

NEWS

Long Beach nonprofit helps rural poor in Guatemala after coronavirus shutdowns

In the last month, Xela AID, known stateside as Local Hope, has shifted its focus to just one need: food.





Participants in Local Hope's Leadership Training Program gather and stack bags of food for 150 families who were set to arrive at the organization's Guatemalan headquarters in San Martín Chiquito.

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Maria Juarez cried when she heard the news.



Her family of five — in the rural, western Guatemalan village of Aldea Miramar — would receive a month's supply of rice, beans, cornmeal, pasta, soup, cooking oil and soap from Xela AID, a nonprofit based in Long Beach, known stateside as Local Hope.

"It's a blessing from God," Juarez told Ilsy Lopez, one of the organization's volunteers, over a spotty phone line in Mam, her native language. "We won't starve."

When the country's largely agricultural economy hums along, Juarez and her family live — like so many others in the area — on \$2-to-\$4 a day, with no savings; her husband takes a bus to Concepcion Chiquirichapa, a town 45 minutes away, to find whatever work he can — sometimes construction, sometimes harvesting coffee.

But the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has put a stop to that.

The [World Health Organization has reported](#), as of Sunday morning, only 50 cases and one death in Guatemala from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. The country, according to the World Bank, is home to [about 17 million people](#).

The government has instituted a curfew and ordered residents to stay home. Public transportation has been suspended.

It remains unclear if these efforts will keep the tally low — but they have prevented people like Byron Vasquez, Juarez's husband, from finding work.

Price gouging, meanwhile, has driven the cost of food, already in limited supply, up 400% at local markets.

"This is right on time," Juarez told Lopez. "We needed this so badly."

Juarez's family is one of 600 in the region to receive provisions from Xela AID, which has served the area for nearly 30 years, providing the local population with access to clean water, education, health care and small business assistance.

The organization's Guatemalan headquarters, a three-story, 4,000-square-foot building, sits in San Martín Chiquito, a town in the country's midwest — between highlands that merge into a mountain range to the north, and a coastal plain that meets the Pacific Ocean.

But the nonprofit has recently narrowed its scope. It assessed the best way to help the local population during the global pandemic and, based on what it learned, the workers running the on-the-ground operations there have shifted their focus to just one need.

"It was literally food," the organization's executive director, Leslie Baer Dinkel, said in a recent interview. "People need food."





Dinkel first traveled to Guatemala in 1992, at age 33, for two weeks to learn Spanish.

The country — about the size of Tennessee and nestled just south of Mexico — was, at that point, more than 30 years into a complex, ever-evolving civil war.

By the time the conflict officially ended, four years after Dinkel's arrival, more than 200,000 people had been killed; tens of thousands suffered torture, sexual violence and forced disappearance, [according to the United Nations](#).

Dinkel was not prepared for what she saw.

"I was kind of 33 going on 23," the Orange County native said. "I was very sheltered."

The trip changed her life.



Leslie Baer Dinkel, the founder of Local Hope, an organization providing aid to Guatemala for nearly 30 years from a base office in Long Beach on Thursday, April 2, 2020. (Photo by Brittany Murray, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

[Reports on the conflict](#) eventually documented the genocide and war crimes the Guatemalan government committed, largely against the rural, indigenous populations Xela AID now serves.

But that came later.



And so, while the war continued, families fled the violence roiling the countryside and went to the mountains, creating their own peaceful villages, which they called “communities of peoples in resistance.”

Even in those hideaways, though, refugees often traded one form of suffering for another. They were free from bloodshed — but they also lacked medical care. Families starved.

Dinkel witnessed this.

One rainy Friday night during Dinkel’s sojourn, a teacher took her to one of those communities.

The smell overwhelmed her; it betrayed the lack of sanitation.

She watched entire families cook, over campfires, grass and a single egg to share.

Then she heard the wails.

Dinkel and her teacher ran toward a group of women; the crowd circled a mother, inconsolable, near the body of a boy.

The boy had died of a sore throat.

“I remembered that I had just cleaned out my medicine cabinet a few weeks prior to going,” Dinkel said. “It just haunted me that I threw out medicine. I threw out antibiotics that could have saved a child’s life.”

The memory has stayed with her since. She returned to the country six months later — to provide emergency medical services.

“I was haunted by that,” she said. “I wasn’t ever the same.”



Elmer Mazariegos, Xela AID’s operations manager, led a trip Friday morning, April 3, from the bright yellow headquarters in San Martín Chiquito two hours south, to a series of villages in the country’s Boca Costa region.

A bus, filled with 188 black trash bags that contained the sustenance families would need to survive, cruised along a paved road that eventually gave way to gravel.

Police patrols, tasked with enforcing the country’s curfew and stay-at-home order, were a frequent sight.



As of Friday, [Reuters reported](#), Guatemalan authorities — under the command of a [newly elected](#) conservative president — had detained 5,705 people for leaving their homes without justification.

Officers stationed along the country's roads keep a lookout for anyone traveling unnecessarily. Though that category, these days, is especially broad, buses — intended to carry as many people as possible — are particular targets.

Mazariegos and his team were pulled over.

The officer asked where the group was headed — and why.

Carlos Ramirez, the team's driver, said they were en route to Nueva Esperanza to deliver humanitarian aid. He showed paperwork documenting their plans — and the vehicle's interior, stacked with provisions.

The officer waved them along.

Mazariegos and his team arrived at the designated location, an open, outdoor spot, at 10 a.m. A line of people from five nearby villages — those their town leaders determined had the most need — waited.

They were single mothers and elderly folks, appropriately spaced to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. They had walked from their homes, up to 30 minutes away.

They needed the food. But, Mazariegos said, they also knew the help would only last so long.

"It was temporary relief for the situation they are living in right now," Mazariegos said, "but they are really, really uncertain about, in the near term, what are they going to do to survive through this crisis?"





Local Hope's Elmer Mazariegos delivers sorely-needed food to Lucia Ramirez, left, a widow who, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, subsisted on little more than a handful of corn and beans each day.

One man who Mazariegos met Friday took his wife and three children to his father's house to talk about their families' food supplies. Together, they had enough to last two weeks.

"We don't know if there will be transportation or any way to get some work after the food runs out," the man told Mazariegos, "and then we will be two families without food."

Mazariegos has heard many such accounts. He has spent the past three weeks overseeing the production and distribution of hundreds of bags of food, each providing a month's worth of sustenance for an entire family.

At first, procuring the food was the biggest challenge. To guard against panic-buying, the Guatemalan government banned bulk purchasing.

So Mazariegos drove from store to store throughout San Martín Chiquito to buy the food so many families would require.

Xela AID has since gotten permission from the government to receive wholesale deliveries. But still, checking in with local providers on their supply levels is a never-ending undertaking for Mazariegos.



As is talking with families — across 54 nearby villages — about their own dwindling rations.

“The goal is to help all of them,” he said, “but we have to prioritize the most needy.”



When Dinkel returned, in 1992, to her hometown of Anaheim from her two-week trip, she enlisted whoever she could find to help form the organization that would become Xela AID.

The group of 40 volunteers she brought together over the next six months included folks from Saint Matthew Ecumenical Catholic Church, in Orange, Brothers of Charities and Catholic Charities. There were also “devout atheists,” Dinkel said, musicians and doctors, including one who was a refugee from the Vietnam War.

“We were a real ragtag group,” Dinkel said.

Together, they recruited more doctors, from the U.S. and locally in Guatemala, to treat the thousands of people in the region who had gone for years without care.

Dinkel and her team set up roadside tents to house emergency clinics. Sometimes, they operated out of local homes residents offered up for the cause.

Patients arrived who suffered from malnutrition, gunshot wounds, gastrointestinal issues, machete lacerations, infections and broken limbs that had gone years without being set.

There was one boy, Dinkel recalled, who had an eye infection for a year. He cried at any glimpse of light.

“We gave him a couple of drops of antibiotics, and it was gone,” she said. “Those are the kinds of little miracles that make you never take your life for granted.”

But over time, after government officials and rebel leaders [signed peace accords](#) in 1996, the country stabilized. And Xela AID transformed.

The nonprofit grew. It built the San Martín Chiquito command post in 2004; it now employs three people in the United States (outside of Dinkel and her husband, who are full-time volunteers) and 12 full-time staff members in Guatemala.

The organization also shifted its focus to meet the changing needs of the local population in and around San Martín Chiquito. Xela AID developed programs to increase access to education, leadership training and entrepreneurship.



“We wanted to do more than (just emergency medical care) and do something that would be lasting and sustainable,” Dinkel said. “We fashioned our new model, which was to help people have the tools to be self-reliant.”

The nonprofit is building a 16,000-square-foot learning center, which will offer a computer lab, a preschool and a special program for children with disabilities.

But for now, Dinkel said, Xela AID has returned to its roots in emergency operations.

The situations are different. The civil war decimated villages, but people were still free to move around. People could still access coffee plantations to make a living. There was still food to eat.

Now, “the first line of defense is just getting people food,” Dinkel said, “making sure they don’t starve during this crisis.

“You have to save their lives first,” she said, “before you can even think about the virus.”



Dinkel spends much of her workday applying for grants with her husband, who serves as the organization’s chief financial officer, chief operating officer and treasurer.

They have a small office in downtown Long Beach, though — with California’s own stay-at-home orders — they now work from their Huntington Beach home.

On an average day, Dinkel calls Lucrecia Gonzalez, the director of Guatemalan operations, to hear about the situation on the ground and what Gonzalez needs to move forward.

Dinkel finds new ways to fundraise, organizes volunteer trips and helps the Guatemala staff solve problems as they arise.

Her role has evolved over time; as Xela AID has grown, Dinkel has prioritized training and hiring people in the local community to run operations as they see fit.

“We see ourselves as really supporting the work that they’re doing for their own community,” she said. “We really try to take our cues from them.”





A resident retrieves an emergency bag from Local Hope in San Martín Chiquito, Guatemala, which contains beans, rice, cooking oil, salt, sugar, spices, the nutritional supplement Incaparina, soap and reliable information about precautions against COVID-19 infection.

Take, for example, Lopez, the volunteer who told Juarez her family would soon get a month's supply of food.

Lopez, who has a college degree, runs a program for children with disabilities, providing them with speech and physical therapy.

Xela AID's new learning center, when it opens, will include space for her program.

But, for now, with COVID-19 collapsing Guatemala's economy, Lopez also relies on Xela AID for her own food.

Before the government shutdown, Lopez worked with 20 children, often inside public schools with the necessary equipment for physical therapy.

That work is on hold.

But, like everyone else involved with Xela AID, she hasn't idled; her focus has shifted to providing those same families with food — while also comforting them.

"They don't know how long this is going to last, so this creates a type of anxiety," she said in Spanish. "They have to provide for their children and, at the same time, they have to remain calm because they don't want to transfer their worry to their kids."

And the fear is palpable.



They don't know when they will work again. They don't know when they will run out of food. But they know it could be soon.

They also know the worst, it seems, is yet to come.

The virus itself, after all, has not yet ensnared the country.

Mazariegos, for his part, said the future appeared clear: Whether people have food, whether they have medical care, whether they have jobs — a surge in cases will come. An overwhelmed hospital system, on top of the suffocating economy, he said, is “the worst possible scenario.”

Mazariegos said he didn't want to imagine it.



h, is knowing soon he won't have to.

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