than pay the debt or his workers, he fled to the United States. Luckily for El Porvenir, that debt was forgiven.

The same year, the Marxist-leaning Sandinista party was confirmed at the polls, and the United States stepped up its covert counterinsurgency. The Contra forces engaged Nicaraguans in war for another six years, leaving the already depleted Nicaraguan economy tattered and deeply in debt.

In 1990, the finca was down to 18 families, but it grew through the '90s. The 43 families now are a weave of Sandinista supporters, former Contras and former members of the Guardia, the Somoza dictatorship's police corps.

"What unites us is our poverty," Gaitan said. "But our ideas are to improve."

Twenty-seven of the residents own the farm, which is guided by a seven-member board of directors. There is a fire brigade, a civil defense brigade and committees that oversee the education of children, the lives of women, the management of the forest and the soil and the collection and storage of food.

The school that last year went up to only the fourth grade, is now offering six grades. The Jubilee House in Managua has supported its growth, and there is money to pay for seventh grade next year.

"We're working on going up to the secondary level," said Gaitan, who several years ago made regular trips up and down the mountain to take night classes in Leon. "We think an educated person has a better view of the world."