

Juntos Newsletter September 2015

A Montreal visitor teaches English and a remarkable woman, Martha Ponce de Leon.

On March 2, 2014, Soryl Rosenberg and her daughter Cathy, gave a lively and memorable English class. They brought many props to get the children to talk and used them all. The children who participated, around twelve in all, learned numbers with cards with sums, played ball, skipped rope, and more. Soryl brought along a map of the world which she left to be put up in the room.

This initiative was greatly appreciated. All friends of Juntos are invited to visit the sites and enrich the lives of the children and adults. It is clear that the children that played are not fluent English speakers now, but they are open to new ideas and new languages, and have had a very positive learning experience.



Soryl teaching English.



Martha Ponce de Leon is used to being interviewed and to write this newsletter, I relied heavily on a 2014 interview by Susabi Arellanes. Although Martha gave me details that differed from the previous interview, the main lines are very similar. Martha, born in Puebla, is and was a rural mid-wife in the Cuernavaca area. Today she is the *ayudante*, the mayor, of Lomas de Juitepec, where Juntos has been active for over one year. She

was the person who lobbied to get the Juntos teachers since she has known lead teacher Lilia and her brother, tech genius Oscar, all their lives.



Martha checking the architect's plans for new rooms on the third floor.

Martha insisted that they come to Lomas de Juitepec. Here was an opportunity for yet another improvement and she was relentless. The internet, she explained with great animation, is the future, and if the children in her neighborhood don't learn how to use computers, they will be left behind. For someone born in 1953 with a grade three education, she understands perfectly what Juntos is trying to do and supports the project wholeheartedly. She insisted that her personal thanks, on behalf of the people of Lomas de Juitepec, should be included in this newsletter.



Welcome sign in the computer classroom

As *ayudante*, Martha has a myriad of plans and enough energy to carry them all out. Her work is mostly done in one building which is called the *ayudatía* and where the Juntos classes and many other activities take place. On the day we visited Lomas de Juitepec, there was a huge pile of bricks in front of the house and inside there were two sets of workers. On the ground floor the bricks were almost complete for the new cistern. They already had a cistern, but the new one would have three times the capacity of the old one and the water would be excellent.



Welcome sign

Space where new cistern will go →



Cistern that will be replaced

In addition, the top floor was being prepared for a classroom. Martha, a true autodidact, is a very big promoter of education. Since her jurisdiction does not have a *preparatoria*, a high school, she is organizing retired teachers to come and teach. She repeated several times that although she did not have much formal education, it is crucial that the young people in the neighborhood get one. Their future welfare and their future jobs depend on their level of education. In addition, several other courses are already being offered. Chess was a big success, because, as she said, it promoted thinking and kept the youngsters away from silly television programs and playing on their cell phones.

Since not everyone is able to go on to the secondary level, a carpentry workshop, complete with equipment, has already been approved and will be up and running when the building is completed. She then added that she was also working on a literacy program because there are still adults in the neighborhood that need to learn how to read and write in order to live with more dignity.

Martha explained that Juitepec, is not part of the city of Cuernavaca, but an adjacent city. Juitepec has about 150 local mayors, *ayudantes*. One person, called the *president municipal* or municipal president oversees them. At present the very first woman municipal president has been elected. *Ayudantes* are an elected, renewable, three year position. Martha feels that the previous *ayudantes* were very self-interested and had not done enough for the neighborhood. To date she has been able to have all the streets paved. Previous *ayudantes*, she explained, had only paved the street they lived on.

The local grade school is another cause for concern. Martha feels it is too small, each class has over 30 children, sometimes even 40, and the space is cramped. Right now the same building still houses two schools, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon and Martha insists that they have to build a better school and they must move to the 8AM to 5PM schedule. This would allow parents to go to work without having to be home in the middle of the day to either take or pick up their children. Her words in Spanish were "*Luchar por una escuela digna*," "*(We have to) fight for a school with dignity*."

Martha told me she has 13 children, although the number was smaller in the previous interview. Nevertheless, it is clear there are many. Two daughters and their families live in Iowa and two sons with their respective families, live in Pennsylvania. Most of the others are in Cuernavaca. Several years ago, because of her midwifery work, she was invited to a conference in Oregon and at that time her children in the United States invited her to visit. She was happy to have visited them since they have been gone for over twenty years, yet she underlined the fact that they would not have left Cuernavaca had they found work. She is very well informed and cited the names of the Mexican states that had the greatest number of people leaving for the United States. She also talked about the state where the petroleum industry is, Tabasco, and said that there were no Mexicans that had to leave the area because there was work for everyone there.

One of her daughters, Martha Elena, was present throughout the interview and was busy helping her mother. Her two children were attending the Juntos computer class and during those hours, she printed out forms, stamped, collated and had her mother sign various documents. She is very satisfied with the Juntos classes and feels her children are very comfortable using the computer now. She especially likes how they can find images on the web and then paste them into their homework. Martha Elena is a

nurse, although right now she is a stay-at-home mother and her mother's personal assistant. Her mother, she said, had about 30 grandchildren, one great-grandchild and another on the way.



Martha (Senior) described her work as a midwife at length, getting up in the middle of the night, helping mothers bring their children into the world. She was poetic in her description, hands out, ready to catch the newborn infant. Although she had been present at many births, the ones that stuck in her mind were the difficult ones, the baby whose legs appeared first, the child born with only one leg, a hermaphrodite infant. And she seems to have kept up with many of the babies she brought into the world, the boy born with only one leg is now a teen-ager who plays soccer and walks well with his prosthetic limb.

It is clear that Juntos is very lucky to have people like Martha in place, people who seek out the program, lobby for the computers to be brought into their neighborhood, and understand the value of computer literacy. Although there are probably not that many Martha's among the 150 *ayudantes* there are quite a few others who have sent formal written requests to have the Juntos computer programs implemented in their neighborhood. With so many requests in hand, the difficulty becomes trying to decide which ones to fund. The word is out, the Juntos computer program is excellent.

And Martha must have the last word. Her personal motto is *Ver y haber servido. To see and to have served.*

Some additional photographs of the Lomas de Juítepec *ayudantía*.



Third floor rooms just being built with a beautiful view of Cuernavaca.



Last but certainly not least, Soryl and Claudia in front of the Ayudantía Municipal Lomas de Juitepec.