

# A Spiritual Relationship

By Beth Soltzberg

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At 7:30 every morning, after feeding the chickens, health promoter Rafael Guardado writes down where he's going to be. He folds the paper and slips it into a manila envelope taped above the door to his small office. You'll seldom find him in his office, because the bulk of his work is making daily home visits to his neighbors in the village of Teosinte, El Salvador. The manila folder allows villagers to find Don Rafael anytime during the day. People come to him at night, too.

"I tell everyone that they are welcome to come whenever they need me," he says. "That's part of how they came to trust me."

He knows where to find them, too. It would come as a culture shock to an urban health care provider to see the hand-drawn maps on his office wall, which precisely indicate, house by house, several key aspects of his neighbors' healthcare status. Color coded pins indicate the immunization status of every child, the prenatal care status of every pregnant woman, the family planning status of every woman of childbearing age, and even which families are still throwing trash in their yard rather than following the village's new sanitation plan. Don Rafael's maps are just one example of the high level of organization and cooperation in this now peaceful community.

It wasn't always this way. Just before the Salvadoran Civil War began, during a time of violent repression, soldiers burned down Don Rafael's family home. They poured gasoline on his sister and burned her to death. They shot his parents in front of him. Don Rafael and his little brothers fled into the mountains, where they lived for two years, eating what they could scavenge and avoiding helicopters and soldiers. When he was twelve, his little brothers went to stay at a refugee camp, and Don Rafael joined the guerilla army. He fought until he was eighteen, when illness forced him to seek shelter at the camp.

"Sometimes, in those days, it seemed that life would end. You had to struggle with yourself to go on," he tells us, as Elizabeth Dray, Kim Holt and I peruse his maps and tour the tiny clinic next to his office. He received training as a health promoter at the refugee camp and later, from the Salvadoran Ministry of Health. "I've always been interested in health care. Now that I have this work I feel that I have done something good, and that strengthens me also."

Our conversation turns to Don Rafael's role not as a health care professional but as a father. He has three daughters, ranging in age from three to nineteen. His middle daughter, Marisela, is studying to be a nurse. We ask how he inspires his girls to focus on their studies, despite El Salvador's high unemployment rate and the stresses of life there. "We live in a poor country with high crime," he says. "It's a constant struggle to inspire them, and it's one you begin when they're little. It's very important to set a good example for them. My wife and I work hard together to do that. It's also important to remind my daughters that the value of education is beyond something material."

"Around the world," he continues, "technology keeps marching on. Our children need, at the very least, to get their high school degree and to learn to use a computer. Beyond that, it's not for me to tell my daughters what profession to choose, but to support their decision. I tell Marisela that health care is a hard field, with lots of responsibility. She says she's ready to take it on."

Don Rafael's family is one of many in Teosinte that is making daily sacrifices to pay for a child's education beyond ninth grade, the highest level taught at their village school. High school and college tuition are well beyond the means of most families, and two years ago the Arlington-Teosinte Sister City Project responded to the Teosinte Town Council's request by establishing a scholarship program for Teosinte's youth. Scholarships are allocated by an elected village committee, and recipients must meet GPA and community service requirements. The Arlington-Teosinte Sister City Project raises money for scholarships through a membership program and fundraising events held throughout the year.

"For us, seeing the youth get their education is like a new flowering of Teosinte," says Don Rafael. "We thank you so much for the effort you are making for us. Our children are very grateful." He pauses. "But I look at the sister-city friendship as primarily a spiritual, not an economic relationship. It is as if together we are one big family. Every day, I wish for our family to get stronger. The doors of Teosinte are open to all of the people of Arlington."