

Wednesday,
January 7th, 2009

MIERCOLES MADNESS

After a busy Tuesday, Wednesday was a bit more relaxed. In the morning the students split up into two groups. Liz, Mandie, and Matt had the chance to speak with Carmen, a woman who is involved with the pest management lab in Monte Carmelo. Because Las Lajitas is an organic farm they use various methods of integrated pest management instead of using chemical pesticides. This unique and innovative lab is very advanced considering its location in a small rural town. The lab raises two types of beneficial insects that help to control pest insect populations. Parasitic wasps and green lace wings are predators that help keep the caterpillar populations in check. Unfortunately, the lab right now is not producing these beneficial insects due to an infestation of spider mites which attack the hosts used to grow parasitic wasps and green lace wings.

Mandie discussed the health effects of pesticide use in Monte Carmelo and discovered that pesticide use had led to illness and birth defects within the community. The adverse health effects of pesticides caused the switch from conventional agriculture to an organic approach some 30 years ago.





The rest of the students picked coffee beans or cut maize at Gabriel's or headed up to Las Lajitas to help out on the farm. We were put to work in the brand-new greenhouses. The three new greenhouses, two large and one small, were funded by a government grant and constructed by the cooperative. The Venezuelan farmers with whom we spoke confessed that they built the greenhouses not to keep the heat or the moisture in, as most American farmers do, but rather to keep their crops cooler and to reduce the water intake. Our job was to mix in compost with the soil to increase soil fertility for the cultivation of bell peppers. The compost that we were mixing in the greenhouse came from both regular compost(decomposing coffee shells and animal manure) and vermiculture (the regular compost developed further in a step involving worms). The vermiculture compost was the darker of the two versions, and was obviously packed with nutrients and minerals. The bell peppers and other greenhouse crops would benefit greatly from growing in a nutritious compost foundation, in oppose to the shaley dry soil that originally layered the mountain.

Students at work at Las Lajitas and Monte Carmelo:



Right after lunch we were called to the MonCar building to talk to Gaudy about the women's cooperative. The women's co-op was founded in 1974, without any government support. MonCar was established by the same women who started the *liceo*, or the high school, in Monte Carmelo. The mission of the cooperative is to provide women in the community a feministic system of support, as well as the opportunity to be economically independent.



Sitting outside of the Liceo (High School). MonCar is located beneath the school, down the steps to the left.

After discussing the women's co-op, which makes value added products such as marmalades, jarred fruit and tomato sauce, we went inside to purchase some of their products. We learned how the all-women's cooperative was unique and was also used as an example as a "national success." It empowered this group of women socially (in the community), economically (by being monetarily independent), and provided social unity (where women could gather and share their lives with one another). MonCar is a great example of the Venezuelan sense of community and values and how they intertwine political, social, and economic rights.

We then had a relaxing afternoon where students had time to explore the town, catch up on journaling or take a nap. After dinner the class watched two documentaries on pesticide use in the town of Quibor (nearby Monte Carmelo). High rates of birth defects in the community were linked to the over application of pesticides and herbicides in the fields. The evidence of harm to this community further encourages local farmers to reduce pesticide use or farm organically. The farmers in Quibor, despite the mounting health issues, have not given up pesticide use entirely but they have significantly lowered their chemical application on crops. The story of Quibor contrasts with that of Las Lajitas whose farmers know that they are making a healthy and environmentally responsible decision to farm organically.

Today, we as students also gained a further appreciation for the mission and goals of Las Lajitas. As asked in one of the Quibor documentaries, "If these chemicals kill smaller living things, then what do they do to us?" This prompts us, as a class and as a society, to question the foods that we are putting in our own bodies, as well as the health of those who grow the crops. This emphasizes the importance of knowing where your food comes from and how it was grown because of the severe environmental and health repercussions. We are proud of Las Lajitas and their goal of engaging in sustainable and organic agriculture.