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Creating a bond with Guatemala

The donor Janet Townsend

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The Gift: Creating the Hearts & Hands Foundation

The Reason: To fund several projects in Guatemala.

In 2001, Janet Townsend went through a painful divorce and wanted to do something different with her life.

"I decided I wanted to go somewhere and make a difference," she recalled.

Ms. Townsend, a retired social worker, had always felt drawn to Central America and Guatemala in particular, where she had studied in school. A few months after her divorce, she headed there with a friend and did some volunteer work. But she wanted to do more and returned home to Canmore, Alta., to come up with a project.

Within six months she created Hearts & Hands, a non-profit organization that brings groups of Canadians to Guatemala to work on programs for a couple of weeks and get to know the country.

"I wanted people to learn about Guatemala by the time they went home and understand the different culture here," she said.

The groups started out building new stoves in Mayan communities but they now work on many other programs, including helping with dental clinics and building schools. Ms. Townsend brings about four groups a year to the country, each made up of about 24 people, and raises roughly \$500,000 annually with help from many supporters, including Rotary International.

"We just completed our first junior high and will start our second one in a couple of months when we raise the money," she said.

The organization has also added classrooms to four elementary schools and has a scholarship program that sponsors 40 children. Ms. Townsend plans to start a new program soon that will bring volunteers from Guatemala and Canada together to work in local communities.

"I really have to pinch myself everyday to realize what it is that we're able to do now and what we are accomplishing," said Ms. Townsend, who divides her time between Guatemala and Canmore.

"It just seems to be growing and growing every year. It's just amazing and a total blessing."

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