

Theater company welcomes Guatemalan women

Elizabeth Kramer, ekramer@courier-journal.com 12:28 p.m. EDT October 17, 2014



(Photo: Amber Sigman/Special to The CJ)

It was a short play created about a chance meeting on a bus that launched a theater project. Earlier this month, the play was performed in front of nearly a dozen people gathered at James Lees Memorial Presbyterian Church on Frankfort Avenue.

The actors were members of the Looking for Liliith Theatre Company, plus five women from Guatemala whom the company began working with after its community outreach director, Jennifer Thalman Kepler, visited the Central American country nearly 12 years ago on a Presbyterian Church mission trip.

"Then while traveling at the back of a public bus from a conference, (a group of women) asked me what I did in the United States," Kepler said. "I told them about Looking for Liliith and how we created original theater from

women's stories," she said.

That's when one woman asked, "Why don't you do that with us?"

After that, Kepler began working with women there and used theater techniques in workshops to help women begin to talk about ways to improve their communities and their lives. Although the women were leaders in their church communities, they weren't formally recognized because they were women.

Every year since that bus conversation, Kepler and others from the Looking for Liliith Theatre Company have journeyed to Guatemala for one or two weeks to work with these women and help them find their voices and address a range of issues — including nutrition and accessibility to food, doctor-patient communication for women and violence against women — via theater exercises and short plays. The activities fall under the theater company's Faith Stories Project, which includes women from faith communities who also are leaders in their communities.



Juana Herlinda Yac Salanic teaches a theater game in Spanish to students at Hawthorne Elementary School. (Photo: Holly Stone/Special to The Courier-Journal)

Earlier this month, and for the first time, five of the women the company has been working with made a nearly two-week visit to the United States, with stops in Louisville and Winchester, Va. During their trip, they performed the plays they had created with the company, including the one about the project's genesis on the bus and others, such as one Guatemalan woman's story about the barriers she had to overcome to get her visa for her trip here.

During the trip, they ventured out into the communities they visited. In Louisville, they led theater exercises for several classes at Hawthorne Elementary School, where students are taught in English and Spanish. And one evening, they took a trip to the Kentucky Center to see a performance of the PNC Broadway in Louisville series show "I Love Lucy Live on Stage."

Telling their stories

Three of the Guatemalan women — Alicia Moscoso, Martha Salonic Ramirez and Juana Herlinda Yac Salanic — talked about their first impressions of the project and one of their first theater exercises — to create a dramatization of a personal experience where someone had helped them.

Moscoso's performance covered a trip she had made with a group across an old, rickety bridge, which ignited anxiety and prayers to God about keeping her safe upon her return across it. The next time she came to the bridge, she found a strong wind had destroyed it, but there was a concrete bridge not far away for her to cross.

Ramirez talked about her story dramatizing her efforts to organize an end-of-the-year dinner at the church where her husband is a pastor and how she and others working on it made it a success by working on tasks they wanted to do instead of being assigned.

Since those early plays, the women also have devised short plays inspired by biblical stories that involve important actions of women — the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at a well and went on to tell others about this man who she suspected was the Messiah, helping to spread his word, and the women who worked to save Moses from peril from his infancy through adulthood.

Salanic took a breath before she spoke about a play she took part in and staged publicly to an audience of men and women that took on a more precarious subject — violence against women.

"There's a lot of machismo (or sexism) in Guatemala. It's in community organizations and the churches, regardless of whether they are Protestant or Catholic," she said. "The men don't want to hear the opinions of women, but as women we have good proposals. The men don't like that."

She described the play she and others performed in her home country. It was a series of frozen images in which actors depicted a scene and the audience had to deduce what was happening, then ask questions about and discuss the situations, which touched on violence. The characters included an authoritative man and a woman who always accepted the way he treated her.

"So, we created another scene that reflected equality between the genders," she said.

Salanic knew that the performance would be risky, considering, as she said, that "it's seen as sinful (in the Guatemalan culture) to be involved in working on domestic violence issues." But she saw the benefits of taking that risk when women recognized that they are not alone in feeling oppressed and in their desires to have a voice in their homes and communities.

Change goes both ways

Kepler and others from the theater company recognize how working with these Guatemalan women has changed them, too, in part through the emotional bonds between the groups of women. Looking for Lilith is looking to maintain and strengthen those bonds and the project. The company has been raising money and applying for grants to fund annual trips for the Americans to Guatemala, quarterly meetings for the Guatemalan women and another trip to the United States in 2019 for the Guatemalan women.

Next month, the company will perform a new multilingual work called "Uncaged Desenjauladas" as part of the Slant Culture Theatre Festival (Nov. 12-23) at Walden Theatre. The play will trace the project over the last decade and include scenes that the Guatemalan women created, snippets of videos of their work and scenes created by Looking for Lilith.

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For now, many of the Guatemalan women admitted their own theatrical works may not be making sweeping changes, but their modest performances are small steps to making a difference.

Ramirez's comments indicated a strong faith in the power of theater. "It could work to eradicate violence, although maybe not now, but little by little," she said.

Although she doesn't have daughters, Ramirez talked about working with her nieces and female neighbors and how this theater work could help them avoid and escape violent situations. And she talked about bringing these performances and subsequent discussions to men.

"I have a son, and I can teach him," she said.

She and the others also talked about the inspiration they found in seeing the performance of "I Love Lucy Live on Stage."

"It helped us wake up and see that we need to make our plays better," said Salanic. "For women, the challenge is that we don't give up," Salanic said.

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