

Q&A with...

Paola Gianturco on

¡Viva Colores!

Q Your book *¡Viva Colores!* is clearly a celebration of life and the people of Guatemala. Why do you refer to Guatemalans as “indomitable”?

A The people we met have overcome many kinds of difficulties, but in all cases, they are working to build a better future for themselves, their families, their communities and their country. They inspired us with their courage and indomitable spirit. And we were struck with how Guatemalans use color to express their hopes, dreams, beliefs and feelings.

Q You seem to have access to so many different people. How did you choose the people to profile?

A We worked with the PAVA Foundation staff and board members who accompanied us to the interviews and introduced us as friends. They knew some of these people from their work in the highlands building bridges, schools, waterlines, community centers and housing; planting trees, vegetable and marketable crops that enable women to add to their families’ income. The organization also gives scholarships, which is how we met some of the younger people. David and I were so impressed with PAVA’s work that we are giving all our royalties from the book to the Foundation.

Q What are some examples of these profiles?

A Fourteen-year-old **Alex Morales** was having a soda in a convenience store when he was shot by a gang member who mistook him for someone else. The bullet severed his spinal cord. Alex, whose philosophy is, “Be an example,” co-founded and runs a live-in job training and counseling program for disabled young men.

Estuardo Zapeta’s illiterate grandparents saw the value of education. “If you don’t study, you’ll end up like me,” his grandmother told him. At age 18 Zapeta became the youngest Fulbright scholar ever. Today, he holds four PhD’s and hosts an influential public affairs radio program in Guatemala City.

When the men in her villages were unable to earn enough to take care of their families, **Gabina Yax** organized their wives into a pine tree cooperative and sold the seedlings. When the village well ran dry, they recycled a bicycle to function as a pump. They bagged sand and sent their husbands to sell them in other villages. Gabina hopes her 11 children will have lives less difficult than hers.

Luz Mendez has had to go underground, change her identity and, at one point, go into exile for speaking out against Guatemala's military dictatorship. Today, she works with a consortium that aims to prevent domestic violence, to help its victims and punish its perpetrators.

Carmen Ordonez spent 15 days in a coma when she was 16, having tried to kill herself to escape her husband's relentless physical abuse. Ultimately, she separated from him, and supported her children by making and selling yoghurt. Now 44, she is studying to be a nurse and working at WINGs, an NGO that gives boys and girls classes and counseling in facing the problems that she faced at their age.

Q Your photographs document a vibrancy of everyday life. How did you come to know and portray this country with such intimacy?

A Two chapters for my first book, *In Her Hands*, were devoted to Guatemalan weavers. And I helped the Ixchel Museum in Guatemala City start a photo archive by documenting weaving in highland villages. All told, I have worked in Guatemala 5 times in the past 10 years, and I took pictures—just for myself—on the way to or from every assignment. I have been looking with wonder at these irresistible colors for a long time.

It wasn't until the last trip, though, that I understood more about the indomitable Guatemalans. David and I interviewed people who are poor and affluent, scholars and illiterates, men and women, children and adults, abled and disabled, Hispanic and Indian, Cachiuel and Quiché. Despite all odds, these people are succeeding in building a future.

Q How do Guatemalans honor their natural environment?

A Mayan beliefs have anchored Guatemala's culture for some 1,100 years, and connections with nature are strong. (Half of Guatemala's population is Mayan and the other half, a mix of Spanish and Mayan.) The Mayan creation myth says that man was made from corn. Mayans still hold rituals in caves and fields, on mountains, near lakes and rivers, all of which are considered sacred places. They believe in a "tree world," in which the earth is the trunk, and the roots link to the underworld, the branches to heaven.

Q From your photographs, color appears to be found everywhere. Can you describe these colors of daily life and culture?

A Color has played an important role since the beginning, for Mayans. The four colors of corn represent the four directions: *red*—east, where the sun rises; *black*—west, where the sun sets; *white*—north, where the rains come from; and *yellow*—south, the sunshine.

The natural world inspires their colors. There are 600 species of birds in Guatemala; one parakeet is chartreuse. Macaws are scarlet, indigo, chrome yellow, Kelly green. Guatemala's national bird, the Quetzal, is crimson-breasted with a blue-green body and tail. There are 8,000 plant species, including pale and bright roses, purple jacarandas, and white calla lilies. The jungle foliage includes every hue from light to emerald green. And the sunsets are shocking shades of red.

Every imaginable color appears in Guatemalan tiles, pottery, architecture, even cemeteries. Guatemalan textiles (in geographically-specific patterns) are used in blouses, baby hats and bedspreads, purses and placemats...and everything in between.

Q You worked with a co-author on your first book, but for this one, that person was your husband. How was it working with your spouse?

A David and I worked together for almost a dozen years when he was head of Saatchi & Saatchi's Corporate Communications subsidiary where I supervised accounts and business development. Everyone who worked with us then knew that we have opposite opinions about everything.

While we were working on the book, I promised myself I wouldn't respond for 24 hours if I thought David was suggesting a hare-brained scheme. Inevitably, by the time I understood his idea, I also understood how it could work brilliantly. The book benefits from our combined perspectives.

Q This is your first bilingual book. What impact do you hope this will have?

A The fact that *Viva Colores!* is in English and Spanish is a dream come true: it will be accessible to everyone who is featured in the book. And because it is bilingual, almost a billion people worldwide are now able to know these inspiring stories of Guatemalans.