

PROJECTS - Repair the Casa de Costura building in 2013

In 2013 TSTSCA helped update the Olympia-to-Nicaragua Construction Brigade's 1988 building project for the Casa de Costura in Santo Tomás:

For 25 years the Thurston-Santo Tomás Sister County Association (TSTSCA), a local non-profit organization, has maintained a productive and mutually respectful people-to-people relationship with Tomás, an agricultural town in the Chontales area of Nicaragua, especially with a local entity there, whose name translates to the "Committee for Community Development." Before TSTSCA got substantively underway, the Olympia-to-Nicaragua Construction Brigade (for which Jean Eberhardt' was an instigator) went there and built a structure where a women's sewing cooperative could generate income for low-income women and serve the larger community. That building has served the community well, but heavy use and the tropical climate have created the need for significant repairs, including electrical, plumbing, windows and casings, and a new roof.

TSTSCA's sister organization there is a different community group with more wide-ranging activities, as mentioned at www.oly-wa.us/tstsca. Our sister city organization in Santo Tomás requested our support to raise funds to make critical repairs to the Women's Sewing Co-op building in order to continue to provide this safe space for women. In 2013 TSTSCA agreed to help and needs to raise \$8,000 to pay for these necessary building repairs, so in the fall of 2013 TSTSCA launched a fundraising campaign to meet those needs.

This building has a long-standing connection with our two communities. For many women, the Sewing Co-op and School was the first place where they could gather, talk and find commonalities in their lives, while learning a marketable skill.

As mentioned above, in 1988 a crew of volunteers from Olympia raised funds and traveled to Santo Tomás to build the Women's Sewing Co-op and School. This was while the Reagan Administration was illegally funding the *contras* who were committing acts of terrorism against people who supported Nicaragua's government, in which the Sandinista party - which had overthrown the brutal US-backed dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza - was vigorously organizing efforts for literacy, public health, and other social needs. Members of the Olympia to Nicaragua Construction Brigade worked side-by-side with the people of Santo Tomás to create this building, the Casa de Costura. In 2013 our sister organization, the Committee for Community Development (the Spanish words are abbreviated as the CDC), acquired the title to the property and has elected to broaden the scope of services being offered to create a community center for women in addition to the Sewing School. Original members of the Sewing Cooperative are helping to make this transition.

TSTSCA member Patty Otero was part of the Spring Quarter 2013 delegation from The Evergreen State College. She spent spring quarter working at the Sewing Co-op. "My time at the Casa de Costura was spent working around fun and empowering women taking advantage of an irreplaceable resource in Santo Tomás. The Sewing School provides the opportunity to learn a skill that could bring in extra income and a community that supports women and understands the challenges they face."

Safety for the women working in the building is of primary importance. Sewing Co-ops are one way to make the garment industry fair. Most clothing in the world is made in sweatshops. Some of the buildings that house these sweatshops have collapsed or burned, each incident killing hundreds of workers, mostly women and children. Supporting this grassroots economic development project in Santo Tomás is one way to improve the working conditions for a small group of garment makers.

In the decades prior to the Nicaraguan revolution, opportunities for women were virtually non-existent. Lack of opportunities for education or to develop job skills combined with domestic violence drove many women to the streets to support themselves and their families. The Sewing Co-op and School provided the first real gathering place where women shared their stories and learned they were not alone. This support helps women find the strength to take action on behalf of themselves and their children.