

We Are Your Future: Creativity and Resilience Among Women Weavers in Tlamacazapa, Mexico

In November of 2015, OPIRG staff, Shelley and Cecilia had the rare opportunity to visit with the women weavers of Tlamacazapa in northern Guerrero, Mexico.

The following is Shelley's recount of the experience:

Our visit was prompted by an invitation from Atzin and made possible by financial support from OPIRG McMaster, CUPE 3906, Unifor Local 5555 and the Hamilton and District Labour Council.

Atzin is a small non-profit organization, working in solidarity with the Indigenous Nahua community of Tlamacazapa, Mexico, since 1997. The community lives in acute poverty and has experienced a severe erosion of traditional culture and language. The determinants of poverty affecting the community are many and complex, further exacerbated by a long history of systemic oppression.

Malnutrition is prevalent, more than half of the women are illiterate, and a quarter of the children do not attend school. Lack of clean water is a constant worry. The village wells have cracks in the limestone, where water trickles down and villagers have to wait for hours in the dry season to fill their containers. During the rainy season, the wells become contaminated with a runoff of garbage and excrement. Further complicating matters is the presence of naturally occurring lead and arsenic in the water. Atzin research revealed that the poorest families use 7 – 12 litres of water per person per day and the average family uses 7 – 20 litres of water per person per day. This is well below the World Health Organization's recommended minimum to maintain health of 25 litres per person per day and 15 during a disaster. At present, a municipally funded project is seeing the streets dug up to lay sewer pipes, a problematic endeavour from many angles. The sewage will be dumped into a lagoon near the primary school with no set treatment plans. In addition to that, discussions regarding future contingency plans in the case of lack of water and consequent hardening of sewage in the pipes is severely lacking. This presents a large concern for health and sanitation, among other factors, such as financial. Is this simply poor planning or a blatant example of ongoing exploitation of the poor?

Atzin has been able to respond to the needs of the community by focusing on four main areas: Health and Healing; Community Education and Literacy; Income Generation for Women, and Environment, Water and Sanitation. Health and Healing programming includes Special Needs and Nutrition, Motlan Dental and Oral Health, and la Buena Cocina (The Good Kitchen), where participants learn to use an ecological rocket stove to prepare a nutritious meal of lentils and vegetables. Samples are distributed and leftovers are sold at cost. La Buena Cocina promoters also prepare atole (similar to thin porridge) for the Tihueliske Education Programs. The Safe Motherhood program includes a series of prenatal classes, prenatal checkups and post-delivery follow-up. Atzin is also in the initial stages of fundraising for a Women's Wellness Centre to be built in the community, which among the many amenities will include a birthing centre and a

Crisis Reception Centre for Women. The Centre will include outdoor healing gardens and is designed using sustainable principles. Education initiatives include the Tihueliske Early Stimulation Program, Tihueliske for Children aged 5 – 13, Tihueliske for Women and Youth to engage in literacy classes, Tihueliske Tutoring for children and special scholarships for youth.

OPIRG has long supported the work of Atzin, most noticeably by selling woven palm baskets in our office — everything from quirky chickens to large colourful hampers — with proceeds going to Atzin. We have also facilitated student volunteer placements with Atzin; nursing, engineering, and arts and science students have gained valuable learning experience through their time with Atzin. One student returned and formed an OPIRG Working Group, “Walking with Tlama”.

When the invitation to attend “We Are Your Future” arrived, I was excited to attend the art opening in order to visit with Atzin staff and volunteers and, most importantly, to reconnect with the women weavers, Victoria, Reyna, Salome, Justa and other familiar faces from previous visits. The exhibit featured works of art by Mexican artist Aranda and Canadian artist Ray Dirks, and a large selection of beautiful baskets. It was an empowering and emotional experience for the women to see themselves depicted in art, their struggles, strengths and daily labour presented to the world as something of value and to be given thoughtful consideration. The exhibition will tour throughout Mexico and Canada with an aim to increase public awareness and create support for the work of Atzin.

Amongst the invitees to the exhibit was a Pottawatami Cree family from Walpole Island, living in Ottawa and funded through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. There were many poignant moments as when Elaine toured Tlamacazapa and saw a community in suffering, not unlike her birth community - the devastating colonial legacy has been felt across the Americas. There were also moments of delight, as when the 12 year old Theland mesmerized the villagers of Tlamacazapa with a traditional hoop dance wearing his “Proud to be Native” t-shirt.

For many of the women weavers, their stories include persistent illness, the loss of young children, alcoholic husbands and domestic abuse. It takes tremendous courage for village women to take steps to change their daily reality. The courage to train as a midwife, attending late night births and then face down the hateful rumours of being labelled a “street walker.” The courage to take pencil to paper and learn to write your own name. The courage for the first time in one’s life to leave the community and attend trainings held by Atzin in Cuernavaca. When Salome joined us for a walk to the market in Cuernavaca, I realized that the heaping mounds of mole, the butchered pig heads, the edible bugs, the maze of stalls with all variety of fruit, vegetables, flowers and a vast array of consumer goods was just as exotic and potentially unnerving for her as it was for me. The training with Atzin, whether as community health promoters and midwifery attendants or in expanding income generating skills beyond the weaving of baskets, has allowed many women to see that another life is possible. These are hard gained glimmers of hopefulness. The Director of Atzin, Dr. Susan Smith, formerly of the School of Nursing at McMaster University, sees the community as one characterized by a poverty of

spirit, as well as economic poverty. She emphasizes that there are no easy solutions when working under such circumstances.

A primary purpose of the intensive promoter training schools, Igualtanesi (Here Comes the Dawn), hosted by Atzin is to begin to reconnect the women to their cultural heritage. Women and youth take on responsibility for delivering Atzin programming in the community. The training schools provide an opportunity to learn conflict resolution skills, communications and creativity development and to engage in topics such as human rights, gender and economic productivity. The schools are always followed by regularly held learning circles. Nacho, a Nahua leader from Amatlan, is instrumental in these trainings and will often lead the attendees on treks lasting many days to sacred sites, such as Xochicalco, an archaeological site dating to the 8th century CE. We visited the community of Amatlan with Nacho and followed a winding trail alongside a small stream to a natural gateway in the mountain face sacred to the Nahua people. Nestled in the valley of the mountains, surrounded by fruit trees and with a spectacular variety of flowering plants, Amatlan stands in complete juxtaposition to the arid and rocky terrain of Tlamacazapa. Although poor, the community of Amatlan has maintained spiritual wealth, cultivating traditional healing and maintaining a connection to sacred lands. Working with Nacho and members of his community has been an inspiration for the women.

“We Are Your Future: Creativity and Resilience Among Women Weavers in Tlamacazapa, Mexico” will open at The Pearl Company in Hamilton on Saturday, November 19, 2016. Please mark the date.