

Belmont artist helps to direct coronavirus relief operations in Guatemala

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Belmont resident Anne Wickham Smith helps lead Local Hope, a U.S. nonprofit organization based in Guatemala, with COVID-19 relief in the Highlands of Guatemala. Wickham Smith, a member of the Belmont Artists, The Berkshire Artist Guild, and an associate in the Oil Painters of America has served on the board of directors of Local Hope since 2018, bringing her art teaching skills to the children and families in rural Guatemala.

“It seems like she has been here forever,” said Leslie Baer Dinkel, Local Hope executive director based in the U.S., “she is an amazing ambassador for our organization.”

Local Hope, founded in 1992, focuses on creating sustainable community development in the San Martín Sacatepequez area of the Guatemalan Highlands. The nonprofit provides clean water, education, meals, and emergency relief programs to nearly 5,000 people each year living in poverty while promoting self-reliance. However, due to COVID-19, Local Hope has had to pivot its operations toward emergency relief in the area.

“We were able to turn on a dime back to our roots,” said Baer Dinkel.

Local Hope has turned its headquarters in San Martin Sacatepequez into an emergency operations center with staff working around the clock to distribute food to those in need.

According to a press release from Local Hope, they have distributed food to over 1,300 of the region's most vulnerable individuals. While Guatemala only has a few confirmed cases, they have been hit hard by the economic ramifications of the virus. Those in the San Martin Sacatepequez area have seen severe price gouging as the price of staple foods has increased by 400 percent, according to a press release by Local Hope.

"This is an impossible situation for the critically poor," said Baer Dinkel, about those the organization supports in Guatemala.

The Local Hope board of directors is "working vigorously," according to Wickham Smith, meeting via Zoom in order to stay in contact with their staff in Guatemala.

"We were all going to go in the fall, but it is unknown when we can travel down there again," said Wickham Smith with a disappointed sigh.

When the outbreak struck, Wickham Smith was in the middle of developing an art therapy program through the organization. Wickham Smith developed this idea when she noticed that through the art she was teaching, certain individuals in the community were expressing being victims of abuse. The program, meant to be implemented in the fall, is geared toward helping children with self-expression and identifying their inner struggles.

"When she does art with the kids, they light up, and she lights up," said Baer Dinkel, "it's a wonderful thing to see."

Wickham Smith originally started her career as a video and film producer, working for 20 years. She is currently producing a film for Local Hope to illustrate the aid Local Hope has been able to provide to those it supports in Guatemala and its current relief efforts.

"We have a very, very, very dedicated board of directors that will do whatever they have to do to keep this active," said Wickham Smith.

“We understand that not everyone is in a position to help at this time,” said Baer Dinkel in a press release, “But as those who can help are chipping in for causes abroad and in their own communities, we are seeing the amazing difference it can make. In the community of San Martín, this support is most definitely saving lives.”