

ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

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North-South Connection

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

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By Chenoe Egawa

Last September, during a meeting with *La Fundacion de Asesoría Financiera a Instituciones de Desarrollo y Servicio* (FAFIDESS – the Foundation for Financial Advising to Development and Social Service Institutions) I talked with Executive Director Reynold Walter about my hopes for seeing tribes come together North and South to meet, share ideas, experiences, cultures and traditions.¹ One thing I envisioned, I told him, was the revival of trade among tribes of the Americas. To cite an example of intertribal gatherings at home, I mentioned a celebration that my father was organizing in Puyallup, Washington, called Washington State Indian Days. This event, the first of its kind in the region, was to take place on October 31 and November 1, 1998. Local professional Indian artists and crafts people, such as basket weavers, beaders, carvers and painters would be featured, as well as tribal education programs and businesses. The purpose of the event, I told him, would be to raise awareness and understanding among Washington's 35 tribes — 27 of which are federally recognized — and the general public about what is happening on different reservations throughout the State. Most Indian people are unaware of the activities of other local tribes. There is an even greater information gap among the general public regarding the State's native cultures and programs. This would be a chance to bring people from many backgrounds together in a positive, open and educational setting.

Mr. Walter smiled at me and nodded his head in agreement. "I will see what I can do," he said. "I think we just may be able to send a few women from our communal banks to Washington State Indian Days. I will need a formal invitation and the itinerary as soon as possible. We do not have much time to organize this, so we will have to work fast."

Either my Spanish was a bit unclear that day, or Mr. Reynold heard what he wanted to hear and assumed that my sole purpose for being there that day was to invite Mayan women from FAFIDESS to attend the event in Washington State. I had not planned on this at all simply because I thought it would be impossible to coordinate airline tickets and visas at such short notice. The event was seven weeks away. I liked the idea, though! I promised Mr. Reynold that I would deliver all the necessary paperwork he needed to seek funding for plane tickets. One month later, six tickets were donated by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and five Mayan women from five different departments of Guatemala and one

¹ I wrote CE-5, "The Lilies," about communal banks in San Juan Sacatepequez, before talking with anyone in the FAFIDESS office. After writing the newsletter, I scheduled an appointment with one of the FAFIDESS staff members. At that meeting, I was introduced to the Executive Director. Nobody in the office knew that I had already written one article on some of their associate members in San Juan Sacatepequez.

FAFIDESS staff member were going to Puyallup, Washington — of all places!

When I received this news, I was thrilled. On the day before their departure, I met the women who had been selected to go at the FAFIDESS headquarters in Guatemala City to give them a briefing on my State — the weather, the people, the local tribes and their customs. Stepping into the office where they were waiting was like entering a high-energy zone. There was so much electricity being generated from excitement, nervousness and disbelief that the room was actually buzzing with all of our combined energies. I felt an immense rush of pride — pride in my own heritage, and pride in the heritage of these women. The next day they would be flying to the Northwest Coast of Washington State, be hosted by my family, introduced to native people from the Northwest, present and sell their loom-woven textiles at an intertribal trade fair, see products and programs from U.S. tribes, and participate in an intertribal Pow-wow. Irma Gutierrez, a K'iche' of Totonicapan, Micaela Tol, a K'iche' of Chichicastenango, Maria Eugenia "Cheny" Alonzo, a Q'anjob'al of Soloma, Huehuetenango, Maria Estela Martin, a Kaqchikel of Chimaltenango, Melva Lopez, a Kaqchikel of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Antigua and Monica Lemus Rodas, a Ladina (nonMayan Guatemalan) and Trade-Program Officer of FAFIDESS, made up the team.

Except for Monica, none of the women had ever traveled outside of Guatemala, and most had not even left their own regions before, let alone travel by plane. They did not know one another prior to this trip, but out of 4,000 associate members of FAFIDESS's communal bank program, some magical twist of fate brought them together to share a journey that was filled with joy, despair, hope and plenty of humor. Upon their return, I interviewed them for this story.

* * * *

The Airplane

On October 30, 1998, the women waited anxiously in the Guatemala City airport for their departure to Los Angeles. From Los Angeles they would change planes and head to Seattle, Washington.

Irma, a young, quiet and dignified woman from Totonicapan, at least had the comfort and reassurance of family members at the airport, all of whom were extremely enthusiastic and excited for her good fortune. "I kept thinking to myself, this is not possible that I am actually here!" said Irma. "It was like a dream." Her brother

told her later that as he and his cousin watched the plane take flight, they both cried tears of joy, knowing that the plane was going to transport Irma and the others all the way to Los Angeles.

Maria Estela said that her family was overwhelmed with emotion, too. "Before I left that day," she said, "my father hugged me and told me that I was bringing great honor and prestige to my family by doing this."

Micaela, who is very serious and reserved, was *supposed* to be seen off by her family, but none of them showed up because of the roads. The heavy rains during that time had made it impossible for them to be there. "I felt so sad that I almost cried," she said. "I was really fighting back the tears. I have never been on a plane before and nobody was there to watch me go. I felt so lonely, even though I was with the others. We are all from Guatemala, but each of us comes from a different community, and we didn't know each other."

"Except for Monica, none of the women had ever traveled outside of Guatemala, and most had not even left their own regions before, let alone travel by plane."

Cheny, the youngest member of the group, usually outgoing, exuberant and full of life, was nervous too. "My legs were shaking so bad, I could hardly stand up," she said with a big smile.

An announcement came over the airport loudspeaker.

It was finally boarding time. "I didn't like that covered ramp on the way to the plane," said Micaela. "Nobody could even see us leaving. It was really strange for me. I tried to stop thinking about my family, but I couldn't."

Monica, a young woman who is a well-seasoned traveler with plenty of charisma, enthusiasm and confidence, was the group's program coordinator, travel guide and interpreter. Though very reliable and efficient, Monica still is *chapina* (meaning she's from Guatemala) and was running on *chapin* (Guatemalan) time. She did not show up for the flight until the door to the plane was literally closing for take-off. This added a considerable amount of stress to the others who were already at their wit's end at the thought of flying for the first time. They were counting on her to guide them on this journey. Tension levels were so high in all of the women that when Monica finally ran down the ramp at the last minute, her presence provided the others with only minimal comfort. All of them were seated separately, making their individual experiences that much more isolating and terrifying.

"I was in the middle seat," Micaela said. "A handsome man was on one side of me, and for awhile his good looks were distracting enough to make me forget my fear. He had the window seat, and offered to switch places with me so that I could see out the window. I didn't accept, though. I was too scared as it was. I had no desire

to see what was out that window."

Maria Estela had been counseled about flying beforehand by one of her daughters who had once flown to Tikal. "She told me not to be afraid," said Maria Estela. "Don't worry, Mom, she told me. It's just like being on the bus. You know, a little bumpy sometimes, like when you hit a pothole in the road. Even with her encouragement, I was still mortified," she said laughing. "A Guatemalan lady sat in the window seat next to me and pulled down the shade so that I couldn't see anything. She didn't like sitting next to me, I know. We put up with a lot of discrimination in our own country. The *gringa* on my other side was great, though. She spoke Spanish, so we talked a lot, which helped. She even loaned me her radio."

Cheny had a similar experience. On one side of her sat a young Taiwanese man who did not speak any Spanish. "I could tell he wanted to talk to me, but we didn't know each other's languages. Through hand signals we tried our best to communicate. I'm glad I was sitting by him, because on my other side there was an older Guatemalan man who was so proud and rude that he wouldn't even look at me. He didn't say one word to me the entire flight, so I ignored him too."

After being airborne for awhile, everyone began to feel more comfortable. Melva got up to find Monica. "She came up to me," Monica said, "and asked me where the bathroom was and how big it was? I told her and asked why. I saw this woman on Cristina, she said," Monica explained. "Cristina is like the Oprah Winfrey of Latin America; she has her own talk show that airs in Spanish out of Miami, Florida. Anyway, Melva said there was a woman on the show and Cristina asked her to describe her most memorable adventure. The woman said that it was when she made love to this man in the bathroom of an airplane. Melva said, full of curiosity, I want to see how they managed, because I heard that airplane bathrooms are very compact."

Later I asked Melva what she concluded. She was beside herself with embarrassment that I knew about this conversation. After she quit hiding her face behind her hands, she said, "No, I can't see how it was possible." She was laughing hysterically. "It was so small. Only for one person."

Micaela liked the airplane lunch service, which she described as "a delicious chicken dish." Maria Estela agreed, her only regret being that she did not ask for wine or a Coke. "It was all free!" she said. "We could have had as much as we wanted, but I was too self-conscious to ask."

"One man in the bathroom line told me that he was

a rich American businessman, and he asked me if I wanted to marry him," said Cheny. "He acted like I should be impressed by his wealth and his status as an American. The thing is," she said looking a little puzzled, "I'm almost positive he was Guatemalan. I said, excuse me, but I don't know you and quickly returned to my seat. He was creepy."

* * * *

The Los Angeles Airport

Micaela was still worried and flustered by the time the plane landed in Los Angeles, feelings that she would never completely shake until she was back in Guatemala. "I had no idea where are all my things were, and were they going to arrive?" she said. "It's like taking the bus in Guatemala. If the guys who load your baskets and bags on the roof aren't quick and efficient, then they leave your things behind. You have to watch them every minute. What were these guys like who took our bags in the Guatemalan airport? I didn't get to watch them load our things. The others weren't worried, so I tried to quit thinking about it."

Much to Micaela's surprise, all their bags were waiting for them. "We got our bags and went through customs, but we were losing

time," she said. "By the time the bags were checked back in, we were running for our next plane. We ran and ran, and my feet couldn't take it any more. Someone announced something in English over the loudspeaker. I don't know what they said!" She threw one hand up as she said this, obviously irritated. "For all I knew, they were telling us that we were all going to die. *Saber!* [Who knows, or more accurately, who the hell knows!]."

"There were tall people everywhere!" Cheny said. All six of the women are the same height, barely five feet tall. Except for Monica, who is not Mayan, they all wear their *traje tipica* (typical clothing) — *huipiles* and *cortes*, or traditional blouses and skirts — that indicate which Mayan community they come from. "Everyone was staring at us as we ran through the airport," said Cheny.

I could picture it perfectly. Six tiny, frantic women, five of whom were wearing beautiful, brightly colored clothes, running through the airport, looking a bit lost. Surely all the tall people must have been curious.

Another point of fascination was the bathroom in the Los Angeles airport, with automated plumbing. I found an entry in Irma's journal that she had written during her trip. In it she mentioned the strange bathrooms. She wrote, "I couldn't turn the water on in the sink to wash my hands. A lady saw that I was confused and came over

to help me. I watched her and she waved her hands in the sink and made signs. The water started running by magic."

* * * *

Arriving in the Emerald City

The second leg of the trip was much less dramatic. Already they were becoming more accustomed to flying. My father and brother, Jim and Keith Egawa — neither of whom speaks Spanish — met the women at the airport in Seattle. "I never knew what they were saying," said Micaela. It was obvious that they were welcoming us, but they mainly just laughed a lot. *Saber*."

"They were so nice to us," said Cheny. "I was amazed that people from another country, who didn't even know us, could be so welcoming and friendly." They split up between my dad's and brother's cars. Cheny told me that she wanted to make sure she was with my brother. "I wanted to talk to him, but neither of us could say much beyond basic introductions, and after that there was pure silence the whole way to the hotel." I imagined that if one had listened real close, they could have heard my brother's mind racing around searching his memory for Spanish words he learned back in Señora Erickson's high-school Spanish class more than 15 years earlier.

* * * *

On Saturday, October 31st, the women got up at 6am to get ready for the trade fair. "So how was that first day?" I began with Micaela. She took a deep breath and let out a long, deep sigh. By the look on her face, I could see there was a lengthy story coming.

"Well, I was really sad Saturday because of what happened. That morning, I got up and took a shower first, because all of us had to get ready. There were three of us in each room. I asked if we should bring our papers — my visa and passport — but Monica said no, that we wouldn't need them. I put my papers in a small bag and there was a closet in our room, so I hid the bag in there. Thirty minutes later, right before we were going to leave for the fair, I opened the closet to make sure my papers were still there and they were gone! Nothing! I searched the whole thing and I asked everyone else. Nobody had seen them. What am I going to do, I thought? We searched the whole room; we turned it upside down. Leave it! Maria Estela told me. We'll find it later. If you remember putting them there then they are still there." Maria Estela was losing her patience, because when Micaela could not find her papers, she began accusing the others of stealing them.

"What was wrong? Were you afraid that you were going to get stuck in the U.S. forever?" I asked, laughing.

"Yes," she said seriously. "I thought I wouldn't be

able to return to Guatemala and I couldn't figure out why this was happening to me."

Maria Estela had an idea. "Maybe it is because it is Halloween," she told Micaela in a scolding tone. Halloween in Guatemala is a holy day, the Day of the Dead, a time to honor those spirits that have passed on. "You were so negative on the airplane. You complained and cried, and you have been thinking that everything is going to go wrong. Now this is what happens."

The others agreed with Maria Estela. "Yes, it is probably because it is Halloween!" they chimed in.

Micaela continued. "I went to the exhibit, but I couldn't think about anything else but my papers. We set up our booth. The others were having so much fun, but I didn't want to. Everyone probably looked at me and thought that I was really sad or really ugly. *Saber*. They were all bothered by me, but I couldn't help it. I was worried sick. Would I be able to go home? What would the supervisors think of me when they found out about this? Every thought I had made it worse."

When they returned to the hotel that night, everyone helped her search again. Her papers were still in the closet; they had fallen out of the bag and slid down the back to the bottom behind the shoes. They had been sitting there all along.

* * * *

"I can't tell you how nice it felt to go so far away, yet see how appreciated we were there. It made me feel so proud."

—Maria Estela

Washington State Indian Days – Day One

As the women set up their booth, laying out loom-woven hammocks, tablecloths, placemats, napkins, clothing and other items, people began to come over and greet them and ask where they were from. An Indian woman who works at one of the local tribal schools came over to introduce herself. "She was impressed that we had traveled all the way from Guatemala to be there," said Monica. "We had brought along several gifts and gave her one. She left the booth and came back a few moments later with gifts for each of us and then asked if she could offer a special prayer on our behalf.

"I am so happy to know you and that we can have this North-South connection," she told us. "She began to pray and she was crying." Both days were very emotional for the women and the Native American people they met. They realized that the presentation and sales of their products represented just one aspect of this experience. Maybe more important was the chance for them to meet

other Indian people, to share that time and to learn about one another.

"Even though we didn't understand each other's languages, we felt really comfortable with everyone," said Cheny.

"It was strange," said Monica. "I saw each of them on their own, interacting with different people, and I couldn't figure out how they were communicating. Were they speaking English or Spanish? It was like an acknowledgment, an understanding and a happiness to see one another. Even though they couldn't converse, they were sharing."

"That first day I went to the auditorium and saw all the [North American] people in their regalia," said Cheny. "I never thought I would see people like this in the flesh — only in the movies! Some people had *traje* made of eagle feathers. I loved it! I danced as much as I could. That's what I wanted to do the most, so every chance I got, I was out there. Everyone was always inviting us to dance, too. There is one image I will never forget," she said, her eyes glancing upwards for that place in her memory where the image remained. "It was a little girl who was out there fancy dancing all by herself. She seemed like she was in her own world as she moved across the floor twirling in and out of the other dancers, like a tiny whirlwind, always in perfect step with the drumbeats."

"The parents do not oblige their children to adopt



Micaela Tol (left) and Maria Estella Martin (right) at Washington State Indian Days celebration in Puyallup, Washington

the customs and traditions, but the children feel it just the same. They must feel it in their hearts when they get up and begin to dance alongside the old people," said Irma.

Later on, the Guatemalan women had the opportunity to present one of their own dances. Since they are all from distinct Mayan language groups, their songs and dances are different. Instead of each person doing her own dance alone, however, they decided to present a Kaqchikel dance that Maria Estela knew in honor of the four directions. In Mayan belief systems there are four *spiritual* directions. After just one quick lesson, Maria Estela led them in the dance.

"She was really mad, because we all made mistakes," said Monica. Mistakes or not, a blanket was laid out in the center of the dance floor. Often times at Pow-wows a dance is dedicated to special guests or people who have traveled great distances. As the women danced, people came to the center of the floor and left monetary contributions on the blanket to help their special guests with expenses they would incur during their visit.

Following their dance, each gave a presentation and Monica translated. "They were so excited to be speaking in their own languages that they went on and on," said Monica. "Of course I couldn't translate because they were speaking K'iche', Kaqchikel and Q'anjob'al! Every so often they would stop and hand me the microphone to give the translation. I said, they want to



(From left to right) Maria Estella Martin, Melva Lopez, Monica Lemus and Micaela Tol pictured with two "traditional" style U.S. dancers



First try at Pow-wow dancing! (left to right) Monica, Micaela, Melva and Maria Estella. Cheny was apparently off dancing on her own from the moment she arrived to the last dance of the celebration.

realized something was amiss, however, when he just stood there watching them, seemingly irritated. As other visitors came to the booth the man began a tirade about how all these things were much cheaper in Guatemala. "That there is only worth 50 cents, and this one is only worth a dollar! Everything is totally overpriced," he said, pointing out different things that were displayed in the booth. "They don't deserve any more than that, and they certainly don't need it."

"He was really rude," said Monica. "He stood next to our booth for a long time with his arms folded across his chest in an angry, aggressive stance. I don't know why they are coming here, he said to all our visitors. We [meaning the middlemen] are supposed to be the ones who take care of sales here. He infuriated me, and finally I gave him a piece of my mind. I'd like to see you

say thank you very much. They are really happy to be here. Aside from that, I hadn't a clue what they said!

"Finally they switched to Spanish, but after translating for so long, I started getting confused. One time Melva spoke in Spanish and instead of translating in English, I repeated what she had just said in Spanish. Cheny got all excited because she understood everything I said, in Spanish, and thought that she was starting to learn English. Everyone in the audience was really laughing."

* * * *

Washington State Indian Days – Day Two

"The second day I decided to dress in *traje tipica* too," said Monica. "It was much better. Dressing like those of a normal person, I didn't impress anyone, so I felt alone." Even though Monica is not Mayan, her features, like many Guatemalan people, are more native than European. Most people would not recognize the difference, especially once she was dressed in *traje*.

It was that same day that a *strange* man — but not a stranger — approached the booth. Three or four of the women recognized him right away. They had seen him before in Guatemala. He had been coming to Huehuetenango, El Quiche, Chichicastenango and Antigua for several years to buy Mayan handicrafts for export. At first they thought he had come to the booth to do business. They

weaving," I told him. "You have no idea how much skill, time, patience and sweat goes into each piece of work."

Melva had brought her backstrap loom, and Monica told her to set it up right then and there for a demonstration. A crowd had gathered around the booth. With all of the negative commentary, some people had begun to question the prices. After watching Melva weave for awhile, it was obvious that the prices the middleman was shouting out did not reflect the true value of the products. It was the first time many people had seen a backstrap loom and Cheny and Maria Estela took the opportunity to talk about the art form and explain how many Mayan women in Guatemala make their living in this way.

"Yes, *that* is the product. Now *you* tell *me* the price!"



The women checking out a "fancy-dancer's" eagle-feather bustle

Monica said to the middleman. "These women just need to learn English and people like you will disappear." Finally she told him to leave. "You're not helping any of us and I need to translate some things for others, instead of wasting my time with you."

There she was in *traje tipica*, telling him off in English. He was astonished that a *Mayan* woman would know English and began a desperate barrage of questions. "Why do you know how to speak English? Did you come to the States before? Did you have a scholarship? Are you living here?" He seemed really threatened. She never told him that she was not Mayan, but instead said that many Mayan people are learning English so that they can begin to make their own contacts and export their own products. Although she was just acting out her anger towards his aggression, this was a good lesson for the women to see. The last time I went to visit Melva she told me that she had started studying English.

* * * *

Booth Sales

Over the two days, each of the women averaged sales triple that of an average two-day period in Guatemala. Melva's very first sale was a jacket, which she negotiated without translation services. When the interested buyer asked the price, she immediately said, "Yes, okay," and holding up her left hand touched the tip of each finger with the index finger of her right, saying, "10,10,10, 10,10!" She sold the coat for \$50. Another person bought something from Irma for \$7. He paid with a \$10 bill and told her to keep the change. When North American customers thought that certain items could be sold for more in the U.S., they said so. In response to these comments, the women raised prices on the second day and were still selling well.

Useful household items and accessories were the most popular. Clothing and backpacks were next, and blankets, loom-woven rugs, *huipiles*, *cortes* and decorative items, although often admired for their craftsmanship, sold last. Maria Estela did sell one *huipil* for a decent price. Most customers, however, saw the *huipiles* as pieces of art — collector's items — and more often than not, they wanted something that they would feel comfortable wearing. Shirts, blouses and jackets with neutral earth tones and simple adornments along a pocket or collar were much easier to sell than those with extensive embroidery and fluorescent color combinations.

From a cultural standpoint, they learned that Native American people still exist in the United States, and that there is an instant recognition of kinship among indigenous people no matter their country of origin. This



Melva demonstrating weaving on the backstrap loom

strong connection can, and should be, a very important channel for sharing ideas and experiences in areas of cultural preservation, as well as social and economic development. Each one of them told me about the renewed sense of pride that they felt as indigenous women through their interaction with other native people.

From the standpoint of marketing, the women's first-time exposure to a specific population within the United States served its purpose. It demonstrated how people's likes and dislikes vary from one market to the next, and how important it is to create new products that meet the needs and demands of consumers in a well-defined target group. In addition, they saw how much preparation remains to be done in the areas of market research, business and export-management training, and language skills, to name a few.

* * * *

Back in Guatemala

"Where have you been for the past week?" asked one of Micaela Tol's neighbors when she returned home to Chichicastenango.

"I was in Washington State," Micaela replied.

"Washington?" the woman repeated, obviously impressed. "Did you see the White House [Casa Blanca]?"

"Oh yes," said Micaela matter-of-factly, "I saw the white one."

As Maria Estela put it, "I haven't forgotten any of it. Every day since my return, my children ask me to tell them again about my trip to Washington. That experience changed my whole world-view dramatically. Everything



Some visitors to the booth. Cheny Alonzo (left) and Melva (right)

seemed different when I got home."

Each woman met with fellow associate members from their local banks when they returned to their communities. There were mixed receptions.

Melva is one of FAFIDESS's technical advisors, and as such manages 12 communal banks in and around San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Through her work she has gained the trust and confidence of other associates. Before she left for Washington State, many of them gave her samples of their own merchandise to sell while she was there and they eagerly waited to hear about the trip upon her return. As she shared her experiences, Melva talked to the women about product design and quality, stressing the need to change designs in order to target outside markets. Her suggestions met with a lot of resistance.

"Melva and I talked to three or four women in San Antonio about new product designs, but nobody wanted to decide anything on their own," said Monica. "Everything had to be talked over with the group, and if the group's majority is afraid to change, then everyone is held back." The women of FAFIDESS are organized in groups of 20 to 30 persons. Although each group has its own elected leadership, any new proposals are accepted or rejected democratically. Every woman in the group has a vote. This group mentality serves its function when dealing with each individual's responsibility to the group to make loan and interest payments on time, but it tends to cripple the decision-making process when it comes to product change.

This is exactly what happened in San Antonio Aguas Calientes. San Antonio is near Antigua, the colonial town

that is one of Guatemala's biggest tourist attractions. Most of the women Melva works with already have buyers at several foreign-owned tourist shops in Antigua, so the women are already accustomed to producing high-quality products in order to be competitive. Even though they are not making as much as they would like, they have a secure market in which to sell. They are not interested in creating new designs, because changing now might mean losing their only sure market. Furthermore, they are simply used to making certain items and they do not *want* to change. On the other hand, women who live in more remote regions, with little or no nearby tourism, have minimal access to any markets. Perhaps they would be more open to change if they had a sure market lined up for new products. That remains to be seen.

When women in Totonicapan learned that Irma was going to go to the United States, most were satisfied that she had been selected to represent them. "They would have loved a chance to go too," said Irma, "but they realized we do not all have such luck in the same moment." She, like Melva, took products with her from fellow associates, who trusted that she would come back with information that would help them find new market opportunities. "I told my *compañeras* to have some patience, that the people liked our products, but that we will need to make some changes. We have to be together when the opportunity comes. I sensed a lot of animosity from several women, who were angry and jealous that I was the one who got to go, but it was worth enduring to share news of my trip with everyone. I made some contacts while I was there, but we have yet to develop any new markets from those leads."

For Micaela, Maria Estela and Cheny, envy and jeal-

ousy were so strong in their communities that they were not able to share with others what they had learned. Cheny is part of the technical-support team in Huehuetenango, but when she went to the reunion following her trip, nobody said a word to her. In fact, they made such an effort to ignore her that it was as if she did not exist at all. There is a long road ahead on every front.

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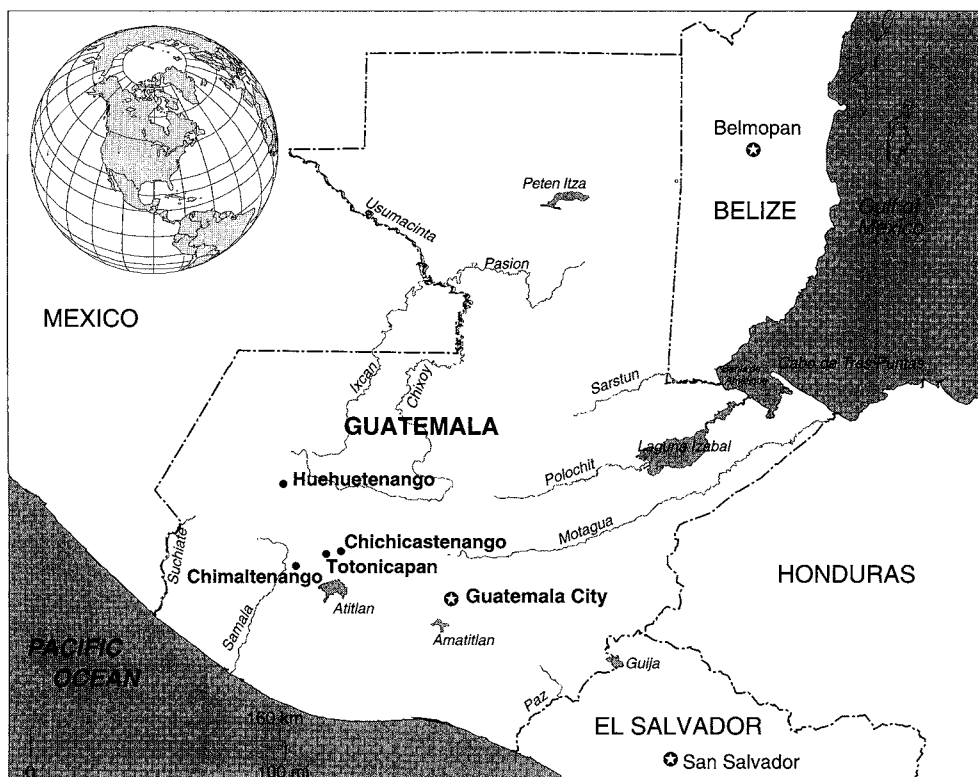
Getting Ready for New Markets

Last spring, FAFIDESS initiated a three-year Trade Program for the purpose of developing new market opportunities for their associate members. As part of this program, FAFIDESS proposes to work with associates at the local and regional level to provide training seminars in product design, quality control, small-business management and marketing. In addition, they are facilitating participation of associates in national and international trade fairs such as Washington State Indian Days. Although sales possibilities in international markets are considered in the Trade Program, most efforts are being concentrated on national markets first — local markets for sales of traditional clothing and household items, and the tourist market. Eight stores are scheduled to be opened around the country by the end of this three-year period, providing sales outlets that will be managed and operated by associate members.

“We don’t want to become middlemen,” said Monica. “We want to facilitate training, without becoming a permanent part of the process. If we can effectively train

some of the associates, they will eventually be able to manage everything on their own. We know it isn’t possible to bring everyone to the same level at the same time. Some women are a lot closer than others to learning this process, and we are starting with them. It is our hope that we can then back out and they will continue the training process with associates in less developed areas.”

At present, women of FAFIDESS have minimal interaction with others from the same community and virtually no interaction with women from different regions Guatemala. Of the little time they do have together through their involvement in FAFIDESS, most of it is spent managing loans, not working on product design and market research. Competition in sales remains very high between individual sellers. Fear of changing current designs is a huge draw back, because it is too risky to spend time and money making a new product that may or may not sell. Some of the women who work with FAFIDESS are gaining self-confidence as they learn how to operate their own small businesses successfully and their financial role in their families becomes more important. The majority of the 4,000 associates, though, still work around the clock just to maintain a hand-to-mouth existence for themselves and their families. How will these women ever be afforded the luxury of taking time out from this nonstop treadmill to learn about new markets, new designs and exporting? Will the women who participated in Washington State Indian Days be able to benefit from what they learned through their experience or will that journey just become a fond memory? It is my hope that this North-South connection was just the beginning. □



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