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# #Thrive Thursday: Meet Leslie Baer Dinkel, Executive Director, Local Hope Guatemala

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**What is your story? Or in other words, what made you your awesome self you are today?**

In my early thirties, I was a relatively happy person, but I felt as if something was missing in my life. A friend suggested I volunteer, collecting and distributing food for families that had fallen on hard times. Although I wasn't sure that would fill my empty spot, I tried it—I felt like I had nothing to lose—and loved it! I felt incredibly gratified being able to help a family in a small way, and often, recipients would tell me that the groceries they received made a big difference in their lives. Over time, this led me to volunteer on Skid Row in Los Angeles, in places I never thought I'd visit. But there was an incredible need. I met so many hungry people, including families. With all the

blessings in my life, I realized I had plenty to share, and that I should.

Through people I met volunteering, I ended up doing similar work on Skid Row with the Brothers and Sisters of Mother Teresa's Missionary of Charity Order. Because we often worked with Spanish-speaking people, my Brothers of Charity mentor was always teasing me about my miserable Spanish and daring me to improve. At his urging, I ended up one December studying Spanish. But rather than someplace safe and sane, I landed in the middle of the Guatemalan Civil war—complete with soldiers occupying the streets and tanks in the central park!

When my Guatemalan Spanish teacher asked, discreetly, if I wanted to see the “real” Guatemala—the places tourists didn't go—I naively said yes, not understanding the danger. That moment's decision was one of the most important of my life. I ended up in a refugee camp where I saw people living in inhumane conditions. I saw a child who had just died “of a sore throat,” his mother told me. I remembered cleaning out my medicine cabinet weeks earlier, and throwing away antibiotics that could have saved his life...

That same night, the village was attacked and I was nearly killed. I had gone to Guatemala to study Spanish but had become a witness to suffering and terror. That night changed the course of my life. **After seeing an entire family sharing a single egg and some grass, how could I go home and look at Christmas dinner the same way?**

Six months later I did return, and with 40 friends to help. At first, we provided emergency medical services. But when the war ended two years later, we changed our focus to scholarships so that indigenous children who lived on dirt floors with no electricity could get an education and one-day advocate for themselves and find good jobs. That was the vision, and a good one. But when we started the organization, none of us ever could have imagined the obstacles that would come our way. We faced extortion, I was kidnapped twice, and there were many more adventures. But once we had set our intent, I don't think any of us looked back. For me, the work was so extraordinary, so fulfilling, that it kept me going. I've never been sorry for my decision to make volunteering central to my life and to focus on Guatemala.

That was 28 years ago. Today, our organization Local Hope Guatemala provides critical services to indigenous people in one of the worst poverty belts in Guatemala, including educational scholarships, health care, clean water filters, leadership and job training and much more. After a successful career, my husband and I were both able to “retire” early to do this work full time. With all our wonderful supporters have been able to

grow the project to 13 employees in Guatemala serving about 5,000 people each year. I couldn't have imagined a more fulfilling life.

### **In what capacity do you LEAD UP in your community?**

When I was a little girl, my mother gave me big-girl tasks to do. She'd show me how to do something once or twice, then tell me she had every confidence I could do it on my own. She would turn me loose on the laundry, walking the dog, painting the bottom half of a wall, entertaining myself...even as a five-year-old. She never criticized but gently corrected. It might be because of this early sense of "can do" that I became a leader, often taking charge when needed.

In one example, on the frightening day the twin towers fell, I felt compelled to go to a local mosque that night and pray with the members. As it turned out, I learned the mosque was under attack—women's hijabs were being pulled off and members were receiving death threats. I knew the mosque needed to call upon the wider community for support, but they were an insular community and had no contacts. Before I knew it I had volunteered to plan an event for them, "Unity Sunday," to be held just a few days later. I called on a few friends, we visited churches of all faiths and a synagogue, and we brought together speakers from each institution as well as local politicians. That Sunday, twenty clergy and community leaders shared the stage and 3,000 people showed up for the event. From it came community connections and friendships that reassured and protected the kind and loving people of this passivist mosque.

This kind of organizing is now second nature to me, but there is no doubt that I became better at doing it on a large scale after having lots of practice while forging our help project in Guatemala.

### **In business and/or in life, share a struggle you overcame that other women can relate to?**

Understandably, some of my family members and friends were terrified that I was traveling alone, and worse, working in a war zone. Many of them tried lovingly to dissuade me from going to Guatemala, and from returning. I am not sure that, had I been a young man rather than a young woman, they would have lobbied as much or as hard. It was over their objections that I returned to Guatemala, and besides the challenge of the suffering I'd seen and all the planning to address it, I also had to deal with feelings of guilt for going to Guatemala against the wishes of people who loved me.

At one point, I considered abandoning the project to have a more “normal” life that was not so demanding. In the end, I realized I couldn’t do that; that if I did, I always would have wondered what the higher purpose for my life might have been. Over the years, I’ve had to make many sacrifices for the project—sleep, job opportunities, relationships... but I have never regretted my decision.

### **What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?**

I so enjoy getting to know the children in the villages we work in and seeing them grow up to become leaders in their community. They grow from being children with no possibility of even getting to third grade, to becoming sponsored and graduating from high school and college and becoming teachers, nurses, engineers... It is incredibly rewarding to see this! I also love working with volunteers. My husband and I and others trained to lead trips for our organization get to take people to Guatemala on volunteer service trips. I never get tired of serving alongside new volunteers and seeing their perspectives change and their love grow for service work. It is exhilarating! I get to do that several times each year, and watching others get involved and hearing how profoundly it impacts them (they post amazing, heart-felt testimonials) fills me up again. It makes it worth all the effort.

I love people’s stories, and I love to write. During my career, I found writing other people’s stories very rewarding. For many years, people suggested that I write a book sharing my own story of finding purpose, and how adding volunteering to my life filled the void and made me feel truly happy. They were interested too, in the nuts and bolts of how our group established a project in a war zone against the odds, and the new perspective we’d surely gained along the way. After nearly three decades, it was such a joy to finally complete that book, *Hope Dancing: Finding purpose and a place to serve among the Maya*. It’s been thrilling to see through the reviews that people are really enjoying it, and truly benefitting from reading it. The best part hands down is getting notes from people I’ve never met letting me know that the book has inspired them to find their own unique way to serve others. I couldn’t be more pleased.

### **How do you SHOW UP?**

I’ve found that showing up for myself is a process with lots of moving pieces. For me, it’s been a life-long practice and I am still refining. I try to be honest with myself about where I want to spend my time; it’s too precious to waste. I’ve learned that when I say yes to something, I am actually saying no to something else. So I use my yeses

carefully. I aim to commit to what's most important and impactful for me and for others, and when I do commit, I do my very best to follow through and to do a good job. Another part of showing up is attitude. Will I do my life lovingly, with patience and kindness? It's not as easy as it sounds, but worth the effort. Even when I fail (which is often!) I am better for trying. My husband Mel and I keep each other on our toes.

**If you could give one piece of advice for women who are entering the workforce or launching their own business what would that be?**

Believe in yourself. Every good deed that's been done, every song that has been written, every non-profit organization or business that has been started, or nation that was born began with an idea that was generated in its infancy by a single person. There is no reason that you can't be such a person. You will do it one step at a time, as you believe in yourself.

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