

SANDY'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Flamborough Chamber of Commerce Past President Sandy Gray with friend Blanca Peña travel to Colombia to help launch Soroptimist Club; assist orphans and pregnant teens

Flamborough Chamber of Commerce (FCC) Past President Sandy Gray of Weeks Home Hardware joined her friend Blanca Peña on an unforgettable trip to Colombia, South America last November. What follows are Sandy's recollections of the trip.

Blanca and I are good friends – we both own local businesses; are members of Soroptimist International and is my golfing buddy. She is my past Spanish teacher (I definitely need more lessons) and I am a customer of her salon, Blanca's Aesthetics on Mill Street South in Waterdown (featuring – in my opinion – the best pedicure anywhere!).

About three years ago, Blanca was telling me that in Colombia there are no emergency shelters for abused women (places like Interval House in Hamilton) and how she wanted to try and do something about that.

Realizing that you 'can't put the cart before the horse,' we knew that you must have people living in Colombia lobbying for those changes. That is where organizations like Soroptimist International can be truly instrumental in helping to bring about those changes.

Soroptimist International is a professional women's organization whose mission is to improve the lives of women and girls here in our community and around the world. Blanca and I decided that is how we could work towards making changes in Colombia and we devised a plan to go there to establish a Soroptimist Club.

Unfortunately, due to a variety of circumstances, we never were able to move forward on that dream.

Fast forward to the year 2007.

Having not been back to Colombia to visit her family in



Flamborough Soroptimists Blanca Peña and Sandy Gray (Weeks Home Hardware and the immediate Past President of the Flamborough Chamber of Commerce) are surrounded by a large group of residents of the Instituto Santa Maria (Saint Maria Institute) orphanage operated by Roman Catholic sisters in Cali, Columbia. The little girl seated between Blanca and Sandy is holding a copy of the *Flamborough Review*.

many years, Blanca decided it was time to do just that. Initially, it was planned to be just a family trip home. Blanca, daughter Paola and her husband Brad Asselstine, along with their two daughters Sydney and Samantha (four and two years old respectively).

The group grew to eight including friend, past Soroptimist and retired French teacher Natacha Kun; Brad's brother Bill; and I. It looked like our dream to start a Soroptimist International Club in Cali was finally going to happen!

The itinerary was to spend one week in Cali, where the majority of Blanca's family lives. We would then spend another four days in Bogota, Colombia's capital city.

Since we were each allowed two suitcases up to 50 pounds each, we knew we had far more luggage space than

we required. Paola's family only needed three of the eight allotted bags and the rest of us could most likely pack in one suitcase each.

Cali is a large city of nearly 3 million people. But there is also much of poverty. So we decided that we should utilize that extra baggage space and take children's clothing to some orphanages while we were there.

Following coverage of our trip in the *Flamborough Review* as well as in *Members Only*, the internet newsletter published by the Flamborough Chamber of Commerce (FCC), we found we had more clothes than we could pack!

We also took along a few stuffed toys – there are children in those orphanages who have never received a gift!

The Waterdown Rotary Club also contacted me. The

club gave us a \$200 contribution to use where we thought it was needed most.

On Monday, November 19, we departed from Toronto very early in the morning to fly to Miami, Florida. After a 4 hour layover, we travelled onwards to Cali, where we landed in the mid evening.

Blanca, Natacha and I were to stay in an apartment of a friend of Blanca's, Blanca Fanny (who I will refer to as Fanny for less confusion). Fanny in turn was staying with a friend in the same apartment complex, Yolanda. Yolanda was fluent in English as she had moved to USA during her university days and ended up staying there for 20 years.

On our first day in Cali we had to go grocery shopping to get food supplies and our much needed bottled water. The water in Cali is very good

but we were warned that we should play it safe and drink only bottled water as none of us wanted to deal with the dreaded Montezuma's revenge.

In the afternoon, we loaded up our car with five suitcases of children's clothing and headed to Instituto Santa Maria (Saint Maria Institute), a Catholic orphanage on the outskirts of Cali. It was in a poor area of the city and as we drove up the rutted road, we were unsure what we were headed for. The outside of the building appeared very 'institutional' to me and looked like an old hospital. Inside, it also was very old and institutional.

We were greeted by a young teenage girl who was reading a book at a small desk in the foyer. Her name was Marilyn and she was there to greet anyone who may arrive when no one else was in the office area. Shortly thereafter, we were greeted by the Mother Superior of the orphanage, Sister Julia Elysa.

We were taken on a short tour of the lower level which included a visit to the chapel, as well as the classrooms.

There was one room for each of the five grades. We were surprised how barren these classrooms were – hardly anything on the walls and no book cases or signs of school supplies anywhere.

Later we visited a small library room, which had a large collection of well worn books.

This orphanage is for girls only but there were a few local children whose parents pay a small amount of money for their children to attend the school. There were also a couple of boys in that group. Those not wearing uniforms are 'local' kids.

50 children and nine nuns live at Saint Marie. Five of the older girls attend high school which is being funded by a group of people from Virginia.



ABOVE, LEFT: Past and present Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough Soroptimists (from left) Sandy Gray, Natacha Kun and Blanca Peña get ready to celebrate Christmas with some of the residents of Cermujer, a home for pregnant, unwed teens. ABOVE, RIGHT: One of the sisters at the orphanage is pictured with the new washer purchased by the visiting Soroptimists along with a donation from the Waterdown Rotary Club. The gift brought tears to the eyes of the mother superior.



Blanca Peña with Marilyn, who warmly greets visitors to the Cermujer home.

One of those five is our greeter Marilyn.

After being introduced to the children, we answered a few questions including trying to explain where Canada is. Then we had a group photo taken.

As we continued on our tour, the children were given a fruit snack. I recognized the colour and texture to be pears. But they were cut in odd shapes. Pears are an expensive fruit in Colombia as they have to be imported.

The cooks work with what they get – in this case, they had received a large quantity of

spoiling pears. They cut off all the bad fruit, exposing the good food still inside. Often, the food they get from the food bank is in this condition. A few local grocery stores also donate spoiling food to the orphanage.

I saw some corn in the kitchen that I thought was not fit for human consumption. On second thought, I realized that there is a certain amount of good corn on those cobs. It just needed to be cut off and probably ended up in the next day's soup.

Upstairs, there were some very small individual rooms

for the sisters. The girls were housed in rooms that generally had six beds, many of them bunk beds. They were long and narrow, just wide enough for beds running down both sides of the rooms with about three feet in between. There was a small cabinet that housed the few street clothes the girls had.

The washroom had three showers – one marked for Grades 1-2, another one for Grades 3-4 and the final one for Grade 5 or higher. There were no cabinets or storage facilities. I have no idea where their toothbrushes were. But they had to be somewhere, as the children were all clean with their hair and teeth brushed.

As we continued our tour, we saw they had a small barn with chickens and a cow. Naturally, our thoughts turned to purchasing more of them.

It turned out that they didn't have enough pasture for another cow and had been having trouble with diseases that kill the chickens. They were concerned if we bought them more, they would probably lose them to disease.

When pressed as to what we could get them, we discovered that all of the laundry was being washed by hand. We decided that a new washing machine would be something that would make their lives easier. And the cost was affordable for us.

Natacha, Blanca and I all chipped in \$100 each. We added to that the \$200 from the Waterdown Rotary Club. That covered most of the cost – I decided to submit the rest to our Soroptimist Club.

After our visit to the orphanage, we immediately headed to an appliance store where we met with the manager. After negotiating a small discount, we arranged delivery and installation for later that week.

Sadly, we never managed to make it back to the orphanage to see the washer in use. But Blanca spoke with Sister Julia Elysa, who was so emotional about our gift that she was in tears.

Our second day we were to

visit Cermujer. When we originally planned these excursions, I was under the impression that we were going to visit a second orphanage that was for babies. That is not what Cermujer is. It is actually a home for pregnant teens where the girls move to during mid-pregnancy.

Like young girls everywhere, some of these girls are victims of their own poor judgment and a persuasive boyfriend. But sadly, a large number of these girls are victims of rape and abuse.

Some of these girls have been ostracized by their families. Others realize that if they don't seek help, they will most likely have unhealthy babies due to poor nutrition or further abuse. Cermujer is truly a haven for these girls. It is a safe and nurturing environment where they are taught all about pre-natal nutrition as well as child care and the nutritional needs of their children.

Cermujer is housed in an old, dilapidated building in a poor part of town that is owned and operated through the generosity of the building's owner, Rocio Laverde. Her kind and loving ways are reflected in how the girls act around her. They obviously have much love and respect for what she is doing for them.

They receive virtually no government funding. Everything they have is through Rocio's generosity and persuasive abilities to get what they need through donations. All of the girls' medical care is provided free of charge by a high quality private clinic, including pre-natal tests and ultrasounds. The girls all breastfeed their children but due to laundry space restrictions, they do use disposable diapers which are also donated. Again, we were treated to a full tour of the facility by the girls there. None of them spoke a word of English and my grasp of Spanish is shaky at best. But Blanca was there to help Natacha and I understand.

The main floor has group activity room with a nursery area and two offices – one an examination room; the other

for counseling. There are also a few bedrooms on the main floor to reduce the number of stairs for girls in their final trimester.

There is also a single room which is exclusively used when the girls first arrive back with their new babies. They are given a bit of privacy to get used to being a new mom before they are sent upstairs to a group room. The babies all sleep in their mother's bed.

The rooms upstairs are just big enough to house two or three sets of single wide bunk beds with very little space in between. Most of the rooms have basic gym lockers for clothes storage – one locker per mother and child to keep all of their clothes and possessions. With 4-6 girls plus their babies in a room about the size of an average bedroom, you have to wonder how anyone can get any sleep in these rooms.

We were also introduced to the cook. The girls raved about how great she is. Again, balanced nutrition is paramount. But they also have to work with what they get.

We ended our tour in the group activity room. We had brought a huge suitcase filled with baby clothes and a quantity of small baby toys. The girls were very excited to receive the items we brought but all waited their turn patiently.

Under the guidance of Rocio, we first distributed toys to the girls who already had their children. We made sure the girls understood that the baby toys were second hand and they should wash them thoroughly before giving them to their children.

These girls were also all given a choice of one of two outfits each. Then all of them were each given an outfit based on what sex their baby was expected to be as they had all received ultrasound results.

We noted that the oldest baby there was around six month old. We asked when the girls were expected to leave Cermujer. We were told they could stay until they were ready to leave.



ABOVE: Flamorough Chamber of Commerce Past President Sandy Gray (right) presents some baby clothing to pregnant teens at the Cermujer home. Ultrasounds have indicated the girls pictured above are expecting daughters. LEFT: One of the residents of Cermujer with her newborn.



Natacha Kun, Blanca Peña and Sandy Gray (seated, left to right) are pictured with a group of Colombian women interested in launching a Soroptimist chapter in Cali, Colombia. The meeting was held in a local restaurant owned by Blanca's nephew, Andres Felipe.

While we were there, the girls also performed a dance for us that they were planning to perform at an upcoming arts festival. It was a courtship dance where three girls were dressed in beautiful flowing skirts and three others were dressed as boys in basic cotton outfits. The symbolism of this dance made you wonder how many of these young girls would ever have a healthy relationship with a young man and enjoy a stable family life they so much deserve.

On our arrival at Cermujer, we noted the cute Christmas decorations the girls had made. We enquired whether those decorations were for sale. The girls had actually made them for decorating the center. But they said we could buy them as they could make more!

We also purchased some necklaces and earrings that they were making for the arts festival that was taking place a few weeks later. Rocio told us that all the money we gave them was to be given to the girls when they leave Cermujer.

Apparently, when they leave there, Rosario always sends them out with a small amount of money. But these girls will also get extra money they earned through their crafts. I have since ordered 20 sets of necklaces and earrings which are available at our store for a \$10 donation. All of the proceeds will be sent to Colombia and more items purchased including new styles and other items (like the hand-made purses I saw some of them working on).

That same evening we held our first meeting of the future Soroptimist International Club of Cali. It was attended by 13 enthusiastic prospects.

We held our meeting at a tiny corner restaurant called Santono's which is in an old section of Cali. It is owned by one of Blanca's nephew,

Andres Felipe, who actually lived here in Hamilton for over six months while he attended Columbia College in Westdale studying the English language. Andres is actually an engineer specializing in large building construction. But he owns and operates this small community restaurant and bar in the evenings.

Governor Pina – the immediate past governor of the South America region and our official Soroptimist representative – cancelled her appearance at the last minute because of unrest in her home country of Venezuela. As she is fluent in Spanish, Blanca became the official mistress of ceremonies for this event.

To help break the ice, I introduced myself as best I could in Spanish. I said hello, told them my name and that I only speak a little Spanish. My Spanish was very, very bad but I told them my English was very, very good!

After Blanca made her formal presentation, we fielded many questions with Blanca as the interpreter for this enthusiastic bunch of ladies.

As we came to the close of our meeting, Luz Mariana, one of our prospective new members, got up to thank us. She said they all appreciated us 'planting the seeds' to making a change for less fortunate women in Cali.

She vowed – along with many of the women there that night – to work hard towards making a Soroptimist club a reality. In order to receive their charter, they must have 15 women sign up. So there are a still few more steps before that club becomes a reality.

(Let me add a footnote. The Cermujer home we visited is a perfect match for a Soroptimist International Club as their pet project. Cermujer would benefit in so many ways, including the great role models these business women would be for those young

ladies. I hope to be fortunate enough to visit Colombia again as well as attend one of their future meetings!)

Since our visit, Blanca and I have been in contact with Luz Mariana. Blanca had the idea that it would be nice if we arranged a special breakfast for the children that have nowhere else to go on Christmas morning. We also wanted to make sure there were some presents for the children and we decided to do this too for the young ladies of Cermujer.

Thankfully, Luz Mariana arranged all of this for us. She will also be acting as my liaison with Cermujer in efforts to help the young ladies through sales of their handicrafts!

She also took photos when she visited both places including photos of the washing machine in its place at Santa Maria! I also see in her photos taken at Cermujer that two of the young ladies who were pregnant when we visited are now mothers. There is a new baby girl and a baby boy that are part of the Cermujer family!

Those first three days in Colombia was the extent of our 'work' in that country. It gave us a much bigger perspective on the needs of others in a different country and how a few people can make a difference.

While in Cali we also had the opportunity to attend a dance production named Delirio, which had recently returned from a tour of Russia. It was primarily a Salsa dance troupe that features the music and dance of Cali. But it also had elements of Cirque du Soleil. Simply put, the dancers were fantastic.

But the most interesting part was that all the dancers in the troupe were previously street kids who had no real education and poor job prospects.

They were brought together through the vision of a man who wanted to showcase the

heart and soul of Cali – its music, dance and people. He believed the way to accomplish this was by means of naturally talented artists, not those who were professionally trained. So Delirio was formed.

We also had the opportunity to visit a farm in the country owned by Fanny where the prime crop is sugar cane.

The farm has been in her family for many years. She built a small cottage on the property for her use. Her main farmhands also have a home on the property. She had a few farm dogs, four horses for riding, a few head of cattle, a small flock of geese, a pair of free roaming scarlet macaws, a pair of green parrots and an aviary cage of cockatiels. The original farm house, which is well over 100 years old, is still there and in good repair. But I was surprised that no one lives in it on a regular basis.

Andres (Santono's restaurant) also wanted us to visit his family's country home in a mountain village called Pichinde. The scenery was absolutely breathtaking as we twisted and turned our way up the mountain. We visited a monument like the famous

one of Rio on the top of one peak on our way to our final destination. The monument was an odd sight up close as it was covered in mesh and lights for the Christmas season.

Our final destination in Pichinde was no less breathtaking. It's a quaint old mountain town with many beautiful homes all with perfectly maintained grounds, flowers to rival the RBG and views you could never tire of.

Our final few days were spent in Bogota, Colombia's capital city. It was only a 45 minute flight from Cali, but 9-10 hours by road. We opted for the flight!

At 8,600 feet above sea level, it is situated in the Andes Mountains nestled on a plateau rimmed by mountain range. Having just arrived from Cali – with an altitude of only 2,400 feet – we all felt a little light-headed. We were warned to take it easy when doing things like climbing stairs.

One of the highlights in Bogota included a luncheon at the home of Wilma Zafra Turbay. The Zafra and Turbay families are some of the most powerful in the politics of Colombia.



Sandy Gray (left) and Blanca Peña with Andres Felipe, Blanca's nephew who is the owner of Santono's, the local restaurant where the Soroptimist meeting was held.

Wilma spent nine years as the Colombian ambassador to Paris, France. Wilma's late aunt – Nelly Turbay – was the Colombian ambassador in India.

Nelly was also a dear friend of Blanca's younger sister, Carmen Elisa. Wilma thought this would be a good opportunity to remember and honor their friend so she invited Carmen Elisa to bring her visiting Canadian sister and her family and friends to a luncheon in Nelly's memory.

For once, I was kind of glad I didn't understand the language well. Wilma paid a very emotional tribute to their friend that I'm sure would have brought this softie to tears.

Following the luncheon, some of us wanted to visit Monserrate. So, after returning to work, Wilma sent her driver back to take us there.

Since the Turbay family is very powerful in Bogota, their stature does not come without danger. Another first. I can now say that I have traveled in a bullet proof vehicle. The window glass was very thick and the doors were lined with plate steel. I couldn't believe how heavy they were to swing closed.

We wondered if it was safe to be traveling in a dignitary's vehicle. Of course, we were safe. The danger is only when getting out of a dignitary's vehicle!

We arrived at our destination without incident. Then we rode in a cable car up an additional 1,500 feet to the top of a mountain where we visited the sanctuary of Monserrate, a beautiful Catholic church perched on the top of a peak which directly overlooks the city. The church was incredible and there was a small market where you could purchase souvenirs, the first place like that we had visited so far on our trip.

Our last two days in Colombia involved a trip to Carmen Elisa's country farm on the mountains. Her friend Martica actually designed this home which includes a large upstairs loft that sleeps eight – perfect for this occasion.

I was treated to a bedroom downstairs with its own bathroom. I had been warned to keep my shoes on in the evening. I couldn't quite understand why but I discovered why in the middle of the night.

Just like cottages here in Ontario, homes that are not always occupied attract various creatures like mice and spiders. I got up to 'use the facilities' at 4 a.m., took my flashlight and discovered a black scorpion on the bathroom floor. There was no way I was going to be a courageous naturalist and capture him and toss him out the window. So I scurried out of there, grabbed my shoe and smashed him. Then I carefully checked my bed and went back to sleep,

albeit a little creeped-out.

I discovered the next morning that those scorpions are not dangerously poisonous. But if you're stung by them, it is like an extremely nasty bee sting.

I am just glad I didn't have the chance to find out.

This was our final day in Colombia, but our flight didn't depart until after midnight. So we had the whole day to continue on our adventure.

On our journey back to Bogota, we stopped in a beautiful town that featured many shops selling the crafts of local artisans. We enjoyed lunch in a café that – like many restaurants in Colombia – had an open air courtyard dining area.

Throughout the countryside, I was amazed by the number of cows that were tethered at the side of the road, taking advantage of the grazing available there. As we continued along our journey, we realized it was after milking time as there were many farmers at the roadside on their horse carts containing milk cans, waiting for the milk truck to arrive.

We also passed through an area where it seemed that everyone made bricks. The hillside was covered with clay baking huts where the people made bricks by molding them by hand and then firing them in small batches. That afternoon, the smoke hung heavily over that hillside and you wondered about the health of the people in the area.

Incidentally, Carmen Elisa's country home was built with all local materials including local handmade bricks.

And so ends our Colombian adventure.

I have had a few people to refer to our adventure as a 'mission.' But our adventure was far from what I consider a true mission.

I am amazed by the number of truly giving people in the Flamborough area who do go on true missions – spending weeks in far-away places building schools or churches.

On our adventure, I met so many wonderful people, visited interesting places and learned something about a country I previously knew nothing about. And yes, we made a difference in some peoples lives too!

Everyone was so friendly, welcoming Natacha and I like we too were family. They have all invited us to come back and stay with them anytime. So I suppose all we really need to do is think about that next time!

I must also take a moment to thank all of the wonderful people here in Flamborough who so selflessly donated the items we took with us. Your generosity was so much appreciated by the children and young ladies there.

One more thought about Colombia. When I first said I was going there, I had many



It was a journey back to her roots for Blanca Peña's daughter Paola Asselstine, who was joined by her husband Brad (left) and his brother Bill (right). Paola and Brad brought along daughters Sydney and Samantha.

friends expressing concern about our safety. Colombia certainly has had its fair share of bad press. 30 years ago, it was epicenter of cocaine trafficking and the violence of its drug lords is legendary.

Times have changed and so has Colombia.

Like any country where there is a large amount of poverty, there are always problems with theft. Cali is a huge example of this disparity of the classes.

The apartment complex we stayed in was absolutely beautiful. But it was in a fully fenced and locked compound along with a couple of very friendly guards who incidentally carried guns.

The current president of Colombia, Alvare Uribe Velez, is working hard to make his country a place that is safe for everyone. So you do see a large police and army presence. You could tell by their body language that they were at ease in their jobs, but nonetheless, they were there.

Our hosts didn't want us going for unescorted walks, to keep our camera close and generally be aware of people around us. Basically, to not make ourselves targets.

I found that to be a bit difficult as I stand – on the average – about six inches taller than most Colombians. A big blonde Caucasian chick trying to not be noticed. At the best of times, I find it impossible to do that here, let alone in Colombia!

I actually got used to people staring at myself and Natacha. Here, if you catch someone staring, they generally look away. But especially the children in Colombia would just continue to stare. If you smiled at them, they would

smile back shyly and perhaps look away to only look back when they thought you were now looking elsewhere.

As for 'the danger,' I realize that something could have 'happened' while we were there. But it didn't and Natacha and I never felt in any danger.

How could we be?

We were surrounded by all of our new friends!

For further information about Soroptimist International please visit the following internet web sites:

Soroptimist International of the Americas: www.soroptimist.org; Soroptimist International of Eastern Canada Region: www.ecsoroptimist.org; Soroptimist International of Dundas/Ancaster/ Flamborough: www.soroptimistdaf.ca.



Joan German (left) and Danielle Fenn of Weeks Home Hardware in Waterdown model the necklaces made by the pregnant teens at the Cermujer home in Cali, Columbia. They are available at Weeks for only a \$10 donation with all proceeds channeled back to Cermujer, helping new moms as they return to their homes. Sales on the first lot have been brisk but Sandy Gray has ordered more.