

Wednesday

Wednesday, August 20th took our group to the outskirts of the city. We traveled through narrow streets, harrowing traffic, and then down gravel dirt pot-hole filled roads in a steady downpour. Our Habitat construction supervisor assured us it would stop soon, and it did but not before most of us got soaked.

In this neighborhood, folks live in small homes with cardboard roofs. The walls are cobbled together, the cooking area is under a lean-to roof. Especially in the rain, there was mud and debris everywhere. The families are proud of the homes they have made from next to nothing, just as we are proud of our homes. The Habitat family who would receive this new home had completely lost their home in recent heavy rains. We thought of the recent flooding in Fond du Lac and of one of our group members whose home had barely survived it. She said that even her worst days of flood aftermath were not as bad as this situation. She still had a house, after all.

Our job in the morning was literally digging ditches - a grid of trenches about three feet deep for the home's footings. Our Mexican partners explained that homes built on cement pads without the buried footings are prone to cracking and warping of the walls during tremors which happen once or twice a year in this area. We formed a team, one with a pick loosening the dirt, another shoveling. The deeper we went, the heavier, gummy gray clay we ran into. This was separated into a bucket which the third person dumped the mud into a wheelbarrow and another wheeled it away. One side of the house where we were digging smelled strongly of sewage because the sink and laundry area from the house next door drained gray water into this area. Our shoes were caked thick with clay which made it hard to balance.

After a lunch of sopas and quesadillas, red and green salsa, and guava juice prepared for us by the Habitat families, half of our group kept working in the trenches while the other half moved to a second Habitat home near the first. This house was about 15 ft x 17 ft with 3 rooms and had walls already being constructed. Our group made a bucket brigade, filling them with gravel to spread over the floor of the home before they laid the cement for the floor.

All of us worked hard, and one of the group complemented the students among us in Spanish who were "working like animals!" We learned the hard way from our laughing Mexican companions that this is actually an insult and something you shouldn't say except as a joke among friends. After nearly emptying a dump truck of gravel in one home and making significant progress on the trenches in the other, our group was done for the day.

From the owner of the first house, we learned that she expected it to be completed within 2 weeks. The Habitat staff told us that the recipient families work on their own homes and other homes every day for several weeks. Different from in the U.S., there are not many other Mexicans who volunteer for Habitat so most of the groups that come to work are from other countries or groups of students from universities.

More than the physical labor was the mutual respect and concern we shared with the recipient families. As we were leaving, the families gave us a formal thank you, blessing, and invitation to return anytime to their home.