



Centro Monte Cristo: Guatemala

Lumos Report

September 2014

Intro

From September 10, 2013 to September 4, 2014, I worked at the Monte Cristo Educational Center based in Chimaltenango, Guatemala with my wife Hilary. I had two primary roles- Business Development Advisor and English Curriculum Development. Both roles were assigned by Monte Cristo to address pressing needs that required my skills and experience to solve problems while working independently.

Organizational Background

Monte Cristo is a small school that sits atop the mountains of rural Chimaltenango, about 20 minutes outside the town center. The school is now 12 years old and had 93 students enrolled in the 2014 school year. Their mission is to develop educational and vocational opportunities for young people ages 11-18 in the most undeveloped villages surrounding Chimaltenango. In the US, their students would be attending the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades. Most of their students come from very poor families with a subsistence-farming livelihood. Students from this area typically suffer from malnutrition, illiteracy, and systemic prejudice. A minority of their students travels in from the center of Chimaltenango; their families typically have more resources, but these students are plagued with a distinct set of difficulties. Those include domestic violence, substance abuse, and deep-seeded racism.

Most of the teachers are members of the Cardenas/Zamora family, mostly because they have found these people to be more capable and reliable when working in such a dynamic, demanding environment. The choice to employ mostly family members also stems from their financial struggles and the need to have passionate people at Monte Cristo that will be more flexible when the school struggles month to month with payroll.

The Goal

Although my initial impression was that Monte Cristo was self-sustainable due to a variety of small businesses operated by the family, I learned in the first few months that Monte Cristo was only about 40% sustainable, but had the goal to reach 75% financial sustainability by the end of 2015. The rest of the cost of running the operation is covered by donations from an Italian foundation. Their dream is to eventually be able to cover their costs completely and use international donations only as an additional supplement to enrich their programs. The Italian foundation has also signaled that their support is only guaranteed through 2016, and they are not sure they can continue with such a large gift of financial support past that time.

Monte Cristo requested that my wife and I work together to develop a business that could help them reach their goal of self-sustainability. The new venture would be added to their current portfolio of businesses: Furniture, Ironwork, Tourism, Vegetables, Artisan Crafts, and Consulting. Hilary and I had worked with coffee

farmers in a different part of Guatemala to use honey production to supplement their income, so we looked at the prospects of building an apiary at Monte Cristo and begin exporting honey. A potential bi-product of the honey would be a bodycare line that we would fashion out of the beeswax. After a due diligence trip to a honey cooperative in Jacaltenango, we realized that honey was not scalable enough with the area of land available at Monte Cristo. However, the bodycare line was still a possibility if we sourced the wax from outside of Monte Cristo.

Queen Bee 1: Conception to Formal Proposal

As a continuation of our hunt for a scalable business opportunity, we researched all-natural formulas for beeswax-based lotions, and made our first trial batch in December. The batch was a success, but it required multiple modifications to be a viable product we could market as anything of quality. After about five more trials and multiple changes to the formula, we had a body cream we were proud of and that served a gap in the Guatemalan market. By March, we had the body cream and a good lip balm formula ready. I had some ideas for a name and logo, but we handed the marketing decisions over to Diana Tojin, a Guatemalan who is studying graphic design at the national University and has been providing consulting services to Monte Cristo for years. After a month of work, she presented us with Queen Bee, an all-natural and woman-centric bodycare company with a beautiful logo that communicates a high-quality, playful image for the company.

Needless to say, we were very impressed and thankful to have her skills and vision available to us.

After an intensive search for containers produced in Guatemala, we decided that we needed to import from the US if we wanted attractive packaging that communicated our brand effectively. In April, we sat down with two complete products- Body Creams and Lip Balms offered in two sizes respectively. We presented the brand, the vision, and a financial plan with a modest three-year sales projection to the school leadership. We offered two options: 1) Decide that Queen Bee has enough potential to invest considerable time and money in pursuing its success, or 2) Turn down the idea and refocus energy on existing projects and avoid risking resources on a new venture.



Understanding the effort and time commitment involved, the Director and Coordinator of Monte Cristo enthusiastically decided to move forward with Queen Bee, with a promise to devote all resources necessary to get it off the ground in order to see results by 2015.

After that meeting, Hilary and I pressed forward with R&D, market studies, and a plan of action through September, when our Lumos experience would end. It was at this point that Hilary and I started considering the implications of this mutual agreement and what that meant for our own future.

Queen Bee 2: Proposal to Functional Operation

We launched the Facebook page in June, with a promise to be on store shelves by July 25. During that time, we promoted Queen Bee heavily on Facebook and set up meetings with stores in Guatemala City and Antigua, our target markets. We also improved our inventory supply chain, contacting more reliable suppliers and streamlining logistics. By late June, we were producing the Queen Bee line in Monte Cristo's industrial kitchen.

On July 10, we launched our IndieGoGo crowdsourcing campaign with 3 funding goals- 1) Build a laboratory, 2) Buy marketing materials, and 3) Stock up on inventory. The goal was to raise \$11,500 within 1 month. We ended up raising a little over \$2,000, far short of our goal, but enough to meet our first need, which is to build a functional lab at Monte Cristo, a space necessary to eventually get approval from the Guatemalan Department of Health to operate above the Artisan level of cosmetics production.

As a result of the Queen Bee initiative, Monte Cristo mobilized their plan to open a store in Chimaltenango, and they set the grand opening date for the same day as Queen Bee's deadline to be on store shelves. On July 25, Queen Bee landed at the Monte Cristo store in Chimaltenango, and in August we were 1/3 of the sales, a total of more than



\$300 from the Monte Cristo store alone. PachaMama, a popular organic store with two locations, has plans to feature us on shelves by the end of the year. By January of 2015, we plan to have Queen Bee on sale in at least 3 other locations in Guatemala, all of which should be produced in our fully finished laboratory.

English Curriculum

When I arrived at Monte Cristo, they were finishing their 2013 school year, which runs from January to October. At the end of this year, their former English teacher, a local Guatemalan, left the school to take care of her growing daughters. As a result of this, combined with the desire to create their own handbook of curriculums, Monte Cristo commissioned Hilary and I to make an English Curriculum for their 7th grade class. While we were crafting this, we were also responsible for teaching all three grades 3-5 times a week. I am happy to say that despite the fact that each grade started from ground zero, all of them are successfully writing paragraphs in English and communicating on a basic level after only a year of instruction. Many children identify English as their favorite class and have dreams of being bilingual secretaries, a high-paying position with lots of demand in Guatemala.

TEACH Academy

There are almost no Americans in Chimaltenango, and because of the fact that fluency in English is almost a universal job requirement for professionals in Guatemala, parents are anxious to

send their kids to the best English programs within 50 miles. Middle-class Chimaltenango families that have the financial ability often send their kids to weekend schools in Antigua or Guatemala City from a young age to help secure them job opportunities in the future. After word spread that Hilary and I were teaching at Monte Cristo, Monte Cristo's reputation grew because families were interested in having their children learn from native English speakers. Due to the amount of inquiries, we have been working with Monte Cristo on a plan to open The English Academy of Chimaltenango (TEACH) in January of 2015.

The Academy will be based in the center of Chimaltenango and will serve as another profit-making venture for Monte Cristo. TEACH will offer night and weekend classes from kids 4-years-old up to adults who are interested in learning from native English professionals. Profit from the academy will be used to provide more scholarships to students from rural Chimaltenango and to pay for general Monte Cristo operating costs.

Replicating Monte Cristo

In my original Lumos Proposal, I said that I would review how to replicate the model of Monte Cristo in other areas of Guatemala. Due to my change in perception regarding their financial sustainability, I have to admit that their model is far from complete, and it would be hard to identify pieces to replicate given how young they are, but especially difficult if they still haven't found a financial equilibrium.

I will say that their biggest strength, which is the same in communities across the world, is that the Cardenas/Zamora family is a large, talented, well-respected family throughout the region. They have been doing development projects in Chimaltenango since the 70's and are internationally regarded as an effective group of locals that are sincere and ethical in their efforts to improve their surrounding community. Although it could be another 5 years before they reach sustainability and can refocus attention to improve the quality of their educational project, they are a dedicated group of people that will never rest in their fight to bring opportunity to the most overlooked of their country.

Personal Growth

This has been the most challenging, exciting, and fulfilling year of my life. Each day provided me an opportunity to grow in a new way, and my ability to solve problems has improved exponentially due to the circumstances of my work and the difference in culture. I was humbled beyond expectation by the extremely talented team at Monte Cristo, and by how many times I found myself dependent on their expertise, connections, and experience. I woke up every day ready to work, excited to give more than I did the previous day. I think I worked 7 days a week for months straight trying to get Queen Bee ready for launch, and I'm so proud to have developed a product that people are excited about and that will go to help Monte Cristo reach their financial goals.

The most important and impactful part of the year has been the Cardenas/Zamora family. They immediately took Hilary and I



in as part of the family, and we have continued to grow closer throughout the year among new brothers, sisters, parents, nieces, and nephews. Our values and mission in life are so well aligned, and there is a mutual respect

that bonds us together through both work and personal life. They are my favorite part about Guatemala and all of them inspire me daily. Because of them, I had not only a year of learning, adventure, and travel, but I very comfortably settled with my wife in a new place where I feel at home, and in every way my life and dreams are fulfilled continuously.

Life After Lumos

Hilary and I were so impacted by this experience, and so passionate about our work with Monte Cristo, that we are moving back to fulfill what we started and build a life together in Chimaltenango. We are going to continue growing Queen Bee,

open TEACH Academy, and learn as much as we can from the amazing family we have there.

I would like to thank the Lumos Foundation and the Study Abroad Office for making this experience possible. It has had an immeasurable impact on my life and has contributed to poverty-alleviation efforts in rural Guatemala. I hope both parties are satisfied by the projects created during my time as a Lumos Fellow and will continue to make this opportunity available to other students interested in *travel with a purpose*.