

# Panama Update

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## “Decent housing is not just a wish, it is a human right.”

*Jimmy Carter*

**Among the most basic human needs is that of a shelter to provide protection from the elements and safety during sleep.** As in other measures of well being, the Ngäbe People suffer from an extreme lack of adequate housing. The vast majority of the Ngäbe live in homes with dirt floors and leaky roofs made from palm fronds or a haphazard collection of tin roofing materials.

When one of the residents of Potrero Palma, Andrés Moreno, requested assistance in order to make some improvements on his home, I asked him if he would be willing for us to build a model home combining traditional and non-traditional elements. He accepted and that was the beginning of the Ngäbe Habitat Project.

The government Housing Department generously provided us with the complete architectural plans for homes built from bamboo that they had constructed in some Ngäbe communities. After doing some research on the subject, we decided to replace the structural elements (columns and rafters) with steel to greatly improve the durability of the home. Church member Fidel Vega, a civil engineer, provided us with modified plans so that we could make this substitution.

With the assistance of three UMVIM teams (Auburn, Trinity-Homewood and Birmingham First), as well as members of the Moreno family and our local team of workers (Jaime, Carlos, Chalino), we dug and poured the foundations and concrete floor, raised and welded the



steel columns and rafters and attached the sheets of tin roofing. We set four rows of cinder blocks for the lower part of the exterior walls and used bamboo for the upper exterior walls as well as the interior divisions. The bamboo grows in the area and even though it will deteriorate over time, it will not affect the structural integrity of the house and can be easily replaced. The two wooden doors and six louvered glass windows add a touch of class in addition to providing good ventilation and illumination during daylight hours.

The greatest unforeseen obstacle was the logistics of transporting every bag of sand, rock and cement, every rebar and rafter, every cinder block and sheet of roofing material from our community center down to the river, across the bridge and up to the building site. We found that the portable welding equipment was not that portable!

In consultation with our own McGiver, Alexander Perez (Chalino), we have devised a way to do all the welding off-site and then assemble the structure by bolting together the steel elements. In this way we will be able to reduce construction time and enhance the contribution of our volunteer work force.

Even though the end product is a very modest home, similar in size and layout to their former dwelling, the Moreno family feels like they have moved into a palace. They are very proud of their new home. The house is open for the members of the community to inspect and give their



1 Benita and Andres Moreno transporting materials, 2 Gerardo and friend pitch in, 3 Last leg of the journey by wheelbarrow, 4 One horsepower, 5 Chalino welding columns, 6 Pouring concrete floor a wheelbarrow at a time, 7 Finished slab, 8 Carrying the not so portable welding machine, 9 Raising the rafters, 10 Ready to roof, 11 Cutting and hauling bamboo, 12 Flattening bamboo for the walls, 13 Putting up the bamboo walls, 14 Finished bamboo house, 15 Joaquin in front of his new home, 16 Bamboo house interior

opinions that will be taken into account in the construction of future homes.

Currently we are designing a process by which the community will participate in the selection of beneficiaries of the project as well as contributing their "sweat equity." Our aim is not only to provide decent housing but also contribute to the strengthening of the community itself.

***The vision of the prophet Isaiah continues to guide our ministry among the Ngäbe People as we develop this new endeavor:***

***They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.***

*Isaiah 65:21-22*

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In addition to his pastoral duties, Rev. Thompson coordinates efforts of the church to strengthen its outreach into the surrounding low-income neighborhood. Rhett also serves as the National Coordinator of Volunteers in Mission Program in Panama, helping mission teams with construction and medical services projects.

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