

[Music playing. Live, Learn, Latin America Kody Gerkin MSU's Center for Latin American & Caribbean Studies]

[Music playing. Kody Gerkin & Mujerave: The Beginning]

My name is Kody Michael Gerkin and I was born in Michigan, raised in Michigan. Went to Michigan State, studied at James Madison College and got a master's degree in international relations and then I joined the Peace Corps. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala and subsequently went to graduate school and have now founded my own nonprofit, working back in my former Peace Corps site. I had always thought, maybe someday I would be Peace Corps volunteer And so I started having a conversation with the recruiter that work in the office, and the ball just got rolling, and I got really excited and I was one of the few people I knew who I thought could join the Peace Corps I thought it was something that people should do, I think it's a program people should participate in so I convinced myself to do it, and I went to Guatemala and it absolutely changed the course of my life.

[Mujerave Ladybird]

Mujerave, it's a combination of the Spanish word for woman and one of the Spanish words for bird so the idea is that as an organization I talked about this yesterday. We practice gender mainstreaming which is something I learned at Michigan State. I focused quite a bit in my studies on gender studies and gender issues, something I looked at a lot. I probably would've gotten a minor in it I don't even know who was you know available, but that was kind of my focus. And so we put the woman the word for women in the world for bird together. Like women's empowerment, women soaring, that kind of thing.

[Photo of woman kneeling on dirt floor making flour]

Well, as I was saying we're all about women's empowerment. So we practice sustainable development but our vehicle so to speak is women empowerment. The projects that we realize whether working directly with women's groups in the case of a pilot projects we built stoves which is the project I worked on as a Peace Corps volunteer and we built a greenhouse, 5 meters wide, 12 meters long and they just planted 200 tomato plants in it about 10 days ago. That project is split between two families and we built stoves in six homes as well.

[music playing. Photo of woman with caption Hundreds of thousands of women in Guatemala cook three meals a day over an open fire.]

[Photo of children and woman around the three-stone fire in the house with caption, The smoke affects the health of women and their small girls the most, as they spend more time in the kitchen]

[Photo of woman in house kitchen with caption, Three-stone fires also require women and children to gather huge amounts of wood daily (18,000 lbs per family per year)]

[Photo of fire with caption, This contributes significantly to Guatemala's deforestation rate of 2% per year.]

[Photo of women and children around stove in house with caption, This stove was built by Mujerave's founder while he was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Totonicapán.]

[Photo of woman cooking at stove with caption, Eight years later, it continues to draw indoor air pollution out of the home and reduce firewood use by over 50%.]

Again, it was a project I had worked on with the Peace Corp but it had been a while since I was on the ground you know making it happen. So it felt really good, I stayed out in the campo, stayed with the family and my former Peace Corps say actually even more remote than my Peace Corps site. I was out farther in a rural area in a dirt road kind of situation. You know it's very basic we're talking about bottom billion kind of people. Dirt floors, adobe shacks. So they're making them out of local clay and mud and things like that. Living the same kind of lifestyle they would have thousands of years ago really anything similar diets making their own clothing still subsistence farming just growing food that they eat. It is the main occupation in the areas of that we work in. But we looked through the gender lens, we practice gender mainstreaming, long way around there. We don't have a gender program or a women's development program. Everything that we do from planning to project execution to monitoring evaluating we're looking at gender and how gender plays out in Guatemala Women are isolated, oppressed, marginalized and have been half a millennium since the Spanish arrived. In some ways even longer within their own culture as genders plays out in all cultures, there are some forms of oppression in different ways. Particularly bad for indigenous women in Guatemala, so we work directly with them in the projects that we do, our hope is that there are some of the corollary benefits of working with us for these women's groups are that they develop the skills they need to work with other organizations in the future. So if they do a project with us there are women that are learning about how to put together the budget there women that are learning how to mix the organic fertilizer. There are women that are helping us build the greenhouse for helping us build a stove. Just learning how to work with other groups or people in positions of "power". I carry a lot of power with me within these communities and I have to be aware of that as a white man.

[Photo of adobe shack home]

Even just some of those kind of soft business skills, that goes such a long ways. Or if you have a business person whose never really kept a budget. So you have a program like Excel or even something just hand written up. This is where you put how much you spend, this is where you put much how much is coming in. Now you can start to see wow, I make a lot in this kind of a product and then, there is so much need in the developing world and there is so much need in the area of Guatemala that we work in. Any kind of assistance you can offer from teaching someone Excel to [giving] a pair of shoes, it can change people's lives, definitely.

[music playing. Photo of child by open fire in adobe house with caption, Are you aware of the ongoing crisis in Guatemala?]

[Photo of old woman with caption, A severe drought in 2014-2015 pushed over 1 million Guatemalans to the brink of starvation. Rural women and children remain the worst affected.]

[Photo of boy with caption, Guatemala has the highest rates of child malnutrition in the Western Hemisphere. In Totonicapán, Guatemala, 80% of children suffer from malnutrition.]

[Photo of open fire with caption, Preventable diseases like diarrhea and pneumonia cause over 40% of the deaths among children under 5. These problems are exacerbated by open fire cooking and a lack of access to basic sanitation services.]

[Photo of girl cooking with caption, In the poorest communities, young girls often drop out of school to help at home. At Mujerave's sites there is a 60% illiteracy rate with less than 10% of girls finishing middle school.]

So, when I returned to my former Peace Corps site, in 2014, By this time, I was married. My wife and I had traveled to Guatemala previously, but we also had a chance to go abroad and live in the Middle East for several years. So I was teaching, actually, I was teaching Spanish and English at a branch campus of a Dutch university in Doha, Qatar for several years. My wife got a job there. The whole time we were there we were kind of thinking about coming back to Latin America. So we did and we decided to move to Cusco, Peru. On a whim. We moved there and never really felt home but we traveled through Latin America together we kind of start traveling north and we both were happy when we got back to Guatemala. We decided to post up there, and I got a job In 2014 when I returned to Guatemala with my wife, we took a look around, and we saw the effects of a massive ongoing drought. So 2014 to 2015 they lost 75% of the corn and bean crop nation wide. There were cattle dying from drought. It was a very bad situation. So you have got a lot of subsistence farmers who are in the edge already, as I mentioned earlier, bottom billion people, living with a \$1.50 dollar a day, maybe 2 dollars if they are lucky. The kids are the most malnourished children anywhere in the Americas. The average indigenous girl will only go to school, 3 to 4 years of formal schooling average. So the situation is dire and then you throw this drought at them which is really the result of climate change, the result of a lot of things that are outside of their control. So, that's another layer of oppression that has been laid of them. And of course, single women with children in rural areas are the worst affected as usual. I think that's generally, going to be the pattern, when we are looking at climate change, impacting lifestyles. There will be people on the fringe who suffer the worst. That's how it works. Even in the States, Hurricane Katrina, for example, So, that's what we saw when we got there, we saw the effects of this massive drought, and the only thing that people really wanted to talk about was food security. I was considering raising some money to run some projects, with my former Peace Corp site. Because I was back. It felt good to see a lot of people who I worked with at the time, at the development sector, who gone for other things and others in the

development sector Guatemalans mostly. I started reconnecting with people and I was thinking about fundraising, and then through a series of jobs and job interviews, I felt that if I started a non-profit, I could practice things responsibly and ethically, in a way I didn't feel comfortable with other organizations I was applying to work for. We are small. We are a very small organization, we are a all volunteer organization, right now. We are interested in growing like any other organization, but I want to do a responsibly, I want to do it ethically. So, our financial statements are always up in our website. You can email me and I will send you a copy of our today's financial statement. I feel like the nonprofit sector should be held in a higher standard, really, than the rest of the business sector because they are purporting to do responsible things with your money. And I have seen many cases, many times where that's not the case. I am not the first one to say this. There are many big non profits, and even governmental organizations that try to provide social services and fail. There is a lot of corruption. In Guatemala, last year, they jailed the president for corruption. The sitting president. And then they elected, kind of like what we were seeing in the US politics, they wanted an outsider, and they elected a television comedian with no political experience to office presidency. He is now the president of Guatemala. Well, long story short, I felt if I opened a nonprofit, I would have a better chance of seeing the kind of responsibility and ethical in every decision that we make. Being, fiscally responsible and transparent is really important for us. And as we grow, that's one thing I am not willing to be flexible about. [Music playing. Logo of woman with jar on head and the word mujerave] [mujerave.org]