

Letter from N.S. 'Breaking the Silence' Intern in Guatemala

(Your use of BTS coffee makes a difference! Please share with your Congregation.)

The following letter from intern, Janelle Frail, was forwarded by Kathryn Anderson who operates 'Breaking the Silence' internships in Guatemala – young people trained at Tatamagouche Centre.

On Wed, Feb 20, 2008 at 7:26 PM, Janelle Frail <janellefrail@hotmail.com> wrote:

Just wanted to send out an e-mail to Just Us! about CCDA (Highland Peasants' Committee) and the Breaking the Silence coffee brand.

I've been in Guatemala now since November. I first studied Spanish in Xela north of Lago Atitlan (where CCDA and the coffee is located). After six weeks of Spanish I went on "vacation" for a week and a bit and then headed to San Lucas Tolimán at the beginning of January. San Lucas is located in the south east corner of Lago Atitlan and is between the CCDA office and the coffee beneficio (plant/mill).

I worked in the beneficio for the first week and it was a great experience. The workers there are great people who are very glad to be paid slightly above minimum wage in a country where the normal pay is half of that. Minimum wage here is about 45Q a day (equal to \$8) though many plantation workers get paid 20Q.

The work is difficult and my back was aching for the rest of week but the view from the beneficio is incredible! I moved/stirred/rotated drying coffee beans, shoveled coffee bean casings and helped with the de-pulping process. It was great getting to know the whole process involved and to see how diligent they are with the quality of the beans they ship to Canada. I think my favorite part was seeing the campesinos (farmers/ landowners) bring their 100lbs bags of picked coffee up the slope off the main road knowing they were going to be given a good price for the coffee they had picked that morning.

Going home in the afternoon I saw coffee being weighed on the side of the roads and wondered what type of life those people lead with the lower pay and lack of their own land to work. Don't get me wrong, the campesinos who sell to CCDA are getting a good price for their coffee but it still is a very small amount and the vast majority of people here live in extreme poverty. But the people who meet the standards and are able to sell to CCDA are much better off because of the better pay and because the money the CCDA makes goes right back into improving the lives of communities. CCDA helps to build houses for communities and the more they build, the greater the demand for the houses.

CCDA also helps with the construction of other buildings such as chicken barns and community kitchens. Next month two groups from BC are coming to help build a chicken barn and community kitchen. Both will be community run and used. Small steps like this help to ensure communities are self-sustaining and not just being given hand-outs. That is what I'm realizing the Breaking the Silence brand is all about. Also, as Leocadio is oft saying, selling the coffee to Canada is not just financial support and gain it's also a way for Canada to be part of self-sustaining community production.

As said in an article about CCDA written by Caren Weisbart and Daniel Martinez "... drinking fair trade coffee. It's what turns consumers into activists."

My work now with the CCDA is centered around the Foro Social de Las Américas (Social Forum of the Americas) which is being held in Guatemala City this October. CCDA is highly involved with this, especially the with the Solidarity Economy theme. I go to the capital about once a week with compañeros (co-workers/ friends of CCDA) and attend meetings about the forum. I work in the office as well preparing a brochure about CCDA, a catalogue of the products the small producers of CCDA sell, a design for CCDA T-shirts and other such things that CCDA may need for the Forum and in general.

The work pace here is very different than in Canada and that took some getting used to. The pace is slower and cell phones are used as e-mails are back home. This can be difficult at times because the reception of the phones isn't always clear and neither is my understanding of the language.

People have a lot of information in their heads and a lot less is written down. CCDA workers are busy people but once I get someone talking about their work the things I find out are priceless.

That's just a little about what's been going on with me on the work and coffee side of things.

I have to say I'm pretty proud to say that I'm from the same province as Just Us! Coffee Roasters and that I drink Breaking the Silence coffee when I'm home in Canada!

Hope this gives you another idea of how buying coffee from the right people can make a large and powerful change. It's really opened my eyes to this fact. Just Us! is enabling consumers to be activists by drinking something they truly enjoy.

Take care!
Janelle