

January 9, 2009
Glenda and Bryn

Another day in Monte Carmelo began early. We split into two groups, one headed to Bojo and the other to visit with the Cuban doctors. Those meeting with the doctors hiked down the hill to El Ambulatorio, the local health care center in Monte Carmelo. Many of the Cuban doctors ended up being too busy to meet with us but we had great stand-ins. We met Jenny a local woman with two kids who is studying medicine in Sanare, and doing her clinic experience, a crucial part of all medical students' learning, at the Ambulatorio in Monte Carmelo. The recent changes to Venezuela's medical programs favor keeping the students closer to home, and involved with their own community's health care so eventually they can live full time as Doctors for their own community and families. The medical students in Monte Carmelo travel to Sanare or Barquisimeto for classes and then work at a local clinic at other times. The Ambulatorio in Monte Carmelo serves as the first line in care for the community. They have a dentist, several nurses, and a doctor who works primarily in Monte Carmelo but also visits for emergencies. The clinic has records of almost every person in Monte Carmelo and the surrounding villages. The Cuban doctors facilitate a true community clinic where doctors are familiar with all of their patients and embody what a doctor-patient relationship should be.

Those of us who headed to Bojo met with Rosa Elena Guedes Dominguez and Labor (one of Rosa's students). The group in Bojo split into two groups so that those who were interested in education could talk to Rosa and those interested in sustainable methods of food production could chat with Labor. Personally, I was interested in talking to Rosa because of her experiences teaching classes about agricultural sustainability and growing up on a farm. I was interested to hear how a woman was accepted as an instructor of farming methods (especially in a country that is perceived as patriarchal). Rosa explained that being a woman did not affect her position as a teacher or the status of her students. She also explained that women all over the country are now taking on different jobs and leadership positions (and the Chavez administration has played an important role in influencing the incorporation of women into all sectors of society). In our discussion, she also clarified that her interest in agriculture is due to the consciousness that growing up on a farm instilled. Growing up on a farm made her aware of the detrimental effects of chemicals and pesticides on the environment and the health of farming populations. This awareness continues to influence her research, pursuit of her masters in Environmental Science, and the courses she teaches at the community school.

I asked several specific questions regarding my individual research, which is comparing organic movements in the United States and Venezuela, and certification in both countries. When I asked about beginning of the organic movement, Labor responded that he believed it started six to seven years ago, and was instigated by the investigation into agriculture and the heavy use of pesticides which was taking place. Organic production, soil management, and integrated pest management were looked at as new techniques. I also asked what government policies support the organic movement, and he listed various organizations such as SASA (Servicio Autonomo de Sanidad Agropecuaria) which is the Ministry of Agriculture in Venezuela. Until Chavez came to power, it was extremely difficult for organizations to get organic certification. Now, there are several programs,

and many government grants that support organic practices. He explained that if Chavez left, it would not be the same support by the government, but he believes the emerging movement would still continue because enough people have become interested. However, for the majority, there is little consumer consciousness; the price of organic and non-organic food is the same. For organic food to survive, it is necessary that it is raised in price because it is expensive to produce (L.Sick).

After talking to Rosa, we re-grouped and headed back to the Casa Campesina. On our way home (or what became home for the week), we stopped in a couple of places, met people, and got sidetracked. First, we stopped at a little bodega (or “bodegita”) and ate the most deliciously fresh granola. Secondly, we headed to the bread cooperative where we met women who worked in different positions of bread production. Finally, we headed up the mountain from Bojo to Monte Carmelo. On our way up the mountain, we were all engaged in different conversations and accidentally got lost!! As a group we decided that instead of going back down the mountain to figure out where we got lost, we would find a shortcut. In trying to figure out how to get to the Casa Campesina we took silly pictures of each other (as you can see in the picture of Dan). Getting back to the Casa Campesina truly became an exciting expedition.





Our view going up the mountain from Bojo to Monte Carmelo (and directly to Las Lajitas).

In the afternoon, Omar, one of the leaders and founders of La Alianza came to talk to us about the history and operations of the cooperative. La Alianza (the alliance) is made up of three parcels of land lying between the villages of Monte Carmelo and Bojo, and based on a theory of *mano vuelta*, “If you work for me, I’ll work for you.” What began as a monoculture cooperative of potatoes in 1979 has grown to produce 80 tons of food sold every week at farmers markets around the area. Omar during our discussion focused on the farmers market of Barquisimeto and the process of selling organic food products to Venezuelan communities. He mentioned that the foods in the market were assumed to be chemical-free but there were no government regulations to certify that the produce was truly organic.

There are many divisions of the cooperative, and each produce a different product: dairy, vegetables, fruits, and meat are some of the offerings. However, the products produced by the farms shift yearly among the three farms so as to keep the soil as fertile as possible. The future of Las Lajitas and La Alianza looks bright as it continues to expand. Within Las Lajitas the workers are selected through social consciousness, participation in the community, and their responsibility to their families. Also, problems with irresponsible workers are usually dealt with as a cooperative and during assembly meetings.

The original co-op has grown to make connections across state lines, enriching the exchange of ideas about sustainability and the benefits of organic foods. Omar described his hopes of his grandchildren and their children continuing the cooperative and the ideals it was instilled upon: equality, globally and locally engaged and a dedication to a healthy environment.



Omar with Jenn and Dan in the greenhouse.