

Reflections on 25 Years of Sanctuary

- Marianna McGuffin

*Dictionary definition of "sanctuary": (from the Latin *sanctuarium*)
a holy place, a place of refuge.*

IN THE PAST, SYNONYMOUS TO ME WITH THE WORD "sanctuary" was Victor Hugo's hunchback of Notre Dame, Quasimodo, swooping down and snatching up the gypsy girl Esmeralda and carrying her into the safety of the cathedral. But then Alicia told me about her dream.

She was back in Guatemala huddled together with her family in a broken down van. They were racing through the night being chased by soldiers carrying machetes and guns. This seemed to be going on forever when suddenly the van lurched to a stop and all was quiet. They had come to a halt in a huge cavern-like cellar. The side door of the van slowly rolled open and the family, fearing the worst, held their breath as they peered into the darkness. But as their eyes adjusted to the gloom, fear was replaced by amazement and relief for there, instead of the expected soldiers, were the brothers, their arms extended to embrace them. They were safe. They had found sanctuary.

So...*Adios!* Quasimodo and Esmeralda. *Hola!* Elena, Felipe, Marta, Julio, Alicia, Juanita, and Inez.

Of all the 500 existing Sanctuaries in the United States during the 80s, ours proved itself to be unique in that it was to survive for 25 years. There were many reasons for this, reasons having to do with financial support and the commitment of a whole faith community. But first there was the brothers' gift of a house and land.

The house rapidly became a Guatemalan Mayan home, and that home became a mecca for many Central American refugees scattered throughout the Northeast. One had only to step inside the door and the aroma of Guatemalan cooking and the sound of marimba music flooded the senses.

And the land...Elena shared with me that she had informed only one person in her village that they were leaving and that person was her mother's older sister who told her, "No matter how far you travel

from our village or Guatemala, you will always be at home because our same Mother Earth will still be there beneath your feet."

This connection to the land goes back centuries in the Mayan culture. And that first year, once the frost was out of the ground, Mother Earth had a dedicated contingent of Mayan caretakers tilling the rocky soil in the Green Mountains of Vermont.

The brothers had gifted Elena and Felipe with a house and land. Elena and Felipe gifted the brothers with a bevy of children. No other monastery had its dining room windows decorated with the handprints of a four year old.



The Miracles !

Miracle 1

In the early days when the family would travel to an early morning sanctuary meeting, how was it possible to pack seven Ixcots, a driver, weavings, and an immense midday Guatemalan meal into a two-door Honda Civic? Five A.M. was the take-off time. The marimba cassette was immediately installed in the dashboard and cranked up so that everyone in the back could hear. A half hour or so on the way, little car-sick Inez would hiccup. That is, everyone hoped it was only a hiccup. But somehow we always fit into the car and reached our destination.

Miracle 2

The marimba! How is it possible that a Mayan marimba could travel piecemeal, hand to hand, from Guatemala to Weston, Vermont? Well, it did.



Midwife Birthing Center



Guatemala 2005



Guatemala 2003



Guatemala 2005

Miracle 3

The finding by Felipe of two Mayan marimba players who taught Julio, Marta, Alicia, and Juanita over 50 Guatemalan songs without the benefit of one piece of written sheet music.

Miracle 4

The creation of a marimba band made up of teenaged Mayan boys that Julio formed years later in Chicago.

Miracle 5

The acquisition by five Mayan children of education not available to them in Guatemala. Kudos to East Hill School, the Little School, Mount Holly Elementary School, Flood Brook Union School, Long Trail School, Burr and Burton Academy, and St. Joseph's High School in Chicago; to Chestnut Hill College, Mount Holyoke College, Beloit College, Colby-Sawyer College, Virginia Wesleyan College, and the Truman Community College of Chicago.

Miracle 6

The formation in 1991 of the International Mayan League whose purpose was and is to familiarize the North American people with the Mayan culture and the plight of the Mayan people.

Miracle 7

The concept and actualization of a midwife birthing center in Concepción Chiquirichapa (the town from which the Ixcot family came in Guatemala).

Throughout the years I saw Elena's and Felipe's testimony against the genocide and oppression of the 70s and 80s evolve into insightful presentations of Mayan culture that reached countless schools, churches, synagogues, colleges and universities. What remained unchanged was their dedication to and overwhelming concern for the Mayan people.

Ironically, sometimes the more things change the more they stay the same. Elena and Felipe and Julio are back in their village in Guatemala. It wasn't a safe place 25 years ago and it's not a safe place now. The oppression has dissipated; however, gangs and drug cartels have moved in. But Mother Earth remains beneath their feet. Julio faithfully and joyfully attends her, and Elena and Felipe continue working with their people to find solutions.

Back in the United States, Sonia (Marta), Alicia, Juanita, and Maya (Inez) work in various capacities with indigenous and Mayan communities. The International Mayan League continues in its efforts to educate the North American people to the plight of the Maya and to raise money for the support of the midwife birth center in Concepción.

Dedication and commitment to the land remain constant. ■