

Want to Travel with a Difference? Try “VOLUNTOURING” with...

Project Somos Children’s Village: A home. A family. A future.

The Dream

Project Somos has something very different about it: a kind of small-world magic that seems uniquely Canadian. Some of the project’s biggest supporters have just sort of stumbled upon it and, by some force, feel drawn to it. Before they know it, they are hosting a 60th birthday party to raise money for the organization, or joining the board, or bringing their families to volunteer for a week. This is the very magic that attracted me to Project Somos. I was attracted by the audacity of the vision; an eco-friendly village in Guatemala where groups of orphaned children would be raised within family units. I was so attracted that I brought my whole family to visit in 2011, just over a year after the founders, Heather Knox and Greg Kemp, moved there to start construction.

From the moment I stepped onto the site of the Project Somos Children’s Village, I felt something special. Perhaps it is because it is located at an elevation of 7,000 feet with a vista of seven volcanoes, adjacent to the Iximche Mayan Ruins. Perhaps it is simply because the good intentions of so many people have gone into the place. Most certainly, it is because the project’s founders have a palpable faith in their ability to help create change for children

in one of the world’s poorest countries.

Heather and Greg make anything seem possible. They are not wealthy, nor are they from well-connected families. In fact, while they were fundraising for Project Somos, they rented a basement suite. Greg, a sort of Jack-of-all-Trades, worked construction and Heather worked for the Vancouver Folk Music Festival. They believe, however, in their own sense of fortune. They have both travelled extensively and, realizing what a privilege it is to be born in Canada, want to leverage this privilege. This is the worldview that attracted Heather and Greg to one another, and also that which attracts others to this project. Being a hero seems entirely plausible with these two as models.

“The hope of any country is in the kids,” says Heather. “My daughter and I had volunteered at a children’s village in the South of India,” she explains. “It was this model of a children’s village that most inspired us. It is holistic on so many levels.”

The Project Somos Children’s Village is about creating families for children, not just providing homes. The Village will include seven of these families; each one consisting of a group mother and seven children. Each family will occupy their own beautiful,

ecologically constructed, nearly earthquake-proof home. Two of these homes are already completed. Each makes use of Earth-bag outer walls; an affordable, ecologically-friendly and seismically-safe alternative to concrete block. Inside, the walls are made of plastic bottles stuffed with plastic bags that are collected as litter by the bushel all around the nearby town. The first solar panels have been installed on the homes and organic gardens are being planted and shared, one to each pair of homes. The Village will also include an administrative building for the Village Director, offices, storage for food and clothing, and a first aid room. At the centre of the Village is a circular gathering space with semi-circular clay benches and a fire pit in the middle that serves to host campfires and performances. Also now underway is a community hall with a commercial kitchen, meeting space, and additional showers and washrooms for larger events and general community use. Eventually, the hall will include nearby cabanas and fancy tents for “glamping” as part of Project Somos’ growing “voluntourism” program.

Helping Hands

Lloyd Bernhardt, CEO of Ethical Bean Coffee, is one of the people that encouraged Heather and Greg to set their vision in Guatemala. In 1999, Lloyd adopted his daughter from Guatemala and wanted to maintain a connection with her native-land. So much so, in fact, that he started Ethical Bean Coffee in order to “benefit the communities and children” there by providing a buyer for organic, fair-trade coffee.

“International adoptions have closed [in Guatemala] and there are SO many children without families, it is staggering,” says Lloyd. There are 370,000 orphans in Guatemala according to UNICEF. “Guatemala is one of the neediest places in the world,” he continues. According to The World Bank, 75% of that population is living in poverty and half of all Guatemalan children are malnourished. The child labour rate is 30% and education



by Eco Aficionado
and syndicated
columnist Manda
Aufochs Gillespie

Ken Spencer of the Spencer Creo Foundation. Spencer bought the land for the project and is leasing it to them with the intention of eventually donating it.

The Reality

To date, this magical little spot in Guatemala has hosted more than 200 Canadian helpers with 90 more already planned for 2013. St. George’s and Southridge schools in the Vancouver area are sending student groups down this year for the second time.

Everyone who comes is touched by Project Somos and the high-school students were no exception. Neil, a student from St. George’s, says it best: “In developed countries such as Canada, life is so fast and materialism becomes our source of happiness. During our stay in Guatemala, however, we all experienced a different form of happiness, one that comes from the love of family, friends, and a community that supports the members within it. The best things in life are free and experiencing this has changed many of us who were on this trip.”

A Space to Grow

The search for land took three years. During that time, Heather took a fundraising class at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. “With the knowledge I came up with from there, we came up with a fundraising strategy,” and from that point, things began to catapult forward. They secured their charitable status, designed a beautiful website, and started holding regular brainstorming sessions. “So many of the little details formed and grew [from these sessions],” says Heather. “Simultaneously, we started making ourselves present by doing public presentations every month in coffee shops, people’s living rooms, and at every festival we could get to: Car-fee Days, Latin Fest, Folk Fest. People started recognizing Somos,” she says and, “We needed that support to make it a reality.”

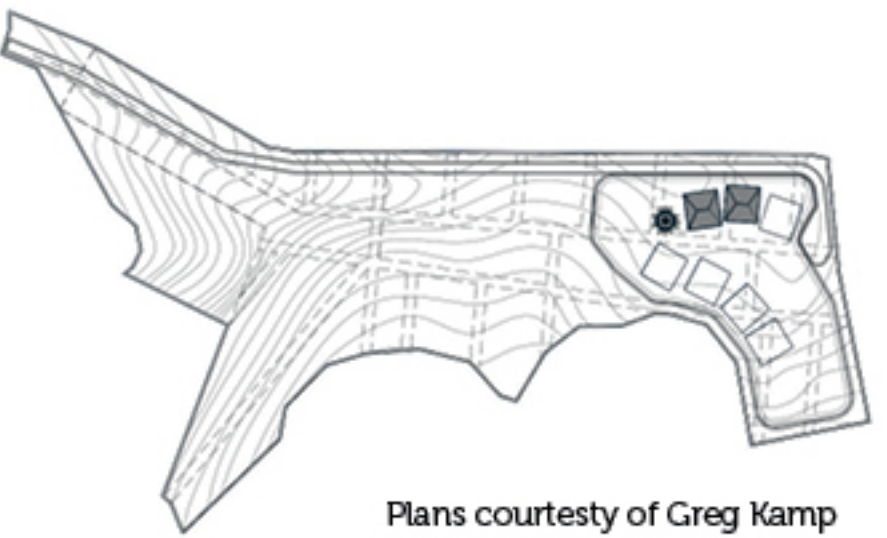
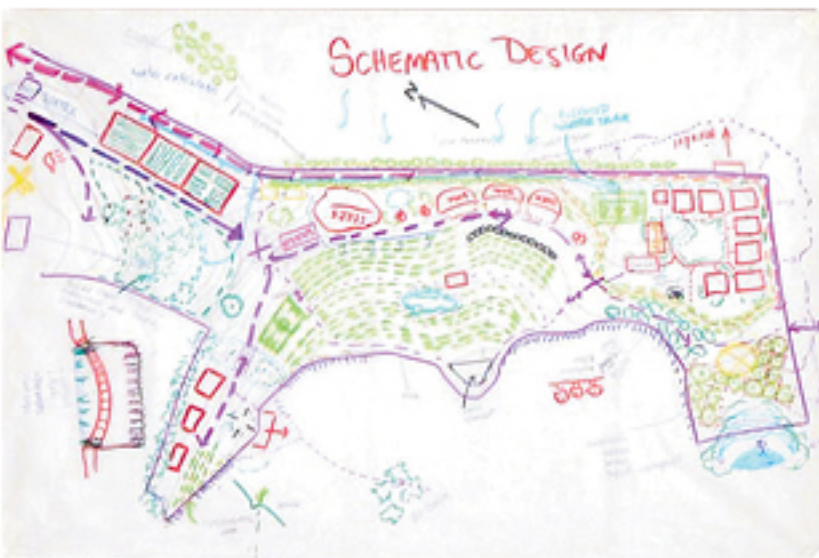
In 2010, they found the land and attracted another supporter to help fund its purchase:

Then, in 2007, they attracted yet another helper. Guatemalan lawyer, Jorge Alberto Granados Mancio, shared a similar vision of a family-oriented, community-based place for orphaned children. Lloyd and Jorge both assisted in the search for land for the project, and it is with Jorge’s help that Project Somos will be submitting applications in early 2013 to begin the process of welcoming their first children.

In 2010, they found the land and attracted another supporter to help fund its purchase:

To learn more about Project Somos Children’s Village, including how to donate money, a quilt for an orphan, or your time, visit www.ProjectSomos.org. Or, ask about the upcoming family “voluntour” opportunities.

Photos courtesy of Heather Knox



Plans courtesy of Greg Kamp