

## My Visit to El Progreso

Weddings can be dangerous. There I was on a dreamy October day in 2002, hobnobbing and enjoying a glass of wine, when my friend Gilligan sidled up and joined the conversation. I hadn't seen Gilligan for two years because he'd been living in El Salvador, working as a volunteer in the mountain village of El Progreso. When he suggested that the village really needed a new pickup truck, I could have wished him well and dug into the hors d'oeuvres. But for reasons I still don't fully understand, I considered the gauntlet he'd so casually dropped at my feet, bent down, and picked it up. I haven't been able to get the darned thing off since.

For the next year I played the part of a traveling salesman, and so did a dozen of Gilligan's dedicated friends from all over the country. His real name is Dan, but Gilligan is how we knew him from the Appalachian Trail, and our bonds of friendship from that experience inspired us to help him and the village in which he'd been living. Collectively our fundraising team put on walk-a-thons, wrote letters, made phone calls, gave speeches to Rotary clubs from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and dug into our own pockets. After a slow and difficult start, we finally hit our stride in the fall of 2003, and by spring of 2004 had raised \$24,000--more than enough for the truck. We decided to use the extra money to help with the ongoing expansion and improvement of the village's school.

In the meantime, Gilligan had enlisted my engineer friend Ralph's help with an even larger project--to bring running water to the village. After a visit to El Progreso in June 2003, Ralph designed the system, which had to pump water nearly two miles uphill. Then it fell to Ralph and me to order the valves, pumps, elbows, gaskets, and connectors; verify that we'd received the correct parts; repackage them; and ship all two thousand three hundred pounds of them to El Salvador.

By March 2004 we were ready to buy the truck, all the water system parts had been shipped, and it was my turn to visit El Progreso. I was to present the truck to the village, inspect the water system, and meet with our partner Rotary Club in the nearby city of Santa Ana. It was also the end of Gilligan's time living in the village, and we would depart together at the end of my visit. I stepped off the airplane and into the long, snaking line at customs, full of nervous anticipation.

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Margarito, the principal of the school in El Progreso, didn't drive his truck to the airport. Instead he has brought an old Geo Metro, out of which he and Gilligan have locked themselves. In the humid evening heat I listen to strange bird calls falling from the banana trees, and watch as the uniformed officer silently pokes in vain with a bent piece of coat hanger. Then Margarito tries, and even Billy, my Rotarian contact, takes a turn at it. Finally, while two people pry the window open a crack, Billy shoves a tire iron inside and flips the lock. We are on our way.

Billy's house in the small city of Santa Ana has tile floors, walls painted in green and yellow and red, and a fountain in the middle of the living room. In an alcove by the front door stands a statue of the Virgin Mary. The grounds are surrounded by a ten foot high concrete block wall topped with concertina wire. Just arrived home themselves from Washington DC, Billy, his wife Pilar, and four of their five children treat Margarito, Gilligan, and me to dinner, courtesy of Pizza Hut. The box blares, "MAS CALIENTE! MAS SABOR!" I tease the youngest girl, calling her "Picolina." A maid prepares my bed for the night.

The road from Santa Ana to El Progreso is lined with mango, banana, and coffee trees, choked with fine limestone dust, and traveled by pickup trucks carrying 10 or 20 passengers in their beds, or as the case may be, hanging onto the outside. In many places the road's deeply potholed surface snakes between eroded cut banks eight feet high. Margarito's truck, an '81 Mazda, bounces over bedrock outcrops. I have already learned that I need to pull the handle and then push hard on the door with my shoulder to pop it open. The left blinker is always on. When he starts the engine, it kicks over only on the battery's last gasp, inducing a perpetual state of prayer. The transmission tends to pop out of gear, and the engine doesn't idle well, so when we stop on a grade to take on or let off passengers, Margarito must alternately hit the brake and the gas to keep the truck from rolling and the engine from dying. This is the vehicle on which an entire village has been depending.

El Progreso sits at the top of a serpentine ridge. The view in all directions is of corrugated hillsides, tawny with dried cornstalks, spotted green with small coffee tree plots. Like most architecture here, the school is built of concrete block, tin, and tile roofing. In gradual stages the school has expanded, until it now consists of half a dozen spartan classrooms, a kitchen, a storage area, and outhouses. The windows have no glass, but are covered with metal grillwork. A chain link fence surrounds the school grounds, with a gate that is often locked to keep out undesirable elements. The school sits on the side of the steep hill; there are retaining walls and steps everywhere, none protected by guardrails, all heavily traveled by running children. It is a fourteen foot drop off the fenced far side of the ball court. A gravel courtyard fronted by a covered stage lies beside the ball court, and beyond that a forest of rebar and new courses of concrete block mark the start of another building.

The children all wear school uniforms--white shirts and blouses, dark blue pants and skirts. With one or two exceptions, they have midnight black hair. Gringos are unusual here; I merit shy glances and smiles. The children often hold hands, put their arms around one another, and laugh.

The only time I heard a power tool was in Mama Hilda's house. A laborer was grinding a new metal door, repairing damage from the most recent earthquake. To build all of the plumbing for the village's water system, to construct the two 10,000 gallon holding tanks, to haul bricks and mortar and 30 foot long sections of 4" pipe over rugged terrain to the spring, the people of El Progreso used their backs.

On Monday afternoon Margarito, Gilligan, and I drive to Santa Ana to buy the new truck. The Toyota dealership across town already has our \$19,250, but negotiations broke down at the last minute before I arrived. Now we are dickering with the Isuzu dealer. The salesmen all wear starched white shirts and handsome, dark slacks. The three of us are led into a cool office where Gilligan informs me that I must play the role of the heavy if we expect to consummate the deal today. On cue, I interrupt negotiations, ask Gilligan for translations, and allow my voice to gradually rise as I demand, "What's the problem here? I made a special trip to purchase this truck, and I expect to get a truck." I know the salesman will understand well enough. "Problem" and "problema" are not that different.

We get passed off to the head salesman. With silvery gray hair and tinted glasses, he patiently explains to us about the paperwork that must be filled out, the temporary licensing requirements, the difficulties in getting the truck from San Salvador to Santa Ana. For our part, we must convince them that the Toyota dealer will actually let go of the money. The first salesman joins us; now there are five of us in the small office, haggling. Finally, it is agreed. Margarito will travel with one of the salesmen to San Salvador tomorrow to get the truck. A letter of agreement is typed up, and we shake on it all around. Gilligan apologizes to the salesmen about the difficult gringo, and we walk down the steps into the evening. A security guard steps aside to let us pass. In his hands is a rifle.

Gilligan has found us a hotel on the rim of an old volcano, overlooking Lake Coatepeque which shines in the evening sun. As Margarito parks the truck, an armed guard stands in front of the tall stone perimeter wall, watching us with a poker face. We pass through ten foot high riveted steel doors, past a lovely garden, and up to the veranda. We are the only guests tonight. The young and beautiful proprietress greets us and leads us to the view of the lake. She joins us as we drink cerveza, tell stories, and listen to the steely evening rasp of cicarras.

At 7:30 we leave for the 7:00 Rotary meeting in town. We are early. Eventually the group of ten is gathered, and "mucho gustos" are exchanged all around. Billy assumes I have a speech prepared, and I do. Before I left home I wrote my speech in English and had my brother Tim translate it for me. I read the syllables, guessing at the meaning of each strange word. There is little, really, to say, except "muchas gracias" to the thirteen Rotary clubs, the one thousand Rotarians, the Rotary Foundation, and the two hundred other individuals and businesses who contributed to the truck and water projects. That, and "let us and our nations be friends."

On Tuesday morning, we go to Margarito's modest concrete block house in Santa Ana. No two walls are painted the same color. Just as in El Progreso, chickens and their chicks have the run of the place, cheeping and keeping the floors clean. We sit at Margarito's old computer and type up the special documents the Isuzu dealer requires of us. Then Margarito is off, on foot, to catch a ride with the salesman to San Salvador. Gilligan explains to me that if Margarito drives himself to San Salvador, he'll never get the new truck. He needs to be able to say, "I must have the truck today! I have no way to get back home!"

Gilligan and I take Margarito's truck to the market, buying corn and melons for Wednesday's fiesta. A few women and girls pile into the back of the truck and we drive the dusty road back to El Progreso. I help by holding the stick shift in gear. A mile short of the village, in a little saddle of the road, one of the women wants to get out. Gilligan stops, and the engine stalls. He tries turning it over several times, but our prayers are to no avail. We all get out into the fine, chalky dust and push the truck backwards into the saddle, hoping to push start the motor. It almost catches. I look in the window and ask Gilligan, "Do you have the ignition turned on?" I get a lopsided smile in answer. We move to the rear of the truck and push again, and this time the engine sputters back to life. In we all pile, and the truck crawls up the hill into the village.

It is nearly two miles on foot through the heat, down and up and down and up and down, to the water source. We follow a trail through rocky, desiccated cornfields. Families greet Gilligan from their houses scattered along the ridges on our way. Some are nervous because they have not paid their hookup fee, and now that the water project is nearing completion they are realizing they need to pony up. The source itself is at the bottom of a deep ravine, where the even deeper shade cools the men and boys who are mixing mortar by hand and passing it up by the bucketful to the top of the holding tank. Families who want water are also expected to work on the project, and there has been plenty of work to go around. Thousands of five pound bricks were hand carried, eight at a time, twelve trips a day per person, from El Progreso.

Before we leave, Gilligan and I take a quick shower in the gushing overflow pipe. I have been careful to drink only bottled water, but accidentally take a gallon or two of fire hose velocity groundwater up the nose. Tom s, in his 50's, joins us on the walk home, and points out the hillside where his brother, during troubled times some years ago, was executed. In his voice there is no bitterness.

On the gravel playground a group of men and boys assemble galvanized pipes and rubberized canvas, creating three big tops for the coming fiesta. It is a job that can only be done with many hands. I put my camera in my pocket and help. Gilligan, pacing off a measurement, blunders into me, and with inescapable escalation we stumble into a wrestling match. My glasses fly off into the dust. He flips me and I fall hard, but reverse him quickly. I am twice his age but bigger, and we grind to a stalemate in the gravel, while the others, I imagine, watch the two crazy gringos.

At Mama Hilda and Papa Anhil's house, I shower off the grit from our tussle. The stall is concrete, shoulder high, and sits just outside the kitchen window. Water is still a scarce commodity and I am mindful. I take a plastic wash basin, fill it with perhaps three quarts, and rinse off. Dinner is rice, a tamale, and pupusas--quarter inch thick tortillas stuffed with beans or greens. Sometimes Mama Hilda serves soup, or sausage and beans. Every meal is satisfying.

Because Mama Hilda and Papa Anhil live on the highest ground in the village, the fifteen foot high holding tank is in their backyard. In the evening, Gilligan and I climb to the top

and enjoy the view of tree covered volcanoes to the west. Seventy-two year old Anhil and his six-year old grandson Gustavo join us. Gustavo's dad is in the U.S., wetbacking. He cuddles with Gilligan. After dark, Barrio and his family come over to visit. His wife sits with Mama Hilda while most of the kids, Gilligan, and I play Sorry! Even the youngest are experts. No one pouts.

Wednesday marks the end of Gilligan's three years of volunteer work in El Progreso. On the outdoor stage, the students perform: songs, traditional Gilligances, a theatrical rendition of Cinderella, a tribute to Gilligan. During a game of pin the tail on the donkey, the teacher helps the youngsters, but turns the donkey upside down and sideways for the big kids. Of course, the gringo gets drafted. First I try to Gilligance with the pretty teacher who has blindfolded me, then I peg the tail squarely in the middle of the donkey's forehead. Next it's time for a fruit eating contest, and I cheat, sneaking a half-eaten apple, lime quarters, and a peeled banana into my pockets. Inevitably, I am caught, and must pull the food out, scrape off the lint, and eat up.

Margarito shows up, driving a brand new, beautiful Isuzu cab-over truck. There is no bed; it will be custom built and placed on the frame later. Margarito invites me into the cab and we back up the hill to Mama Hilda's house. The wheels spin in the dust as we try to get over the stony hump into her driveway, so Papa Anhil and the neighbor lady help us by climbing onto the frame over the rear wheels, smiling as we pull under the shade of a tree.

In the afternoon, the students play round-robin soccer on the concrete ball court, spectators crowded along the uphill side. There are parents mixed in with the children. The 12 and 13 year old boys play with intensity. Gilligan drafts me to join the teachers and stonemasons against the high school seniors. We fight them to a draw.

The priest arrives after dinner. He serves twelve congregations. Villagers arrive in the gathering dusk, until three hundred sit under the big tops. The beautiful hotel owner arrives, and eyes follow her as she joins Gilligan and me. This is a Thanksgiving Mass, to celebrate the many projects that Gilligan has brought to fruition here. Dust blows the priest's white vestments while the little children play on the ball court next door.

The service concludes, and speeches commence. Gilligan is honored with accolades and presented with plaques. Salvatore, a large man, comes to the stage and speaks in such rapid and fiery Spanish I think he must be running for office, but he is, in fact, lauding Gilligan. I can see this much: the people in this community love him. Then Gilligan calls me up to the stage and I, too, receive a plaque. I symbolically present the keys of the truck to Margarito, but am lost for words. I see too much hard work in this village to brag much about raising money for the truck.

Eventually the music starts up, and Gilligan and I Gilligance with the school teachers. They explain to us that the El Salvadoran men are shy and will not Gilligance, but before long there's a good crowd. After an hour or two, the band packs up and we move to the campfire. It is so hot that our circle forms, not around the fire, but to the side. There are

stories, and songs, and a guitar that is passed from hand to hand. There is no alcohol. At two in the morning, Gato spits a rabbit on two pieces of rebar. Then someone shows up with an unlucky iguana, and it too goes on the fire. On a third piece of rebar is a small skinned creature--a toad, Barrio tells me. He offers the meat to me and I eat some. It tastes like chicken. Gilligan later tells me, "He tried that trick on me, too. It's not a toad. It's a little bird."

At three thirty in the morning, we go home and pack. I stuff 15 hammocks into my suitcases. Mama Hilda and Papa Anhil get up, the chicks cheep, the dogs bark at the dark, and we wait for Tony to show up with his truck. Gilligan's parting from Mama Hilda and Papa Anhil is tearful. They have been his parents for three years.

Fourteen others join Gilligan and me in the back of Tony's truck and we set off in the pre-dawn dark for the airport, four hours away. Little Gustavo's butt grinds into my lap as we jounce down the pot-holed road. After an hour we reach pavement. By sunrise we are speeding at 60 miles an hour on asphalt unblemished by any kind of paint indicating lanes, shoulders, or no passing zones. It might be a two lane road, it might be a three lane road. It might depend on who's driving, and how much of a rush they're in. There's not enough room for everyone to sit, so I'm now standing at the back of the truck. The wind tugs on the tiny roof tarp, making it flap. The women all have scarves and hats pulled over their faces to cut the dust and wind. Beautiful Erica, thirteen, stubborn, and devoted to Gilligan, sits heedless of the wind. Gilligan and I both hope that her stubbornness will save her.

The snapping of the tarp pops the galvanized pipe against which I'm leaning out of its bracket. I nearly fall out the back of the truck and under the wheels of the semi right behind us. I turn and rearrange the baling twine so the horizontal bar won't pop out anymore. Only an hour before the flight, and with 50 kilometers to go, the truck suddenly veers to the shoulder and stops. The right front tire is flat. While Tony, Margarito, and I work on fixing the flat, the others stand behind the truck, chatting and stretching in the warm morning sun while vehicles speed by. Gato wanders off to the side of the road to pee. Barrio sits on the spare like a unicycle, utterly unconcerned that Gilligan and I are about to miss our plane. For that matter, I notice, Gilligan is oblivious. None of us have eaten in hours. I look around. At Gustavo, Sessy, and Ruby, suffering this uncomfortable ride. At Gato, Mirna, and Iris, coming along because friendship is important. At Margarito, ever helpful. I don't think I care, either, if we miss the plane.