

COMMUNITY PROFILE: GUARJILA

Talking with a long-time community member is always the best way to get to know a place. On this opportunity, CRISPAZ sat down with Maria Morena Palma, a long-time community member of Guarjila who gives us a glimpse into her community, Guarjila.



My name is Maria Morena Palma and my community, Guarjila, nowadays, is a wonderful one. The people who come to visit feel very much welcome.

The history of Guarjila though wasn't always like this. Due to El Salvador's twelve-year civil war, it was extremely difficult; our community was completely destroyed.

In 1980 most of the families that used to live in Guarjila during the war had to flee to Mesa Grande, Honduras, and seeking refuge from constant attacks

and civil rights violations from the government's armed forces.

In 1986 we felt the need to return to our country and decided to go back to Guarjila. We returned only to find what used to be a small, quiet village, was now in ruins and overgrown with vegetation. The village had been entirely wiped out due to the military coming in and torching the homes and airplanes bombing the village.

Over the last 30 years, about 150 families have returned to resettle Guarjila, and most of the original families remain. Some of the small children that returned with their families as small children in the mid 80's are now adults and have families of their own. The community continues to grow as a result of this.

What is the best thing about your community?

The biggest asset of our community is our organization; this is the quality that has kept us going strong for so long. It is something that we strive to conserve. We have also gotten to experience solidarity among us. Many international organizations that have had the chance to visit our community have acknowledged and praised how organized our community is and the solidarity that prevails among us as well.

Have your values changed from the time you came back to resettle Guarjila until now?

We have been able to preserve these two qualities, organization and solidarity, even though it has been no easy task. I cannot say that with the passing of time some values have gotten lost along the way. Our sense of organization and solidarity, however, are well rooted since they originated during the days of the civil war. Whenever the military would come into our town and wanted to take someone from our community, someone would toll the bell of the church to warn the community that something was going on. We would all gather in the town square and help whoever was in trouble. Things like this have helped us stay together as a close-knit community. It has not been easy, but we have managed to preserve this.

What has been the role of women in Guarjila, and how has it changed?

The participation of women in our community has come a long way. Women worked together with the men rebuilding this community from the rubble. The community has recognized that women have rights and that we can hold positions in public office, positions that in the past were only assigned to the men. The right to vote was also something that was forbidden for women to do, now this is all part of the past.

Nowadays, women are not only confined to household chores, but we also play an essential role in the economy of the household. Women have come to hold different and important jobs/roles in the community. Women run the embroidery/handicrafts workshop; other women are nurses, school teachers, and others hold a position on the town council.

What advice would you give to women in other communities?

One thing I would recommend is that they take advantage of any opportunities to grow. They should also know their rights, so they are not violated, this is a good place to start. They should even hear testimonies from other women that have taken steps to change.

If one has a project, as we have had: our handicrafts workshop, it is really good for the identity of women. Women become an important piece in the economy of the community and support of the family. It is no longer about just taking care of the house, the children, the animals. It also creates a sense of independence for the women. Women have special needs that in the past could not be covered by a single income. These needs are essential, and it is even better that women begin to take care of themselves.

How important are the visits from different delegations to your community?

The visits from the different delegations we host are significant to the community. The groups that come get to know our community and learn how it is organized; they are also very interested in our history.

During their the homestay delegation members also get a chance to experience the day to day life in Guarjila. Some of them know nothing about this community, but soon realize that not everyone lives the way they do, and this creates a sense of social awareness. Some of us are poor, but then there are others that have even less. They see first-hand what it means to live in a community. How we all know each other and support and care about each other.



I know that there are people who live in a place for a long time and never really get to know their next-door neighbor, much less understand what a community is. In some places, people only look out for themselves and not about others. They come here and experience a real sense of community. We appreciate their coming to visit. We know they could choose to go elsewhere. The decision to come here is not an easy one, yet they decide to come here and learn about us. We really appreciate that.