

An Opportunity to Serve— Our Guatemala Journey

The experience of traveling to Guatemala to help a community build a school is one these school business professionals will never forget.

By Cindy Reilmann, CPA, SFO, and Tamara Mitchell



COURTESY OF LIFETOUCH

Members of Lifetouch's 2023 Memory Mission trip to Guatemala to help a community build a bottle school.

Neither one of us knew that day in September that our lives would be forever changed. We were offered an opportunity of a lifetime that would change us for the better: an opportunity to volunteer, to give back, to serve.

In 2022, Jan Haeg, the manager of Give Back Programs for Lifetouch, a company owned by Shutterfly, was given the go-ahead to continue planning Lifetouch's Memory Mission Trips, which had been put on hold during the pandemic. Memory Mission Trips enable

company employees and national education partners to travel worldwide to provide intensive volunteer services to a community.

She has been involved with these trips for the past 20 years, traveling to such places as Kosovo, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and New Orleans. Now she had her sights on Guatemala.

After extensive research, Haeg found a not-for-profit in Guatemala called Hug It Forward. Hug It Forward is a multicultural organization operating at the grassroots

level in Latin America, with an emphasis in Guatemala. The group works with local communities and various groups to construct bottle classrooms using eco-bricks stuffed with inorganic trash. Entire communities come together to build a more environmentally responsible educational space for students.

Lifetouch became an Affinity Partner with the Association of School Business Officials International in 2022. We were lucky enough to be invited to participate in the January 2023 Lifetouch Memory Mission Trip to Guatemala.

Here we all were, most of us strangers, many of us nervous, all united for a common mission: service to a community that we knew very little about.

We had a couple of introductory Zoom meetings to learn about the work from representatives from the companies and meet other volunteers. We discussed itinerary, packing list, and expectations. On January 18, the group of nearly 40 Lifetouch Memory Mission volunteers left their respective home cities and met in Houston, Texas.

Although we were arriving at different times because we were traveling from various cities across the U.S. and Canada, Jan Haeg waited in the hotel lobby to greet us all with a smile and hug. That was one of many hugs to come over the next seven days.

The energy in the room that first night at dinner was incredible! Here we all were, most of us strangers, many of us nervous, all united for a common mission: service to a community that we knew very little about.

The following morning, we were off to Guatemala City. After clearing immigration and grabbing our luggage, we all headed out of the airport and were greeted by staff from Hug It Forward, Inc. We loaded up into two separate buses for the nearly three-hour trek through rush hour traffic to our hotel in Tecpan.

That first evening in Guatemala included an activity in which we told our personal story through magazine pictures, and what a great opportunity it was to get to know the other volunteers and help us get prepared for our coming work in the community.

Arriving to the Agua Escondida school site was unlike anything we could have imagined. The community was so excited to have us there and welcomed us with a

ceremony that included traditional dances. The smiles and friendliness of the children, their families, and the school staff were so heartwarming.

Our group of volunteers, most of us who looked nothing like the community and most of us not able to speak their language, were accepted and welcomed with open arms. Our cultural differences, the language barrier—none of that mattered. We were all there for a common purpose.

Here are our personal reflections on our journey and its impact.

Cindy's Reflection:

I was compelled to participate in the Lifetouch Memory Mission Trip because my family sponsors a child from Guatemala through Compassion International. I knew it wasn't an opportunity to see Hancer, our child, but it was an opportunity to see where he is from and to make a difference in his country.

When I found out that I would be a part of the group of educators going to Guatemala, I was overjoyed for the opportunity. But I really had no idea the impact this experience would have on my life going forward.

I could write countless pages about my experience and include many of the reflections that I wrote in my journal, but I will share the highlights here.

We arrived in Guatemala, were greeted by the Hug It Forward representatives, then traveled to the hotel in Tecpan where we would be staying. Upon arriving in the community of Agua Escondida, where the school we would be building is located, 40 volunteers representing a variety of educational associations jumped in and began working with the local foreman to learn what we were there to do: work with the local community to build an environmentally responsible schoolhouse made from bottles filled with inorganic trash.

Together, we learned how to tie the bottles together to create the walls of the three-classroom building we were there to build. We sorted more than 10,000 bottles that the community had already prepared for us and partnered up to tie them together. Our work continued onsite for three days.

In addition to working, we also took time for some cultural education opportunities, including learning about the 36-year civil war within Guatemala and the migration challenges of its people, visiting Mayan ruins, participating in opening and closing ceremonies with the school staff, and eating some amazing traditional Mayan cooking.

Although these were enlightening and educational aspects of the trip and the community, the most amazing of it all was the students! Yes, those of us in education say it is about the students, but this volunteer opportunity brought those words to life!



Cindy Reilmann with one of the students, “making everlasting connections.”

Every day we were onsite working, the students were right there with us. They weren’t in school yet, as their school year runs from February to November. Most of them were gathering bottles; some were jumping in and taking over the work. They were so invested in the construction of their own school even on a Saturday. It was powerful to see.

Lifetouch representatives took photos of the students during the mission. Picture Day is something we all take for granted, but not these students! We had the opportunity to give students the photos of themselves on the last day. Their smiles filled our hearts with joy!

Although I could go on and on, I will leave you with these few takeaways from the experience:

1. Serving and giving back as a volunteer is one of the most rewarding experiences you will ever have.
2. Helping build a sustainable, eco-friendly school for students who are eager and willing to learn and work right there beside you is indescribable.
3. Making connections with students through work, play, or pictures is everlasting!

Tamara’s Reflection

Of all of the articles I have written for publication, this has definitely been the most difficult. In the spirit of vulnerability and transparency, putting these words onto paper is both emotional and intimidating. Emotional because that is exactly what the entire experience was, and intimidating because I want to be sure that I give the experience and the beautiful people in the community we served the honor that both deserve.

At first, I didn’t think the opportunity was for me. However, within minutes of receiving the invitation, I had a nagging curiosity and began to ask for more



Tamara Mitchell says she left the community with more than she gave.

details. After some back and forth with the Lifetouch staff and after watching the videos of past missions, I was ready to go. I had no idea what a bottle school was at the time, but I wanted to be part of building one.

I spent the next few months researching all I could about Guatemala: the rich history of the country, its large indigenous Mayan population, the civil war that ravaged the country, as well as other important details like “can you flush toilet paper in Guatemala.” (For all those who are curious, no, you cannot flush toilet paper in Guatemala). In addition to the independent research that I did, there was also a wealth of information provided by Lifetouch and Hug It Forward, Inc.

To say that the volunteers were well prepared for the journey is an understatement. The virtual meetings, detailed emails and a volunteer guide that even included a packing list of items to bring all helped to lessen my anxiety about the unknown so I was very grateful for each step along the way.

In addition to our work at the school site, the community visit and community talks were a highlight. To have that kind of access to the community is something that I will never forget. We were able to visit the community where the students live, were invited into homes, and for some of us, had an opportunity to try our hand

at tortilla-making. I believe that being invited into someone's home is an intimate experience to be respected and treasured, and as such, I will always hold those memories in my heart.

As for the community talks, we were honored to hear from a gentleman who shared his experience in living through the civil war and another gentleman who shared his story of migrating to the United States to secure a better future for his family. Both stories were moving and fascinating, and definitely gave the volunteers a glimpse into what drives people to make decisions that we may not have the capacity to understand.

I've been trying to find one word to sum up the 2023 Lifetouch Memory Mission and honestly, there isn't just one. Words that come to mind are:

- Gratitude — for the rich experiences, memories, and friendships that I have made.
- Hope — in humanity. Through service to others, we can all make the world a little better for not only our generation, but for generations to come.
- Ignite — seeing perseverance embodied has a way of changing you. That is what I saw in the people of Guatemala.

I will conclude with the memory that has left the biggest imprint on my heart and mind.

It was our last day at the construction site, which turned out to be an emotional day for all of us because we were saying goodbye to this community, to the children, to the project, and that made us sad.

As we were driving back toward our hotel, families were lined along the roadside waving goodbye to our buses. I had done a pretty good job of not crying too much that day, but I absolutely lost it when I saw that. Another volunteer who was sitting next to me, a new friend, put her hand on my arm and that touch said it all. To see those families smiling at us, waving goodbye, grateful that we came to help them, and having them graciously welcome us into their community and their homes the impact we made is hard for me to sum up.

Yes, there's a building that will be there for decades that the 2023 Lifetouch Memory Mission team had a



Cindy Reilmann and Tamara Mitchell stand in front of one of the colorful bottle walls.

hand in completing, but I can guarantee that most of us walked away from the experience with more than we could have possibly left at that construction site.

Cindy and I would be happy to share more about our Lifetouch Memory Mission 2023. We encourage you to apply for the 2024 trip.

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ARE YOU READY TO VOLUNTEER AND MAKE MEMORIES?

ASBO members are invited to apply for the 2024 Memory Mission to Guatemala, January 17-24. Volunteers will have the opportunity to build another bottle school with Hug It Forward. The application deadline is September 8, 2023. Apply at <https://lifetouchmemorymission.com/application/>.

If you are Interested in learning more, watch this 4-minute highlight video from the 2023 Memory Mission: <https://lifetouchmemorymission.com/video/>.