GLORIA (by Helene Dudley)

Gloria was selling tomatoes on the streets of Santa Marta when she received her first loan to buy thread to weave traditional WAYUU bags. In 2011, TCP Global received a $4,500 grant from the AMB Foundation for FUNDEHUMAC, the micro-loan partner in Santa Marta, to help Gloria create a weavers’ cooperative. By working together to buy thread, the costs would go down, and by banding together to sell their bags, they could hold out for a fair price. While the weavers had primarily been WAYUU women in Santa Marta, displaced from their native lands, Gloria’s idea was to train weavers who were still in the WAYUU settlements in the GUAJIRA so they could earn a living and avoid displacement. While most WAYUU women can weave, they do not all have a good sense of design or color combinations. Some have trouble with quality control and do not understand the value of using the best quality thread when a cheaper variety is available. Gloria held workshops in the Guajira to train...
weavers and then chose the best weavers to be part of her group. Without Gloria and her husband, these women would not have access to markets to sell their bags. The WAYUU settlements are scattered amongst the sagebrush of the Guajira. There are no busses. There are not even roads. Women walked to the workshop. Gloria opened new doors for them.

On our trip to the Guajira, we stopped at a WAYUU tourist shop where Gloria asked to borrow $175 to buy a traditional WAYUU dress. I have never been known to have a poker face and I did not hide my dismay at her purchase. Gloria explained she intended to copy the dress and teach others to replicate it and thus diversify the revenue stream. When we returned to Santa Marta, she repaid the $175 loan.

After we completed the grant and were no longer partnering with FUNDEHUMAC, we lost track of Gloria. In 2012, I checked GOOGLE to see if she was selling bags on the Internet and got a hit, which included Hillary Clinton. There was an Associated Press photo of Hillary admiring one of Gloria’s dresses at a shop in Cartagena. Gloria had done a fine job of replicating the dress.
The first time I visited Gloria’s house we had to drive across a dry creek bed to get there. The house had dirt floors and was open to the elements. By the time she started the cooperative, her home was considerably more accessible, just off a main road into Santa Marta. It was apparent that her children could attend school from this location. The house was basic but a giant step forward. The next time I visited she had a concrete block house with a concrete floor and a door and windows, electricity and running water. I also remember that it had an old boat propeller anchored to the ceiling as a makeshift ceiling fan. At this point her four children were clearly in school and had great visions for the future.

In 2016, I wandered into the Painted Coconut boutique in Coconut Grove, looking for an outlet for embroidered goods from the loan site in Cartago. When I showed the owner the TCP Global brochure, she immediately recognized Gloria and said she bought her WAYUU bags from Gloria’s group. She told me she often stayed at Gloria’s air-conditioned place in Barranquilla. It is nice to know that Gloria is doing well.
and that she is obviously still providing a livelihood for people with limited access to the markets.

Gloria has amazing artistic talent, business sense, marketing skills and energy. She was destined to make it. The Colombia Project is pleased we were there at the right time to help her get started. We probably owe as much to her as she does to us, for she proved to us that there is raw talent that just needs resources to thrive and flourish. All we need to do is get them the tools they need and they will go far.