

Shearing And Sharing

- Storm-Ravaged Punta Gorda Has Never Been Better
- Would Mom Like This Look? Neither Do We
- Shearing And Sharing
- Risk Factors Lie At Heart Of An Attack
- Winner Conjures Up Finale That Possibly Mimics Rowling's



Pam Haigh, who started the school with her husband, keeps photographs of her trips to Nicaragua. A former salon owner, she got the idea to help the Managuans during a service trip with her daughter two years ago.

Herb Haigh

By MICHELLE BEARDEN The Tampa Tribune

Published: Jul 16, 2007

[Channel 8 video: Cuts for a Cause](#)

[Official Site: ProNica.org](#)

ST. PETERSBURG - She found it in a sprawling, rancid city dump where hundreds of men, women and children live and work, scavenging in the garbage.

Her purpose.

Pam Haigh had already sold her high-end hair salon. It just didn't satisfy her anymore. But she hadn't yet found the thing to replace haircuts and curls and dyes. She knew only that it needed to be something more meaningful.

Then, two years ago, she accompanied her 17-year-old daughter, Amanda, on a service trip to Managua, Nicaragua, one of the poorest countries in Central America. As Haigh stood ankle-deep in **La Chureca**, she realized she had found what she was looking for.

"There I was, standing in heaps of garbage, bugs everywhere and some of the most noxious smells ever, and I was cutting hair of kids with lice all over their heads. Kids who **lived** in this dump," she says.

"I thought to myself, 'If my clients only knew why I had left them.' Yet these were the most rewarding haircuts I've ever done in my life."

And it came to her. She could pass along her skills. Teach the girls and women here a trade that would get them out of the dump; give them something to sell besides their bodies. No matter she didn't speak Spanish. They shared a universal language.

"Every woman is the same all over the world," she reasoned. "We all love to look pretty; we all love to get our hair done; we all love makeup."

And that's how the Acahualinca Beauty School came to be.

"She's really kind of prissy," says Herb Haigh, 58, looking at his well-manicured wife of 13 years with affection. "That she'd get so involved in a place that's so out of her element, and give so much of herself ... it just makes me realize why I love her so much."

The beauty school may have been Pam's idea, but it came about because of her spouse, president of a managed-care contract company.

They met at the ballet, both divorced with one daughter each. By then, Herb had left the Baptist church where he had been raised and was a practicing Quaker. He felt at home in a corporate church, run democratically without ministers. They call themselves Friends and congregate not for services, but for silent meetings. They are committed to working for peace, social justice and human rights and honoring the God in every individual.

Pam started attending, too. She was less enthusiastic about his volunteer work with ProNica, an international Quaker organization dedicated to helping Nicaraguans. The per-capita income in the developing country is less than \$3,000 a year.

The nonprofit, formed after the devastation of the 1980s civil conflict, assists with literacy programs, schooling, economic development, agricultural projects and health initiatives. Based at the St. Petersburg Friends Meeting house, ProNica's demands often took Herb away for long hours on the weekends.

"There goes another Saturday," Pam would say when he left for the center.

Then the Haighs took Amanda to ProNica's Acahualinca Clinic and preschool in Managua. She was to work with youngsters to earn her service hours.

Pam's epiphany at the city dump - home to glue-sniffing orphans, preteen prostitutes and drifters camping out in shacks - transformed her into a relentless crusader.

First, she set ground rules for her beauty schools. Students would learn basic skills that didn't require electricity, simply because they typically wouldn't have access to such a luxury.

She and her husband would raise the money to support the school, funneling every donated cent into the project. They would pay for their own transportation to Managua and stay at the nearby Quaker House, which provides dormitory-style quarters to visiting volunteers.

ADVERTISEMENT

More from this channel:

- [Expectations Run High That The Donald Will Return For Another Season On NBC](#)
- [Shearing And Sharing](#)
- [Would Mom Like This Look? Neither Do We](#)
- [A Brighter Idea](#)

Search for more information:

[TBO.com Site Search](#) | [Tribune archive from 1990](#)

Herb, a consultant for health insurance companies, came up with the fundraising idea. Quakers gather on Sundays for "worship sharing"; Pam could raise money for the beauty school with "worship shearing" parties. She would be available to church groups, book clubs, dinner parties and at festivals to cut hair. There would be no set fee, just any donation for the project.

"We get everything from \$5 to \$500," she says. Donations are tax-deductible. The best part, though, is that Pam, 46, has a captive audience.

While snipping away, "I can tell the whole story of what it's like down there, how lives are being transformed, how women are blossoming because they're taking care of themselves in a way they can be proud," she says.

She also chats up the program among their well-heeled friends and her former clients. Neighbors Joe Girolamo, a retired investor, and his wife, Lynn, were moved by her enthusiasm and the photos she showed them from a recent trip. They gave her \$500 to buy a chair for the school.

"You wonder how kids get out of a system they're born into," Girolamo says. "We hear about these devastating conditions and it's heartbreaking. But how many of us are willing to go and change things? Pam is one of those people, willing to take the action."

The first year, the Haighs raised \$4,000 to pay for supplies, an instructor and three months of thrice-weekly lessons in hair, nails and makeup for 20 students. The second year, with a \$6,000 budget, they expanded the program to 12 months and graduated 40 budding beauticians. The Haighs visit twice a year - to buy supplies, check in on the friends they've made and attend the students' graduation party they host in December.

It's a long way from their luxury high-rise condo with its view of the water in St. Petersburg.

"We've got so much when others have so little," Pam says. "I thought what I was doing before was so superficial, while people are starving in the world. Funny thing, I ended up doing it again, but for a different motive."

What she's doing, says Mike McCrary, a friend of the Haighs' who works with a ProNica outreach to children living in the dump, is giving people choices. They can learn a marketable skill and produce a legitimate income.

On top of that, "she's giving them a heavy dose of self-esteem, which is in short supply there."

Some people may question why Pam isn't helping women here at home instead. Surely there's enough poverty right here in America that needs addressing.

She has more freedom to help in Nicaragua, she explains. Professional beauty schools in the United States must be licensed and meet certain standards.

In Nicaragua, have scissors, cape and supply cart, will travel.

The trips to Managua don't get any easier. She and Herb still feel apprehensive on the flight over, knowing the sights and smells they'll be confronting when they arrive. They still cringe at the sight of people, cows and dogs in the dump, digging for scraps. The bottom of their shoes become caked with human feces.

But the positives far outweigh the negatives. They've made friends. The locals welcome them into their lean-to huts like family members. Their kind spirit and warm hospitality, especially in combination with their meager means, overwhelm the couple. The Haighs have learned that empathy, not sympathy, goes a long way here.

"I wasn't so sure this could make a big difference," she says of the beauty school. "It was nothing, really, on my part, and it's everything to them."

"Such a simple gesture, yet it's changed lives. It's saving lives."

HOW TO HELP

To host a "worship shearing" party, contact the ProNica office at (727) 821-2428. All donations go directly to the beauty school.

Michelle Bearden can be reached at mbearden@tampatrib.com or (813) 259-7613. Keyword: ProNica, to see video on ProNica's projects in Nicaragua.