

Unitarian Society of Ridgewood Sponsors the Sienna Project

This article is not about a feel good project, nor does the project's beginnings make for a feel good story. This tale is literally about digging trenches with shovels, picks, and hoes and sometimes-primitive tools. It is about raising money and keeping books and writing letters, but most of all it's about *changing lives*. We call it the Sienna Project. It was launched when the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar's three-year-old daughter, Sienna, suddenly and unexpectedly died in May of last year; a tragedy felt by our family, many in the clergy and particularly by the congregation of the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood (NJ), where Marlin was active for a few years just prior to entering divinity school. Marlin is now the senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa (OK).

I am Marlin's dad, a member of the Ridgewood Society. My other son Derek and I, with the sponsorship of the religious education program in Ridgewood decided to memorialize Sienna by building schools in small indigenous mountain villages (cantons) in the Highlands of Guatemala, where so many indigenous cantons have never been able to afford to build classroom and where many indigenous children never go to school.

The Sienna Project chose Guatemala knowing that it is unlikely that other congregations have the synergies our project has. Marlin's brother Derek is an expatriate living in Guatemala's Highlands and has a limited but working vocabulary of Quichè, the local indigenous language. He also has extensive construction experience. Having a man who can relate to the people "on the ground" in Guatemala uniquely positions the Sienna Project to build in Guatemala. We... chose to build schools.

In February 2007, 11 volunteers traveled to Agua Viva, Guatemala, at their own expense to help the villagers construct a building so that 90 additional children could attend school. The Sienna Project paid for construction materials with the help of friends, two outside grants, and many donations from the Ridgewood congregants.

I recently read that Melinda Gates said philanthropies succumb to the temptation to "apply a thin layer of resources to a broad range of problems and do a lot of charity, but not effect much change." The Sienna Project is already changing the lives of children in Agua Viva and with every school term will multiply that affect. This is a five-year project and is destined to transform – *really transform*, over time – the lives of scores, hundreds even thousand of children.

Submitted by Martin Lavanhar