

# Troy couple see need in Costa Rica, respond

**BY SUSAN SILVER**  
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In 2004, Joan and Dan Swank planned a Christmas vacation in Costa Rica. The couple wanted to visit the

**TROY**

country, known for its friendly eco-tourism. Lush scenery and resources are preserved to the best of the country's ability.

The Swanks also appreciated the beautiful, natural heritage. They were considering Costa Rica as a place to retire, or build a second home. Little did the couple know they would have a very different experience while there.

Barry and Nanci Stevens had a similar idea for retirement before they visited the country. The American couple visited Costa Rica to explore entrepreneurial opportunities and work on art projects. One day a native villager visited, complaining of chest pains when it was actually hunger. The Stevens fed him some soup. Word quickly spread, and before they knew it, the couple provided soup and a place for local villagers to visit.

The Swanks, a Troy couple, happened to meet the Stevens and get involved in their undertaking.

"We had planned to stay a few weeks," said Dan Swank. "I ended up staying a month."

Swank always has been active in social justice. He was a former director of Partners in Hope.

"The Stevens started El Puente, which I read about in an English speaking newspaper," he said. "It was a struggling non-profit. I visited them in person because I



PROVIDED PHOTOS  
Maria Rodriguez, a member of the indigenous BriBri in the Talamanca Mountains of Costa Rica, cooks for her family in their home. The Rodriguez family is one family that is helped by the El Puente program.

wanted to see for myself if it was genuine. I called them and they said, 'Come on down.'"

Swank checked out the situation. The Stevens had begun an informal feeding and education program for local children. Although education in Costa Rica is free, school uniforms and fees are out of the affordability range for the typical villager.

Before long, almost 40-70 villagers were visiting the Stevens on a regular basis. To feed the hungry villagers, the couple set up a makeshift, but pleasant seating arrangement for them.

"I went back six months later and they were feeding these people every few days," Swank said. "They also provided money for 27 kids to get into school."

The journey from jungle

*"We realize our abundance and try to share some of it. To give love and hope, that is the true meaning of Christmas."*

— Dan Swank

home to school was not easy for the children. Other schoolchildren from the wealthier population complained that the jungle children were "dirty." After a long trek through a muddy jungle, and one and half miles walking a dirt road to school, the children could not help it. The Stevens devised a plan where the kids could meet at their

home, hose off and walk the rest of the way to school a little bit cleaner.

"The one child the others taunted for being so dirty ended up being at the top of his class," Swank said. "Even under those embarrassing circumstances, many of the students rose above the teasing, and they excelled."

The Women's Republican Party, The Altrusa Club and Trinity Episcopal Church, all of Troy, donated coloring books and crayons to the native children. The children — and some of the adults — reacted as if the gifts were the best thing in the world.

"We could not believe how much they valued those coloring books and crayons," Swank said. "One of the adults took one home and colored each picture in the book."



William Rodriguez, left, Dan Swank, center, and Alejandro Rodriguez, spend time together in the family's home.



Daughter Maria Rodriguez studies by candlelight in the family's home in the Talamanca Mountains of Costa Rica.

The Swanks said that giving to the children is one way Americans can reach out beyond their own country. A \$200 donation supplies one child with a school uniform, shoes and school supplies. It will support a child going to school for one year.

In addition to feeding some of the villagers, the Stevens now show movies.

"It was a big trek for just one bowl of soup," Swank said. "Now they have started to show movies to visitors. They recently showed Jungle Book with the actors instead of the cartoon characters, and the villagers were captivated

by it." Swank said such situations as theirs show Americans at Christmas time and throughout the year that they have so many material goods compared with people around the world.

"We realize our abundance and try to share some of it," he said. "To give love and hope, that is the true meaning of Christmas."

For more information about El Puente, visit the Web site: <http://www.elpuente-the-bridge.org>, where there is an on-line store. Donations may be made through Pay-Pal.

## Falls increase among elderly during winter

Wire reports

Falling leaves and the first snowflakes herald an unfortunate season mostly marked by hospital emergency rooms — fracture season for the elderly.

Falls happen to seniors all the time — an estimated 30,000 people age 65 and over are injured in a fall each week in the United States. But numerous studies here and in other countries consistently show that more falls, and more limb and hip fractures, occur during the winter than during the rest of the year.

The surprise about that is that snow and ice appear to play only a relatively minor role in the increase.

A number of researchers believe that a combination of colder weather and shorter, darker days contributes to falls among the elderly in several ways. One factor is that seniors become less active and get less sunlight and vitamin D in the fall and winter, leaving them less steady and with weaker bones. It's also possible that

cold itself affects circulation and blood pressure and impairs brain communication with muscles. And there's evidence

that darker days combine with poor indoor lighting to increase the danger of missing a step or stumbling over an ottoman.

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