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Metro's Cesar Guzman Volunteers Help for El Salvador Town

- Growing up in poverty, he has helped build homes, schools in his home town

By JIMMY STROUP



Metro Bus Operator Cesar Guzman works on poverty relief projects in his native El Salvador. Photo by Jimmy Stroup.

(Sept. 27, 2007) When Cesar Guzman was a child in San Sebastian, El Salvador, the fair came to his little village. There were rides, food and midway games.

Or, at least, that's what he could see from down the street; Guzman was far too poor to afford a ticket to the fair. He didn't even have shoes.

Like most of San Sebastian's residents, Guzman – now an operator at Arthur Winston Division 5 – grew up in what most Americans would consider abject poverty. The 11,000 people who live in the town are generally subsistence farmers, eking out a meager existence. His family had enough to eat, but his parents couldn't pay for anything extra.

San Sebastian is in the Department of San Vicente – similar to an American state – which is in the mountainous interior of El Salvador. Thirty-five percent of the country's population lives below the poverty line and most of San Sebastian fits into this category. When Guzman, 41, grew up there in the 1970s, things were even worse than they are now.

He remembered that as a young boy, his older sister did laundry for three months to earn enough money to buy him some rubber shoes and a pen, so he could learn to write.

At 15, Guzman was considered "big enough to hold a rifle" by the El Salvadorian Army and was pressed into an obligatory two-year service that ended up lasting three. In that time, he was sent to train and serve in various places – including the U.S. – that broadened the teenager's perspectives.

"They paid me \$10 a month, most of which went to my parents," he said. "They needed it more than me."

Bound for America

At 18 and out of the Army, Guzman got a job in the American consulate in El Salvador as a bodyguard. During this time he decided to try for a life in America. Three years later, at 21, he made it to the U.S., hopeful for the future. That was in 1988.

After some early struggles and long days spent working and learning English, Guzman has realized the best that America can offer to those seeking a better life. He joined Metro in 2000 and has settled into a long-term career. He's married with two daughters and was awarded American citizenship in February.

By all accounts, his life is filled with accomplishment.

In 2001, though, following a devastating earthquake in El Salvador, Guzman helped start the El Comité de Batanecos: a non-profit organization that raises money to build schools, homes and general community improvements in his old hometown.

"For the last six years, since the earthquake hit El Salvador, I got involved in helping people work to rebuild their houses, supply schools with computers or whatever they need to get a good education," he said.

The charitable work is now one of three parts of Guzman's life: family, driving for Metro and El Salvadorian relief efforts. He travels to Central America at least three times a year (sometimes with his family and sometimes alone) to help build a house, donate clothes and toys to children, or any number of other tasks.

'Lucky to be going to school at all'

His efforts have seen 12 homes built, two schools, the donation of 20 computers to local schools and the construction of a short-wave radio station, which should be on-line in a few weeks.

"When these kids get to high school – if they're lucky enough to be going to school at all – they

El Comité de Batanecos is online at www.machacal.com, with pictures of San Sebastian, the school they built and the people who live there.



Guzman's El Comité de Batanecos built Instituto Nacional de San Sebastian, the local school for the region's children. Schools in the region

don't have the skills, the computer skills, to be able to compete in the bigger cities for jobs that pay even the leanest of wages," he said. "We're trying to fix that."

haven't had money for – or even electricity to run – computers, so Guzman found money to fix those problems. He hopes the 20 computers his group has donated will help make San Sebastian's children more competitive in the job markets in bigger cities.

Guzman's El Komite de Batanecos, named after the regional nickname for the residents of San Sebastian, has partnered with the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) to stretch the donated dollars' use in El Salvador.

"With our partnership with PADF, they give us a two to one deal. If something costs \$21,000, we only have to come up with \$7,000," he said. "It's an arm of the United Nations; they've created these foundations to help the poor around the world."

His efforts in the U.S. are spent mostly spreading the word about what his organization does in order to raise funds. His group regularly holds dinners to raise money, selling traditional El Salvadorian meals (called pupusas) to help the cause. They also host biannual dances at local churches.

Healthcare, too

The money is spent on structures and things like clothes, but also on healthcare. Guzman solicits doctors to accompany him to his village to give much-needed medical attention to the people. He's recently brokered a deal that will allow his group to buy 500 hearing aids at \$35 each; the devices normally cost as much as \$400.

His efforts also give the townspeople work – his group hires San Sebastian locals to build the structures the community benefits from.

"It's all volunteer in the U.S., but in El Salvador, we pay the townspeople for the work they're doing to improve the community," he said, noting that this charitable model improves the local economy, too, however slightly.

Though he has obvious sentiment for his hometown, he has special concerns that drive him to help San Sebastian, too. Two of his five sisters still live there, in poverty like most of the town.

Working on a toy drive

Guzman is currently working on a toy drive for Christmas. He's trying to fill a shipping container with enough toys to help make this Christmas a special one for the kids who he said have little or nothing to look forward to for the holidays.

"The kids don't even have enough money to buy clothes. They jump around when we bring them the toys, they are so happy," he said. "We take [toys] up to the poorest mountain areas of San Vicente where they have nothing. You can see the smiles on their faces from the joy they get out of a \$1 ball."

Guzman is traveling to El Salvador in a few weeks to christen the short-wave radio station and then again at the end of November for the Christmas delivery. The goods will be shipped in containers from Los Angeles with the help of the El Salvadorian consulate and a reduced price from a shipping agency.

Guzman has done much to help the people of his old hometown, but the

memory of the fair he was too poor to attend has stuck with him.

A few year ago, without fundraising and on his own, Guzman contracted with an entertainment company to hold a fair for a day in San Sebastian – free to everyone.

“It was a very special moment for me,” he said. “Something that I will hold on to for the rest of my life.”

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