

Building Homes, Building Lives
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When most people think of going to Mexico for vacation they think of Cancun, Acapulco, or Cabo San Lucas, but for a special group of individuals, a small town outside Tijuana called La Gloria is their yearly destination. For the members of Building Beyond Borders (“BBB”), an organization dedicated to helping Mexican families build sturdy, decent homes, a yearly vacation does not include lying on the beach or drinking frozen margaritas poolside. These individuals spend their vacations helping families build new homes that will not flood when it rains, do not have a roofs held on by tires, and will help them live a healthier and happier lifestyle.

La Gloria is only 30 minutes from the United States/Mexican border, but the poverty, dirt roads and shacks that abound are shocking to those witnessing them for the first time. It is hard to believe that this kind of poverty can exist so close to the United States. In New York, poverty can mean living in an apartment that has been illegally converted into many units, sharing a bathroom with numerous other families or individuals, living in roach- and rodent-infested dwellings or relying on slum landlords. But in Mexico, living in poverty means building a house out of scraps of metal and wood found on the side of the road, sleeping on dirt floors, and using tires to hold a roof in place. The magnitude of destitution is almost unbearable. Given these conditions, it is easy to see why immigrants flood the United States every year, looking for a better lifestyle.



ed by Robert Katz, a Hunter College student studying Pre-Med. Robert, a former Marine, went on his first house-building trip to Tijuana, Mexico with a group called Club Dust, a Christian organization that he found out about while volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. Soon, Robert had enough interested friends to start a group of his own. At first, this new group was called Club Fiesta, a testament to the feeling of the trip, that it was a party. Later, when Robert and a few other volunteers from the trip decided to create a not-for-profit corporation, Building Beyond Borders was born. BBB consists of a group of friends who share a common goal: to help the people and the families that they meet. Each year there are many new faces that show up on

the build trips, but there is also a group of about 20 repeat participants. The group is very close and it often feels like a family. As one volunteer said, “it is hard to share this experience and not create a bond with the people around you.”

In the hillside section of La Gloria, where *Source: Ali Hirschenbaum* BBB usually builds, the government does not see the need to penetrate the area with infrastructure. Unlike the United States, where people and houses follow the infrastructure, in Mexico the infrastructure follows the houses and the people.

Therefore, the houses that BBB builds do not have running water, bathrooms or working electricity. In hopes that the area will shortly be wired with electricity, the houses are fitted with electrical boxes and light switches. Many residents in the area illegally and dangerously tap into the main electrical lines that run to the many factories located on the hilltops surrounding this rural neighborhood.

Building Beyond Borders was spearhead-

BBB builds simple wood-framed homes for the families they assist. The units are situated on 16x20 foot slabs of concrete and consist of 3 rooms and a loft area. In addition, BBB builds an outhouse for each family to use as its latrine. The original building plan was recently updated to include two vertical rows of cinderblocks along the outer edge of the concrete slab. This is intended to prolong the life of the house and add a more water-resistant border. The homes are finished with a shingled roof.

While BBB's main goal is to build a water-tight shelter for the family it is working with, its members take great pride in creating homes for their new friends. These homes are completed with insulation, sheetrock and windows, which are a rarity. If time permits, the interiors as well as the exteriors of the homes are painted. If the group members run out of time before they can fully complete the homes, they make sure that the family has all of the supplies necessary to finish the house and are sometimes able to find another group to finish the work.

The days are spent building and evenings are generally a time for relaxation and getting to know one another or catching up with old friends. The group stays at the City of Angels orphanage in La Gloria, and the children at the orphanage are always looking to play with the American visitors. Tacos La Gloria, a large roadside taco stand, is a favorite destination for the group and the conversations had over a few Tecates are always interesting for this diverse and eclectic group. Most of the participants are from New York and the group is almost as diverse as the city itself, consisting of all ages, races, ethnicities and religions.

Most volunteers show up without any formal construction experience, just the desire to help others and to make a difference. Many of them have learned about the trip from friends or colleagues but by the end of this journey they will have made new friends, learned new skills and



Source: <http://www.b3.mirandamedia.net>

have a greater understanding of what poverty means. Some people will experience this trip only once while others may become lifelong participants. No matter how many times one experiences this trip, the knowledge from it will impart upon each and every individual and will remain in each of their hearts and minds forever.

As a long time participant and volunteer with BBB, this journey has taught me that there is no joy like that of helping others and seeing how your gift can change their lives forever. This article is dedicated to Robert Katz, who always gives so selflessly to others and makes this opportunity possible to so many; I am honored to be his friend.

Building Beyond Borders' next trip is August 4-9, 2006. Visit their website at www.buildingbeyondborders.org for more information, including an application download. Nudge, nod, wink.