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INSPIRING AND HEARTBREAKING: WORKING WITH THE HUICHOL PEOPLE OF MEXICO

By Celena McIntyre

[Last year Celena McIntyre was awarded the first annual Karen Sharkey Flaherty Plenty Volunteer Scholarship. Celena joined Plenty soy and nutrition educator, Louise Hagler, at the Huichol Center for Cultural Preservation and Traditional Arts in Huejuquilla, Mexico in November where she lived and worked until this February. In December, Plenty food programs and agriculture specialist, Chuck Haren, and webmaster/videographer Jeffrey Keating arrived with a truck-load of food processing equipment purchased with grants from Onaway Trust and the AMB Foundation and funding provided by individual Plenty donors. Following is an excerpt from Celena's report. For the full text please visit our website at www.plenty.org]

Plenty's collaboration with the Huichol Center (HC) is beginning to blossom with new possibilities, and I have had the opportunity to observe and participate in the process very closely. The soy project that has been in the works here for a couple of years is now reaching the point where the Center is producing soy products for the local community, both Huichol and Mexican. When Louise Hagler and I arrived here the location destined to be the Soy Dairy was empty, and had several minor problems, including inadequate electrical wiring as well as drainage flaws. Together we worked with Susana Valadez and some other HC staff for almost one full month on smoothing out many details in preparation for the arrival of new equipment. The equipment included a large vapor pot to cook soymilk, an ice cream machine, a large cooling tank, several large pots, calcium sulfate, and two sacks of organic soybeans, all of which were to increase the potential for production tremendously. Without a second to spare, the location was ready and everything was in impressive order by the time Chuck Haren and Jeffrey Keating arrived with the equipment. They were ready to take full advantage of the short time we had together to teach us to run the machines, and assess the need for more materials and any changes that needed to be made in the building. We had our work cut out for us! Aside from a few minor catastrophes, we accomplished a whole lot in a short amount of time, and everything went fairly smoothly.

By the time Chuck and Jeffrey left, we were exhausted but very excited about the potential of the project. The equipment was up and running just in time for the holidays, and we spent a memorable Solstice with several



(left to right) Claudia, Celena, Magnolia and Candelario at the Huichol Center.

Huichol women preparing atole (a soy and cornmeal drink) from fresh soy milk, chocolate tofu pie, and tamales with fresh okara (the pulp that remains from making soymilk and tofu) in the masa (the dough made from ground corn, lime and water), some with chipotle (smoked jalapeno chili pepper) flavored tofu filling. At one point there was a large rainbow right outside of the window where we were working. It felt like a blessing for the project to flourish, and with patience we will watch it evolve.

The literal seeds of the project are in place, as the Huichol Center is conducting a seed trial analysis project to find the best varieties of soybeans to grow in this region. Beginning with about 30 varieties two years ago, last year it was narrowed down to 19, and currently Candelario Vasquez, the agricultural technician, is working on eliminating more varieties for this year's crop. The trials are projected to be complete in about another four years. This was another project that I participated in, which helped me to appreciate the agricultural and scientific importance of establishing soy as a staple crop in this community. Once the seed trials are complete, it will be more practical to expand the project up into the more rural Huichol communities in the Sierras, where malnutrition is much more of a serious issue.

The future of the soy project remains to be seen, as the Huichol Center on its own has a wealth of initiated projects concerning other important issues which face the Huichols today, as well as for their future. I have certainly encountered a bit of skepticism around the soy project from

(See *Huichols* p. 2)

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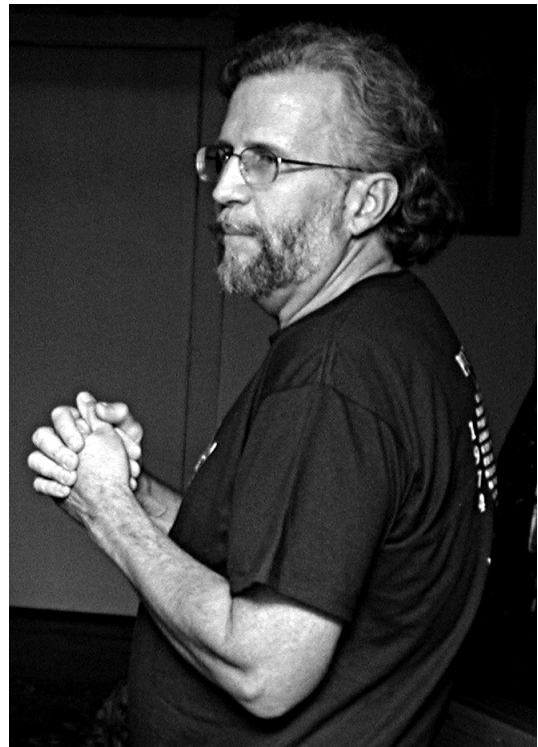
(Huichols cont. from p. 1)

encountered a bit of skepticism around the soy project from some that work here, as well as enthusiasm from others. Some have brought to light that the Center is intended for cultural survival, and that soy is not an indigenous food to the Huichols, nor is it familiar to prepare foods through elaborate processes. This is a very relevant point, and it is also true that soy foods offer a remedy for issues of malnutrition in their communities, and the preparation process for individual kitchens is relatively very simple. Expansion of the project in the coming years will hopefully help to remedy some of the malnutrition in the Sierra, where it is a more of a necessity. Others have maintained that the project seems out of place in the context of the Center's other work. I can see how it may seem like that now, but in the future I think it will become clearer how the projects are integrated. Aside from providing an additional local, income generating business for the center, the dairy will also train many Huichol women with new and valuable skills in food processing and preparation.

For the first month of my time here I was accompanied by Louise, which helped me to integrate into the experience, as she was already familiar with the people and the area. Collaborating with Louise in this work was like an apprenticeship, and we enjoyed working together very much. I was able to observe and participate in processes and experiments in which Louise has expertise, and in offering my support, I learned through experience. This type of working relationship between generations is very important to cultivate, and I think has the potential to strengthen Plenty's work and assure its continuity. We, the youth have much to learn from the experiences and studies of our elders, and we also have vitality and fresh insight to offer.

This brings me to reflect on the experience I had here when I learned of Thomas Wartinger's passing. Thomas had a very special hand in making this experience possible for me, and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work closely with him and Lisa before he passed. When my mother notified us of what had happened, I felt very moved and my heart felt more open than it had since we arrived. I took some time to be alone and process the wave of emotion that had come through me, and I reflected upon the strength of this spiritual message. I felt as though I was a point in some sort of trinity, as I was brought here in honor of Karen, and in the process of my work Tom passed as well. In feeling the magnitude of both of their influences on my present experience, I was deeply thankful for the opportunity to clearly recognize the importance of continuing their work. I am sad that I will not have an opportunity to share with him the richness of my experience here, and what I hope to do is radiate the inspiration that I have felt as a result of this special collaboration. Tom's passing is yet another opportunity for the youth to recognize the gifts that our elders offer to our community, may his work be continued through those he has impacted, and those who reflect his vision and hearts calling.

This has been one of the most challenging and enriching experiences of my life, and I am deeply grateful to all those who helped to make it possible. The Huichol people



Thomas Wartinger 1952 to 2004

are very strong, visionary, and potent. I have been deeply humbled and awakened to new levels of appreciation. Being in the presence of so much intricate, vibrant, ancient artwork has been therapeutic in and of itself, and the opportunities I have had to learn about it in more depth have been blessings I will carry with me forever. To witness such an entity as the HC working to alleviate the immense pressures and challenges facing the Huichols has been both inspiring and heartbreaking. Susana has dedicated an immense amount of energy to the Huichol people, and continues to pursue new ideas to evolve the network of support that the Huichol Center provides.

Indigenous issues are very delicate, and I have seen how one organization works to build a bridge between cultural preservation and modern livelihood. This is work that I believe in with all of my heart and passion, and I now have intimately witnessed one case of its implementation.



Horacia, Celena and Julia make soymilk.

A CONVERSATION WITH SUSANA VALADEZ

[Plenty webmaster and videographer, Jeffrey Keating accompanied CAFSI Project Director, Chuck Haren to Huejuquilla in December, 2004. Jeffrey documented the installation of the soy processing equipment and conducted interviews with Huichol Center staff. Following is part of his interview with Susana Valadez, Founder and Director of the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival and Traditional Arts.]

(Jeffrey) Is food security an issue here with the Huichols?

The population has a 70% malnutrition rate in kids 10 and under. One remedy is having secure reservoirs of food. They can be growing their own soybeans. The soy agriculture part of the project is what Candelario is working on—figuring out which varieties are best in this environment, something he has made great progress on. He is really coming up with some winners. Then we will distribute that seed out to families in the rural areas so that people can have banks of seeds to draw on for future food security. I think that's a critical part of this project. It's of major importance to not just be teaching people how to eat soy, but how to be self-sufficient and grow it in their own plots.

(Jeffrey) When you say that 70% of Huichol kids are malnourished, how did that come to be?

Huichol people have always been the poorest of the poor, and because of their remote location they haven't had much contact with the outside world. Previously, in their own little space and time, they would forage for nutritious foods, wild onions growing by the riverbeds, hunting small game...they were pretty self-sufficient. In recent times with new roads and airstrips penetrating their world, and these big trucks with potato chips, white flour and sugar, all this stuff is new to their diets. The whole system has broken down in the Huichol homeland because of the intrusion from the outside world. Foods that have no nutritional value whatsoever, but are quick sellers like coca-cola, beer...The roads, instead of bringing good nutritional food, fruit trees, good seeds, teaching people how to keep their kids healthy – what are they doing? There are truckloads of beer coming in. Trucks are full going to the mountains, and they come back empty. Lumber trucks go in empty and come back full. So part of the Huichol people being so isolated is that nobody is watching what is happening. I call it a modern day conquest. Now the conquistadores aren't dressed in their armor with their swords and cannons... we have trucks of beer and processed foods, the agro-chemical companies and the genetically altered seed, and the evangelists, and eco-tourists, and wanna-be Huichol shamans. The contemporary conquistadores are devastating the way of life that the Huichol people have practiced for centuries. This beautiful tapestry that used to be Huichol life is just unraveling. We are witnessing the demise of one of the last and greatest civilizations of Meso-America. Why is there a 70% malnutrition rate? The Huichols were a corn

trading society. Now they need cash and where do they get cash? They leave the homeland to work in the tobacco fields in far off Nayarit where they lose contact with their traditions and their healers. They get sick with epidemic diseases. They don't eat right when they're working in the tobacco fields. They're getting sprayed in the fields with pesticides from the planes flying overhead, and they're drinking out of the discarded insecticide containers that they find laying around.

They are like fish out of water. The rugged terrain and the immense awesome canyon-like environment where they have lived for all these centuries really protected them from the outside world. They had their own ecosystem and balance of life and equilibrium. Things are really changing at an accelerated rate, and at this point what we are trying to do at the Huichol Center is just a rescue measure, trying to get back the lost generation, the disenfranchised members of the culture who have lost touch with the profound wisdom and the ancient knowledge that the culture has kept alive for so long. The Huichol Center is a life raft for a sinking ship at this point, but I am hopeful. Just the fact that we've been able to manifest a soy dairy and this collaboration with Plenty and future collaboration with CAFSI is an amazing step forward. It just shows you the power of individuals to dare to have faith in what we're dreaming and bring our visions to reality. My vision for the Huichol people is that through our efforts on many different fronts, through our education, through right livelihood and giving people an opportunity to learn about their culture and value their culture, through teaching people modern technological skills that can be used to keep this second century culture alive, giving them access to technological tools of the 21st century is going to help them. Help the Huichol people be streetwise. Help them as they are navigating the rapids of radical social change. I personally feel very blessed to be a part of this whole thing and am very grateful to all the people that have joined in with us to help make the big vision a reality, and I thank you all.



Susana stirs soymilk.

KIDS TO THE COUNTRY EARTH DAY

All are invited Saturday, April 23, 2005, for the *Kids To The Country Earth Day* celebration at the Peace Garden and Compost Site, in the Greenway along I440 at 10th and Gale Ln. in Nashville. The event will run from 10:00 until 1:00 with the Kids To The Country reuniting with each other and reconnecting with the Earth. Come recognize and support the efforts of the children, the dedicated program staff and celebrate the spirit of spring renewal. Come plant Planters for Peace or make a donation to go toward KTC's urban projects scholarship fund. Nashville's Earth Day activities will follow in other parts of the city in the afternoon.

PLENTY BELIZE GATE PROGRAM by Mark Miller

On January 7th Plenty Belize held a teacher-training workshop with a morning theory session at University of Belize Toledo Campus, followed by a hands-on session after lunch at the demonstration garden at Forest Home Methodist School. More than 20 teachers took the last day of their holiday to learn more about soils, nutrients, composting, transplanting, direct-planting, raised beds, organic pest controls, and other agricultural topics. Besides the positive feedback from the teachers, we have seen improvements in the gardens at several schools after this training.

We organized a celebration at Laguna Government School for Friday 21 January 2005 to honor their successful school garden program and effectively graduate the school from the GATE Project. The event was started with a tasty and nutritious lunch cooked in the school kitchen, including a salad from the school garden and vegetable rice. This gave time for Plenty staff, villagers, school staff, and invited guests to mingle, and enjoy time together. Guests included Master of Ceremonies Mr. Paul Mahung (LOVE-FM Correspondent and former Manager of Toledo District Catholic Schools), Dr. Ludwig Palacio (Director, Toledo Development Corporation who had assisted the school with a Lorena stove for the school kitchen), Mr. Brian Holland (Manager of Belize Minerals Ltd. which donates all the dolomite we want for for increasing soil PH in the school gardens, and Mr. Barry Palacio (District Supervisor for the Department of Agriculture).

The ceremony was a mix of speeches by the village leaders and guests, a report on the garden program by the principal, and 3 wonderful presentations by the students including a poem, a song, and a report on how to start a garden. Items in the speeches ranged across the spectrum: Congratulations to the students and villagers for the hard work that is paying off in a successful garden; the need for vegetables in our diets for good nutrition, as the Toledo District suffers from the worst malnutrition in Belize (44% of children); the economic crisis that Belize is in (Belize has the 4th worst ratio of national debt:exports in the world) and how we need to have food security and stop importing foodstuffs (over US\$40Million of food is

imported annually); the potential of agriculture as a career; the nutritious value of local foods such as calaloo and yams; words of encouragement and empowerment from keynote speaker Dr. Palacio; and many thanks to Plenty Belize for the years of help given to the school and village.



San Felipe village school students water the raised bed where they have planted cucumbers. The water is carried about 150 feet currently. Piping has been installed to the gardens and is only awaiting the connection to the village water system.

TSUNAMI RELIEF—INDIA

By David Purviance

Donors to Plenty have provided funds to build two playgrounds in villages that were devastated by the tsunami in southern India. We will build as many playgrounds as donated funds allow. Each playground costs \$1,500 and includes swing sets, slides, merry-go-rounds, etc.

Two charitable organizations in the state of Tamil Nadu, India have worked in the tsunami-affected coastal villages for many years. They have started projects to help women and children who survived but lost homes, possessions and family members. HOPE (Holistic Approach for People's Empowerment) is working with four villages in Pondicherry. BLESS is working with 18 villages in Cuddalore.

Child Sponsorship Program—seeks sponsors for children who lost a parent. A sponsorship is \$80 a year and goes to the child's family in monthly installments to pay for clothing, food, medical care, school uniforms, school supplies, etc.

Pregnant Women Intervention Program—medical and psychological care, food, clothing and financial assistance to pregnant women who lost husbands or children during the tsunami.

Toys for Tots—provides a stuffed toy animal to each young child who lost a parent in the tsunami. Cost for toys range from \$2 to \$10 depending on size.

To help please contact PLENTY and ask that your donation go to the India Tsunami Project and specify which program you wish to support.