

## **Educating a Village:**

*It didn't start out that way, but that's how it ended up.*

Los Ricos de Abajo, Guanajuato, México

By Dianne Walta Hart

### ***A Man in a Truck***

It began in 2004 when a man, a narrow-brimmed straw hat placed over his head so low that his eyes barely peeked out, pulled his battered truck to a stop on a dusty rural road in Central Mexico.

He rolled down the window on the passenger side and, in his piecemeal Spanish, asked a woman on the road if she wanted a ride. He had lived in Mexico long enough to know that he was breaking all sorts of rules, first by offering a ride to a woman he didn't know, and then even if he *did* know her, putting her in a situation where she'd be alone in a car with a man who wasn't a family member. He also knew that women would never – should never – accept rides from strangers. Still, something about this short, almost middle-aged woman, looking a bit too professionally dressed for someone on a remote road, compelled him to stop. What the hell, he thought. The afternoon was as hot as Hades, and if she doesn't want a ride, she can always say no.

Even though this woman was alone on the road, she was not a country woman, and she said yes. Why not, she thought, it's been a long hot day. What's more, he didn't look like a tough guy and, she smiled to herself, if he became a problem, she always had that machete in her big bag. She made this walk every day and dealt with packs of wild dogs, high river water, and an occasional drunk. She was a championship runner, too, faster than anyone

who might think of chasing her. A gringo in a battered truck didn't scare her.

So she got in.

In Spanish, he asked where she was going.

She kept her answer to a minimum: to the highway to catch the bus to San Miguel.

As the truck bumped down the road, he told her that he was on his way to San Miguel.

I can take you all the way. Too hot to stand out there and wait for the bus. Where are you coming from?

Los Ricos, she said.

He had heard of the rancho, but in all the years he had been going to his nearby weekend home, he had never made that sharp turn to the left that would take him to it, past the monastery and across the Río Laja and up the hill. Funny name, Los Ricos de Abajo. The Rich from Below. Tiny spot. On a hill. Should be the Poor from Above.

I teach school there, she added. Naciones Unidas, an elementary school.

A teacher. It figures, he thought, as he glanced at her again, the way she's dressed and all. He asked her to tell him about the rancho he had never seen.

Her answers lengthened as she talked about the other two teachers, how they managed three classrooms full of students in grades 1-6, the community's poverty, the odds against its residents, the price of being so far from the rest of the world, and how difficult it was to cross the river in the rainy season.

You been there long?

Fifteen years. Since the school opened.

Fifteen years? He pushed his hat back a bit, dropped his sunglasses down on his nose, and surprised himself when he said he'd like to see the school, see that little rancho.

She must have laughed. Los Ricos didn't exactly have lots of visitors.

Then he added, continuing to sound incredulous: Fifteen years you've been walking to the school?

Yes.

They continued to talk as he drove her to San Miguel de Allende. She thought he had an odd accent and a sleepy way of talking. He appreciated her wonderfully precise Spanish, so good he could actually understand much of it.

He asked who built the school. He knew that no school district was taking care of these tiny ranchos.

People in the community. The priests in the monastery helped us with funds, too.

After students finish at that school, where do they go?

Atotonilco. It has a junior high school and a senior high school.

Another long walk, he said.

She told him that everywhere is a long walk from Los Ricos de Abajo.

He had an idea and decided to mention it. Why not? The ride had been full of surprises. There's a program I volunteer with. Feed the Hungry. They feed kids, lots of them. Maybe I can get them to do something with your school. He turned to look at her as if he were asking a question.

She smiled and nodded. She thought maybe something could happen. Just maybe. Foreigners had a way of getting things done. Sometimes. Always seemed to have so much money. But she also knew that they made a lot of promises they couldn't – or wouldn't – keep once they realized how difficult change was in Mexico. Even though she felt safe in the truck, who really knew what *tipo de hombre* this man was. A man who kept his word? She didn't know.

As he slowed down in front of her house, he told her his name was Bob Haas.

I'm Lucha, she answered. Luz María Jiménez Rodríguez.

Months later, when both Bob and Lucha had forgotten each others' names but still remembered the promise, volunteers from Feed the Hungry San Miguel (FTH) showed up at Lucha's school in Los Ricos de Abajo. The school was small for FTH guidelines, but

when they saw it, they knew Bob Haas was right: difficult to reach for sure, desperately poor, and what's more, it had a good school director. They talked to Lucha about feeding the children. That's what we do, they said, and we've been doing it since 1984, and now we feed 4,000 children every school day.

Lucha nodded.

That's all it took for FTH to clear the way with local officials and arrange for funds donated by the Michael Chadwick family of California to be directed to the school.

The school consisted of a couple of buildings surrounded by a patio, a concrete court with basketball hoops (without nets), and a rudimentary dusty playground, all surrounded by a fence. Bob rounded up his crew (along with a pal named Andy Swann) and they designed a kitchen that would be attached to the main building, and farther away, a latrine. The two showed up every Friday to check in with the workers and to dole out payroll and materials money.

In January 2005, Feed the Hungry began serving meals to the school children in Los Ricos de Abajo. Good to his word, Bob Haas saw to it that Lucha got her kitchen.

That's what happens when I offer rides to women, he'd laughed when he'd tell the story.

Lucha would laugh, too, when she'd talk about the hot long day she broke the country rules by getting into the truck of a funny-sounding stranger in a straw hat. She'd always add that now she knew what *tipo de hombre* he was.

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## ***The Memory of an English Father***

The next year, Michael Chadwick and his family visited Mexico and saw in person the Feed the Hungry kitchen at Los Ricos de Abajo that their funds had financed, the cook who was hired, the food that was purchased, and the latrine that was built.

The Chadwicks wondered if they could do even more for the remote, poor, but proud community, to improve the villagers' chances in the world. Feeding the children just didn't seem to be enough. Not in a place like Los Ricos de Abajo. What if they focused their efforts and stepped up the assistance, to see what changes could occur?

In response, FTH made the decision to teach English and started classes in January of 2007, two years after the kitchen had opened.

A challenge for the volunteers – and oddly, part of the allure – was just getting to Los Ricos, as Lucha told Bob Haas. High on a desert plateau about a half hour from San Miguel, the road is ragged and rutted, washed away by rain, causing many SUV drivers to fear their cars would be forever hung up. In fact, many a volunteer driver threatened to never, ever make the drive again.

After a good rain storm – which fortunately doesn't happen every winter – the teachers and residents have to reach the community by fording the Río Laja in their trucks or SUVs. When the rain makes even that impossible, the teachers park at the monastery and cross the roaring river by walking across a narrow rope and plank pedestrian bridge. Once safely on the other side, they walk the rest of the way, through an empty intersection that serves as downtown, and up a steep rocky hill to the school.

Los Ricos is tiny, even by Mexican rancho standards; nothing more than 350 people in 50 houses that spread out over the hillside. People leave their doors unlocked, roosters crow, plaintive radio music fills a narrow street, laundry flaps in the breeze, and the present century is years away.

At first the community looked stunningly poor to the teachers – silent, dusty, and pastoral. But they soon learned that no rancho is as peaceful as it looks. The quietness doesn't mean the village is without trouble: alcoholism, jealousy, abuse, and domestic violence play a role in many of the families. In addition, there's a long-standing grudge between familial groups; a Mexican version of the Hatfield-McCoy feud. In theory, an elected official resolves problems when necessary, but it doesn't always work like that, especially with the stand-off between the opposing groups.

It was also obvious at first glance that the residents must have had to develop a special relationship with the land, since much of it is merely rock with a few spots of grubby gray soil and dusty paths thrown in. A few dust-covered bushes and an occasional mesquite tree.

The teachers wondered, how do the people survive on land others wouldn't even want? By working in the nearby cornfields, making tortillas, toiling in the brick factory, working in construction or in nearby resorts, or going to San Miguel to clean houses – that's how. Some headed toward the U.S. and came back with enough dollars to build a home, but, according to Lucha, only 10 percent of the parents are gone at any one time. Mainly, for the people in Los Ricos, it was a plot of land, shelter, and home.

Classes began. Teaching techniques were enthusiastically embraced, then quickly abandoned. Mission statements reworded, then modified again. A curriculum was set up and then changed. Textbooks purchased but then the vocabulary of fax machines and telephones and elevators made their use impractical.

The realities sank in: unreliable electricity, two grade levels in each of the three small classrooms, not enough Spanish, too much Spanish, broken windows, cold windy days when mothers kept children home followed by hot suffocating ones, undiagnosed learning problems, wayward eyes, swollen gums, and unexpected complications that popped up every week.

Still, the classes went on. Teachers fell in love with one student or another or with all of them. The children eagerly yelled “Hi” or “Hello” or clamored to sing the Hokey Pokey. Their excitement at seeing library books almost rattled the school building; having a chance to eat an orange sent them into a near riot. Some students worried teachers because they understood so little or were so poorly dressed or seemed so sad; others astonished the teachers by catching on to everything said.

Early on, the teachers noticed Ricardo in the sixth grade and his eagerness and intelligence. He was so short that when he wanted to be called on, he’d straddle the bottom rungs of his desk and the one in the aisle opposite in order to be seen. Would he ever be able to let that learning excitement be part of his adult life?

Lucha talked with Ricardo’s father about his son’s being able to continue with school. The odds were against him, because at that time, if there were eight Los Ricos students who finished the sixth grade, only three or four would go on to the seventh grade.

Ricardo was one of many children in the family and there was no money to pay the schools, buy the books, and cover other expenses. Like his brothers before him, he'd work in the fields or learn to be a bricklayer's helper.

Michael Chadwick visited the school and kitchen. He smiled happily through the kitchen tour, watched the students line up to receive their food, and knew he and his family had done a remarkable thing.

Then came the moment he climbed up the concrete steps to the tiny building that housed the fifth and sixth grades and entered the noisy classroom.

It was hard to miss Ricardo: fine featured, dark, thin, oozing energy. Raising his hand, leaping to show the teacher he understood, wanting to take it all in. Michael felt a rush of something he hadn't seen, a memory just imagined over the years.

As he told everyone nearby, his father lived in England and was taken out of school after the third grade to work in a textile factory.

As he continued to watch Ricardo, he wondered what his father, such an intelligent man, could have done with his life had he had more than three years of school.

Well, he said, it's not going to happen to that little boy.

As a result, Ricardo became the first recipient of a Chadwick Family Scholarship, a program that grew to include other promising students in his class as well.

One day, as the volunteer English teachers finished teaching their classes for the year, they started talking about how other students would benefit from scholarships, not just Ricardo and those who showed potential.

One teacher observed that in her experience, you couldn't always tell in the sixth grade who was going to succeed. Some students simply took longer to start taking school seriously.

Another said that there was so much they didn't know about these kids, their lives, their parents, the poverty beyond our imagination, the culture so far from our understanding.

Right there, standing in the dusty parking area at the school, they raised or pledged \$1,500 USD for scholarships. From that moment on, all students who finish the sixth grade at Naciones Unidas in Los Ricos have been offered scholarships to cover fees and expenses - \$200 USD a year for junior high and \$400 for high school students, amounts that are way beyond what most Los Ricos families can pay.

Now all the students who graduate from the sixth grade go to the seventh grade in Atotonilco.

Bob and Lucha's Feed the Hungry kitchen and Michael Chadwick's sorrow about his father had reached farther into the community than anyone had ever expected.

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**Lessons from Rural Mexico:  
Ricardo, Juan, Elsa, Silvia, Yamileth, Ami, Rocío**

The years passed. Feed the Hungry fed the students, taught the villagers about nutrition, and the volunteer English teachers expanded their program.

The village adults asked if they, too, could take classes. Soon the kindergarten teacher asked if his students (ages 3-5) could be included.

Young people from the village who had graduated from the sixth grade long before the English teachers had ever heard of Los Ricos now showed up at the school and asked: could they, as graduates from Naciones Unidas, albeit before the English teachers came, have scholarships so that they, too, could go to high school? Of course. They joined the ranks, older and focused.

The junior and senior high school students made the trek back to the school once a week for additional tutoring.

The school grounds changed, too. Flush toilets (a first for the community), school supplies that made the rooms look like elementary schools in the U.S. or Canada, a room full of librarians and books, a dining room for the kitchen, a school storage area, and a computer center with four laptops hooked up to the Internet. The 21<sup>st</sup> century had crossed the Río Laja.

Grants applied for and received brought in more books, more school supplies, office chairs for the teachers, file cabinets, and even more computers.

And although FTH fed the children on a daily basis, when the English teachers taught the students, the students' mothers fed the teachers: chicken mole, guacamole, pasta, rice, and rajas all rolled up in fresh tortillas.

Wait a minute, one teacher said, they shouldn't be feeding us. But the rest of the teachers knew that the villagers were proud people, and mole was their way of thanking them.

One teacher opened up his home in San Miguel for the students on Saturdays, and he and another instructor gave lessons to one student group after another for hours. The house became a safe house, a bathroom way-station, a place of comfort, and the two teachers became mentors, their lives intertwined with the students' lives for years.

University scholarships followed, as did the rental of an apartment that allowed the female students to live in San Miguel and take early morning classes at their universities.

The teachers learned, too. Rural Mexico meant something different to them now. When they looked out of their car window and watched a farmer leave the highway and walk toward his village, they had some idea of what was waiting for him.

They discovered how to laugh at the unpredictability of events, from finding their students out with shovels trying to fill in the ruts in the road, to the flush toilets not working, to the little boy who simply would not sit down and be quiet, to eating what they began to think was the best mole they've ever had. The teachers were feeling good with the weekly ambiguity and surprises, especially as they saw the students and Lucha shine.

Los Ricos was changing. The level of education in Los Ricos kept rising, passing other small communities, and its people knew what to expect from this army of SUVs that bumped its way up the hill once a week.

Still, there were disappointments. Not everyone continued with their education. When some female students dropped out, they moved in with their boyfriends' parents, the tradition in this part of rural Mexico. Motherhood soon followed and the teachers ended up feeling like grandparents.

After finishing junior high school, several students didn't go to high school, especially the boys, including Ricardo and his best friend, Juan. Getting Los Ricos boys through high school challenged the teachers since it had never happened – no role models at all – but the teachers didn't give up.

Neither did Lucha. She worked at finding out what was going on with Ricardo. It turned out that his father could no longer work, and since Ricardo was the oldest child still living at home, supporting the family fell to him. He spent a year working as a bricklayer's helper in nearby communities. His younger siblings didn't continue their education, either, and instead stayed home to help in the house or work in the fields.

His pal Juan made a half-hearted attempt to sign up for high school but missed registration, and by the time he got around to enquiring, there was no room left for him. He hung around the elementary school where his sister worked as FTH's cook, shyly covering up the additional two teeth that had come in above his regular teeth. At 15, he was short, swift with a soccer ball, and with a personality that drew others in, but always quick to cover his mouth (and his teeth) when his smile was too big, which was

often. He always showed up for classes and the English teachers commented on how determined he was, how good natured he was, and how his English was better than most.

Around the same time, as luck would have it, the dental van from a local charity that works in coordination with FTH, Patronato Pro Niños, rolled up to the school and spent two weeks there, filling cavities and pulling teeth, including the two extra teeth that had so embarrassed Juan.

Somewhere along the way, Ricardo, who had grown up to be a tall, elegant young man, a leader among his peers but shy around adults, decided it was time for him to talk again with his parents. Finally, they said yes, but he'd have to come home with more money than the scholarship offered. After all, they told him, he has four younger siblings and his parents to help support.

The Learning Center (computers and a library) to the rescue. Plans were for it to open in the fall of 2011. But who would staff it? The teachers had long had their eyes on Elsa, an intense older student who had studied computers. But leaving a young woman alone in the center was not viable. Ricardo, her cousin, however, would be a good choice. Double scholarships for the Learning Center managers would make it work for both Elsa and Ricardo.

Juan was at a crossroads, too, and with the teachers and Lucha cheering for him, he went to the high school and signed up in time to be admitted for the fall. He showed his appreciation the best way possible when he came to the year-end party the villagers give for the volunteers. Juan, visibly nervous, gave a thank-you speech in English to his favorite teacher, but all the teachers felt it was directed to them, as well.

Then Ricardo flunked out of school. Back to Square One, or so it seemed, but after spending a few months working in construction, he returned to school.

Juan, handsome smile showing off a normal set of teeth, became the first male student from Naciones Unidas to graduate from high school. The next year Ricardo followed. It hadn't been easy – not for them and not for their English teachers – but they did it.

Ricardo began his criminal legal studies in the fall of 2015 at age 20 with a scholarship from the teachers and the Chadwicks, but after two years, he dropped out. Today he's working in construction and living with his longtime girlfriend in Los Ricos. His pal, Juan, was the chief cook and bottle washer at a popular grill in San Miguel, but now he, too, is working in construction, concentrating on girls and soccer, and lives at home with his parents.

The teachers know that before their arrival, their education would have stopped at the sixth grade. Maybe now, with high school degrees, they'll be the ones *in charge* of construction someday. Or so the teachers hope.

Elsa, the returning student who was the first to run the Learning Center, finished high school, started university classes, but was soon pregnant and moved in with her boyfriend's family in a small community across the highway from Los Ricos. When she told the teachers about the situation, many hugged her and cried, and so did she.

But others forged ahead. A favorite is Silvia. At age five, she worked in a brick factory; that is, until the government found out and forced her family to put her in school. Once Silvia finished the

sixth grade, she was gone, put back to work in the factory, even though she wanted to go to the seventh grade. A few years later the teachers spotted her, now almost grown up with an independent voice of her own. With the teachers' help, she obtained her Mexican ID card. With the teachers' encouragement, she tested out of junior high school. With the teachers' cheering her on, she began preparing to test out of high school.

Yamileth, a beauty with a smile that's forever, is on her way to being a lawyer, a desire nurtured when her brother turned in their father to the police for beating their mother. Yami observed the lawyer who advised her mother through the process and the eventual divorce, and today, inspired by the trauma in her own family, is in her last year of law school.

Ami, daughter of an extraordinarily strong single mother, will be finishing her business degree. Tall, elegant, with a personality to light up the room, her excellent English matches her determination.

Rocío, a soccer star and beauty queen, has her sights set on a degree in tourism and fluency in English and French. She completed her domestic internship in Cancún and now is looking at an internship at Machu Picchu.

Another student is getting her degree in business, two more are preparing to attend a local university, one is obtaining her license to be a masseuse, two have flown in airplanes.

Proud as the teachers are, they know that those students are the exceptions: few Naciones Unidas students become lawyers or business professionals.

The teachers' goals remain modest. Most students finish junior high, but most don't finish high school. The amount of English they learn? Small. But they are learning about other people, other cultures, and they're getting more education than they ever anticipated. The teachers hope that they will find some kind of work other than the back-breaking manual labor and field work that sustained their parents, even though many return to that. Most likely the students will expect their own children to go farther in school than they did, some will continue to love to read, and they'll definitely know more about life on the other side of the river.

Simple acts can bring great consequences: Bob Haas gave Lucha Jiménez Rodríguez a ride, Feed the Hungry built a kitchen, and Michael Chadwick decided to do more for a community and in the process saw a little boy who reminded him of his own father.

That's what it took to educate a village.

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Bob Haas died in 2013.

Lucha is still the school director. Guanajuato's governor presented her with a state award in 2016.

The volunteer English teachers still show up one day a week.

Feed the Hungry San Miguel continues to feed the children in the village.

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