

WOMAN SHARES GLOBAL TRAVELS: On a path to help others

By Mary Ann Bullard for the Daily Courier

Frances Dixon has no regrets about taking the road less traveled.

Rather than taking the safe path, 25 years ago she courageously drove alone in a rented Jeep to the end of a winding, unpaved mountain road in Guatemala. Decades later, she still makes the journey to remote highland rain forests in the Cuchumatanes mountains, helping indigenous Mayan Indians rebuild their lives in the wake of a civil war that raged from 1960 to 1996.

The vibrant 74-year old, who grew up in a small gold mining town in Canada and now lives in Grants Pass, was always fascinated with off-the-beaten-path travel.

"I was always a globetrotter, and as soon as I got out of school I was off traveling," she says. "I've lived in Bolivia, Ghana, visited Zimbabwe and South Africa. After moving to Florida, I looked at the map and it became obvious that was an easy jumping off point to Central America, an area I'd never seen."

Dixon ended up in Guatemala during a war of genocide against the Mayan population. She had witnessed Third World poverty before, but never to the extent she saw in the war-torn, but beautiful, mountainous country.

"I just knew something was different this time," she says. "The Mayan people were trapped between the revolutionaries and government forces, and ultimately it was the Mayans who paid the price. Over 200,000 people were massacred."



TIMOTHY BULLARD/Daily Courier
Frances Dixon with a mask of Tecun Uman carved from a local wood in Guatemala. Tecun Uman was the last of the Mayan chiefs killed by the conquistadors in 1524.

What Dixon experienced during her first Guatemalan travels sparked an intense interest and curiosity. Within a short time, she revisited the country, telling her son of plans to travel deep into the heart of the country.

"I said I feel something is being hidden from me. There is something more than what tourists see," she says. "I looked at the map, saw this red squiggly line that went high into the mountains in the northwest section of Guatemala, then it just stopped. So I told my son that's where I'm going — to the end of that road, to see what I find."

She didn't find the end of the road. What she found — besides adventure — was the last supply town of Barillas in an expansive remote area, an army stockade and a primitive four-wheel road that leads to more than 200 Mayan villages. Since outsiders weren't allowed to travel in the region at that time, Dixon wrangled a pass from the commandant of the army. And off she went.

The 36-year war left the country mired in problems.

"It's a country divided geographically, linguistically, educationally, socially and economically. It's a very racial country and the discrimination is appalling," Dixon laments. "Every bit as bad as what I saw in South Africa ... So I continued going back, but hadn't thought of starting a nonprofit organization."

While she was showing a slide presentation to a group of friends in Florida in 1991, a friend suggested asking others for money to help the people of Guatemala and wrote out a check for \$50. It was the beginning of Adopt-a-Village.

Dixon resides in Grants Pass but spends six months a year in Guatemala, overseeing programs and troubleshooting. She gathers information for extensive reports to donors, and keeps the school within government guidelines.

A member of Rogue Gateway Rotary, Dixon uses her time and skills to raise money for the organization, which has funded many schools, built roads, homes, water systems and a tuberculosis treatment facility.

A training center teaching students how to grow organic vegetables is situated on 150 acres of fertile agricultural land.

"We have a major nutrition center and provide a two-year training course," she explains. Proper nutrition is a great concern for Dixon, who witnessed first-hand how the chronic malnutrition has ravaged the populace, especially babies, children and pregnant women.

"Not only is their physical growth stunted," she says, "their mental development is damaged as well."

She began a sustainable agricultural program. Last year, amaranth, a plant used by the Mayans and Aztecs more than 500 years ago, was re-introduced. When the Spanish invaded in the 16th century they discovered the plant was used in religious rituals as well as in drinks and foods, so they burned the fields and outlawed its use.

However it wasn't completely eradicated because of its resiliency. Dixon wanted to re-introduce the plant because it is high in protein and other nutrients.

"We thought if we could show the Mayan people this is your ancient food, what your ancestors ate, this is going to be great for you and your children," she says.

"Folks ask me why I would go to such a place. My decision was to help the neediest of the neediest in all of Guatemala," she says. "These people were enslaved by the Spanish 500 years ago, and in my opinion they are still enslaved because they can't get employment and can hardly feed their kids."

The government provides education through primary school, and some secondary-level schools, but not the cost of books, supplies or transportation — leaving education inaccessible to many.

"Only 30 percent of children graduate from primary school and only 10 percent are girls," she says. "I saw the need for a high school, so children could make that giant leap to break out of this cycle of poverty and field labor," Dixon says.

That is when Maya Jaguar was born. The accredited high school is a boarding school where students and teachers live, work and learn from January through October. The students attend in blocks of 18 days, then they return to their remote villages, which can take up to two or three days travel time. There, they work for their parents for 12 days before taking the long trek back to school. Also, Adopt-a-Village recently opened its first middle school, located near Maya Jaguar High School.

Dixon is proud of the Mayan staff.

"We have registered our organization as a legal, charitable group in Guatemala. We have to follow a lot of rules and gain accreditation every

year. And last year we were able to receive accreditation from the Guatemalan government for a two-year computer sciences course. This is a huge achievement for us because having this training opens the doors to immediate employment upon graduation." Funding for laptop computers for the program came from the Grants Pass Rotary Club.

A sweet success story Dixon relates is that of Manuel Pascual Lorenzo. He was living in an isolated village where there was no education. But he was determined to become educated despite not having support from his father or neighbors. Only his mother believed in him.

"He had heard our school was giving scholarships and he told his family he was going to talk to us," she says.

"But they told him he must not go, 'because they have jaguars up there and they will set them on you and the jaguars will kill and eat you.' This was the level of ignorance," Dixon says, shaking her head.

The undaunted young Mayan braved the imaginary jaguars and applied for a scholarship six years ago, which he won and then completed an accelerated program in two years. He dreamed of becoming a teacher and had to work part-time at Maya Jaguar after he graduated so he could earn his way to go to university on weekends.

"He finally got his degree last November and it was an open door for him to come teach at the school. And now he's elevated himself to assistant director of the high school," Dixon says.

"We're finally beginning to see the kids get through the process of education and then come back, get jobs and become an inspiration and models for the younger kids."

For more information or to make a donation, log on to adoptavillage.com; check out the Adopt-a-Village in Guatemala page on Facebook for regular updates