



Legacy of Learning

NAPLES-BASED ORGANIZATION
PROVIDES EDUCATION FOR
GUATEMALAN VILLAGERS

by Lance Shearer

Penny Rambacher and Shirley Lotz cut the ribbon to open a school.

IF YOU EVER WONDER IF ONE ORDINARY PERSON can make an extraordinary difference in the world, keep Penny Rambacher in mind.

Working as a flight attendant for American Airlines, the Naples resident traveled to Guatemala, and was overwhelmed by the poverty she witnessed, seeing children living in garbage dumps and scavenging for food.

She and her mother Noreen used Penny Rambacher's airline travel benefits to deliver aid to those children, blankets, shoes, and toys, but came to realize that to permanently make a difference in their lives, education and the knowledge of how to earn a living were key. So they built a school for children in the highlands of Guatemala, funded by Noreen Rambacher's final act of love and giving before succumbing to cancer. Out of that effort came Miracles in Action.

The group has built 42 schools in Guatemala, some in villages so remote they can be reached only by boat, along with seven libraries, 20 municipal water systems, and a three-story vocational training center in the town of Santa Cruz on Lake Atitlán. Subjects taught at the Centro de Capacitación include carpentry, sewing, cooking and mechanics. They have also installed more than 1,800 safe, vented stoves and 500 water purifiers for families.

“One hundred percent of our donations go directly into the projects. We have no overhead or fees.”

From a starry eyed do-gooder, Rambacher has become a canny organizer, working the angles to ensure all parties have a “buy in” to the projects and their school projects are successful. The villagers contribute labor, the government provides the land and teacher salaries, and construction materials are purchased through the generosity of her American donors, many living in Naples.

“When they have worked themselves to build the school, the community feels they have an investment in education,” said Rambacher, reached by a combination of Skype and Magic Jack phone lines from Guatemala. In another distinctive feature of the Miracles in Action approach, they are building schools with an innovative process, constructing the walls from plastic bottles filled with non biodegradable trash packed into a form of brick, removing trash from the landscape and using it to further their children's education. “We have the whole village working to assemble these bottles, packing them down hard.”

“I was impressed by this unique concept that pulls villagers of all ages to collect thousands of discarded plastic bottles, cleaning up the environment, and gaining a ‘bottle school’ in the process,” said Ira Dash of Naples, who funded a school.

Shirley Lotz, a retired schoolteacher, funded another school after hearing Penny Rambacher give a Power-Point presentation on Miracles in Action.

“Shirley sounded really interested,” remembered Rambacher. “Two weeks later, a check arrived for \$20,000, with a note attached — ‘Build a school.’” Lotz said this past Christmas was the first one since losing her husband, and she funded the school as a Christmas gift to herself to leave a legacy of learning.

Janusz Subczynski, a retired neurosurgeon, was so moved by Rambacher's presentation that he agreed on the spot to help build a school for the villagers.

"She's an unbelievable woman," he said. "She is down in Guatemala almost every week. I said I want to fund a school, and she said, 'I'll need a check.'" Eventually, Subczynski put more than \$50,000 of his own money into the effort, and, like Lotz, traveled to Guatemala for the dedication of the schools he made possible.

With Miracles in Action stretching the dollars, a three-room school with bathrooms can be built in the Guatemalan highlands for about \$20,000 to 25,000, Rambacher said. Once the school is built, the government provides teachers' salaries. Miracles in Action is a nonprofit organization, and can make a claim not many charities can match.

"One hundred percent of our donations go directly into the projects," she said. "We have no overhead or fees. Our angel donors fund all our administrative expenses."

Miracles in Action is a Top-Rated Charity of 2012 and has received grants from the Naples Council on World Affairs twice.

In one particularly gratifying outcome for Penny Rambacher, three of the girls who were students in that first school, the one her mother built, have graduated and become teachers, one as a pre-school teacher in one of Miracles in Action's own schools.

"It's sort of coming full circle," she said. "Now the ones we helped are helping others." **TJ**

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www.miraclesinaction.org.*



Shirley Lotz distributes backpacks and school supplies in Guatemala.



Students give their new school the thumbs up.