

Help poor by being partners, not saviors

BY JILL DOCKING

For years, my husband and I donated to Trees for Life, a non-profit organization headquartered in Wichita, based on blind faith in its mission and our belief in the integrity and talent of Balbir



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Mathur, its founder. This faith and belief are now intensified, as I recently witnessed the work of Trees for Life in person when I was invited on a trip to Nicaragua.

We stayed in Tisma, a small, rural town an hour's drive from the capital city of Managua, and traveled to several nearby towns. Everywhere we went, I witnessed intense poverty. In most of Nicaragua, people live as they did in America more than 100 years ago.

Watching Balbir help the people find solutions was inspiring. Again and again, I saw the same ground rules at work. Rule No. 1 was that Trees for Life would not "take sides" and would help only when everyone agreed to cooperate and communicate. Rule No. 2 was that the ideas and initiative must come from the local community — not from Trees for Life. Rule No. 3 had to do with a "business deal"; Trees for Life would help, but these communities had to contribute their share so that they would have total ownership of the project.

For example, in Niquinohomo, a rural community, Trees for Life helped start a children's library and learning center. At this center, 35 physically and mentally handicapped children were learning how to paint. Their paintings were beautiful and heartrending. These children told Balbir they needed funds to purchase more materials for their art and handicraft projects. He asked them a question: "Which would you rather I do — give you the

money or give you the formula on how to make money?" The children chose to learn the formula, rather than be beggars.

Arrangements were made to procure canvas, art materials, brushes and frames so that value could be added to their paintings. The children will lead the campaign to sell these paintings. They now have a vision to earn 50 times more money than they had originally requested.

In another rural area, near Metagalpa, where coffee is grown, a school building is desperately needed. Balbir told them that if they could give us 200 pounds of coffee, Trees for Life would sell it to our friends and all proceeds would go toward their school. They did exactly that — and our suitcases were packed full of the award-winning coffee beans of Cafe Fundador to bring back to the United States.

I came back convinced that the real answer, in the long term, is to give people the tools they need to help themselves.

We are a most generous nation. And our country has increasingly become engaged in helping the poor of the world. But we must do it as partners, not saviors. Our "partners" must own their projects, and we can give guidance, support and money.

How proud I felt to be a part of Trees for Life, and how humbled I felt to watch our partners in Nicaragua put together libraries and schools with virtually no resources other than sheer determination.

The gift of my experience in Nicaragua will stay in my mind forever, helping to remind me that we are all God's children — and to set aside at least a piece of my charitable gifts for the desperately poor around the world.

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