

Chet Thomas: In Honduras for the Long Haul

By Patrick Breslin

All photos by Patrick Breslin

The international development business suffers from a kind of attention deficit disorder. Its attention span is short—two- or three-year projects are ubiquitous, practically sacrosanct. It usually doesn't listen much to its supposed beneficiaries. It impulsively changes direction, lurching from one magic bullet to another.

For an antidote, consider the life and work of Chester (Chet) Thomas, a soft-spoken, graying, but still cherubic-looking, expatriate from the United States who founded Proyecto Aldea Global (PAG) in Honduras in 1983 and has directed it ever since. PAG works with thousands of families in far-flung areas and its projects rank among the more ambitious and successful grassroots efforts anywhere. But its recipe for success would challenge most donors. Simply stated, PAG's timeline runs way beyond the three year framework. "In two or three years, you're just warming up, just getting started," Thomas explained. "If you are talking about change, you need a long time. If you're not committing to eight years minimum, you're not serious."

Thomas' own commitment to Honduras began when he arrived in 1974 to coordinate relief efforts for the U.S.-based National Council of Churches after Hurricane Fifi. Like so many community organizers, technical advisers and development experts, he was a foreigner in the place where he worked. Regardless of the good intentions and desire to bridge gaps, one piece of paper usually separates outsiders from the people they seek to help—the plane ticket out that lets them fly away from poverty at any moment. Chet Thomas decided to stay. His profile in *Grassroots Development* is one in a series investigating the experiences that shaped successful grassroots leaders in Latin America and the visions they have distilled from those experiences.

Thomas' story starts in the hills of Somerset County in southwestern Pennsylvania, farming and coal mining country back when he was born in 1944. His father's family was Pennsylvania Dutch and his grandfather ran a self-sufficient farm in a place called Gobbler's Hollow. "There was a sawmill on the farm, run by a steam engine, the first in that area," Thomas recalled. "All the kids worked. They plowed the hillsides with horses, grew grain there, sold their produce, and raised hogs and beef for home consumption. Come spring, they would make maple syrup, at least 50 gallons a year, all they needed to sweeten their food. There were deer and turkeys and bears in the woods. Neighbors would help each other, whether it was a barn-raising or harvesting crops. They were good people, with good work values and ethics. It was a great area."

In school, Thomas said, "there were kids from many ethnic backgrounds, Italians, Poles, Russians, people from all the Slavic countries, most of them from mining families. There were all kinds of cultural festivals. So I got to appreciate the richness that was there." His own family raised turkeys. "I had plenty of experience

with poultry. For Thanksgiving and Christmas we slaughtered turkeys, 5,000 of them. I always remember the way their wings slapped your face. We would take the feathers off and clean them in the bitter cold and the snow, then deliver them to my father's customers. My brothers and I would almost dread Thanksgiving and Christmas." But the Thomas farm, like family farms around the United States, was being overwhelmed as markets turned to bigger producers offering lower prices. Thomas' father found work with state programs to extend macadam roads in farming areas and later became a county supervisor for road maintenance. Roads for farmers would become a recurrent theme in Chet Thomas' development career.

After high school, Thomas hauled coal for neighbors in his father's truck and then worked in supermarkets. Going to college seemed like a better idea and he started classes at the University of Pittsburgh. Recruiters for President John Kennedy's Peace Corps were on college campuses in the early 1960s, and Thomas was drawn. "I wanted to go for something a little bigger," he explained. "I looked around at a lot of people and I didn't see them going anywhere and I didn't want that. I think it was also a response to my religious upbringing, because I came out of the Church of the Brethren, people that were very dedicated to serving others." Early Peace Corps volunteers were typically liberal arts graduates, first introduced to farm tools during training. His farm background and varied work experience made Thomas the kind of skilled, hands-on young American the Peace Corps was looking for and he was assigned to a rural area in Antioquia, Colombia.

Photo Caption: Chet Thomas, founder of Proyecto Aldea Global, working with farmer Jeramías Vásquez.

Photo Caption: Thomas in Cerro Azul Meambar

"I wanted to do something significant," he recalled. "I was helping a few farmers improve their chickens with Rhode Island Reds, and I noticed eggs were scarce around town. So I started a project with a local guy and a thousand 'peeps.' Eventually we had 20,000 chickens. That municipality was a good place for them. Cool nights and good food is what chickens need. We formed a growers' association to market eggs. The milk truck would pick up the eggs at roadside in the morning, drop them at a store in Medellín, and kids on bicycle carts would deliver them to the customers. In the afternoon, a bus would pick up chicken feed, anything else the farmers needed, and drop it back on the roadside near their houses. We bought freezers so we could sell the meat for soup after the chickens stopped laying." The marketing system worked like a clock; Peace Corps officials considered the project a model. But the farmers didn't like it, and Thomas learned his first lesson about promoting development. "They wanted to sell the eggs themselves," he said. "They really wanted to go to the city, get their money and party. After I left, the chicken project continued, but they stopped using the store."

Thomas extended his service a year to work in Manizales, helping farmers move away from dependence on coffee by introducing cacao, another project that went well. He also worked in a town in the north of Caldas

known for weaving quality Panama hats and the fiber wrappings for the famous Ron de Caldas. There he learned another lesson. "This community was really poor and the people got paid a dollar a day," he explained. "'A dollar a day?' I said. 'We're going to get these people organized and we're going to demand five dollars a day.' So we tried and it created big problems. And this Colombian guy who worked in cooperative development came out and said, 'Look, these people are making a dollar a day. We know it's not enough to live on, but it's a job. Right now we're trying to create employment here, not a high level of income. Once we get everyone working, then we can organize them and demand a better wage, but don't rock the boat at this point.' That stayed with me for years. When someone doesn't have a job and is desperate and sees no way out, he has lost a sense of dignity. Even if you're working for a dollar a day, at least you're making something with your hands, you're busy and you've got something to shoot for in terms of improving your life."

When his third year was up, the Peace Corps offered Thomas a job training fresh volunteers in Escondido, California. While there, he met one of his cousins, a famous circus juggler. Soon Thomas was teaching school subjects to the children of a traveling troupe, his home on the road a converted ice-cream truck. Then he left to study social and economic development in Latin America at the University of Pittsburgh. His thesis for a master's degree in public and international affairs was on rural "penetration roads" in Colombia and the social benefit of building them with manual labor instead of high-priced machinery. After graduate school, he entered a program for young professionals at the World Bank. "I was working in a little cubicle with hundreds of other people in other little cubicles," he recalled. "I thought, 'What am I doing here?' I was losing my personality. A Colombian friend told me to get out."

Soon Thomas was back in California, promoting the Big John Strong Circus along the central coast and through the San Joaquin Valley. That led to a career producing top music acts as well as circuses in Chicago and to branching out into advertising and real estate as head of his own company. "I was making money," he said, "but I didn't really like much of what I was doing. And then, out of the blue, I got a call from the National Council of Churches. Someone had suggested me, and the Council wanted to know if I would go to Honduras to take over the relief effort it was mounting after Hurricane Fifi. When I flew into San Pedro Sula, the Sula Valley was still under water. People were living on the dikes. I was 28 years old. I thought it was time to make a life change. I went back to Chicago, sold my company, put my furniture in storage and moved to Honduras."

Over the next few years, Thomas worked on programs that provided housing, water systems, new wells and help restarting agriculture. His commitment grew. "I felt at home here. I made a lot of friends," he said. "I also thought this was a country with the potential to break out of poverty. There were a lot of natural resources that, if everyone had access, would make a major difference. And I thought, 'If I'm going to do anything significant, I'd have to stay in one place for a long period of time.'" Intending to raise cattle, he bought 800 acres. Honduran law required that he clear the brush covering the land in four months. When he couldn't, the land reform agency took away 300 acres. Nonetheless Thomas' commitment to Honduras

survived.

Then came the earthquake in Guatemala and Church World Services sent Thomas to run the relief effort there. For the next few years, his connection to Honduras was limited to trips back every month or so to oversee his farm and each time he felt like he was home. Meanwhile, the work in Guatemala grew more demanding; by 1979 Thomas was burned out. When Church World Services asked him to work in the Dominican Republic, he recalled, "I said 'No, I am committed to Honduras.' I basically bought into this country and all that it has, good and bad." Deciding to stay permanently was another life change. Thomas had knocked around the United States and Latin America for two decades. Now he was a proponent of staying put, of sinking roots "You can't go home again" is bitter American wisdom, distilled from constant upheaval, movement and change in the name of progress. The grandfather's farm Thomas lovingly recalls from his childhood had become a housing subdivision.

His work for International Volunteer Services, advising Honduran groups on how to do community health projects, set up cooperatives, introduce appropriate technology and put in wells and gravity water systems, pushed Thomas to found his own development organization. He named it Proyecto Aldea Global because, he said, "we all live in a global village now." He eventually sold his farm—too much to take care of along with his development work. He and his Honduran wife of more than 20 years, a bilingual teacher, raised five children and now live in a small town just outside Tegucigalpa. Today PAG has about 160 staff members. They work out of two offices in Tegucigalpa, one serving slum neighborhoods with programs helping youths stay out of gangs, and five regional offices. PAG reaches into 400 communities in 30 of the 270 Honduran municipalities. Besides its work in rural areas, it runs a scholarship program endowed by a benefactor in Chicago and the Deborah program offering legal services to poor women. Despite PAG's reach, the budget ranges between \$2 million and \$2.5 million—not very big in Thomas' estimation.

But PAG takes on big projects, including one in Cerro Azul Meambar, Honduras' major national park and the source of a fifth of the water flowing into the reservoir behind El Cajón, Honduras' largest hydroelectric dam, which generates more than 80 percent of the country's electricity. Some 20 years ago, the Honduran government worried about the deteriorating environment in the park. Erosion, caused in part by unrestricted land clearing, would inevitably threaten the reservoir. In 1992, the government's forestry department turned to PAG to manage the park and protect the watershed. PAG had been working with communities in the area and had the credibility necessary to sell a new approach emphasizing environmental stewardship and the ingenuity to come up with a plan to make that approach feasible in economic development terms. Cerro Azul is a biosphere reserve where the use of land is subject to restrictions. No human habitation is permitted in either the core, meaning the higher elevations that rise to 6,716 feet, or in the area designated for "special use." Resource exploitation is also forbidden in the core and is very limited in the special zone; it is permitted, but regulated, in the buffer zone, where almost 20,000 people, mainly farming families, live in some 40 communities. The entrance to the park is just a few kilometers from the

country's main highway that links Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. PAG's staff understood that the reserve's attractions and prime location could draw visitors, which would generate jobs and income. They also reasoned that the people living in the communities of the buffer zone, once they understood that their livelihoods were linked to preservation of the ecosystem, would be the best guardians of the reserve.

With support from the IAF, PAG trained residents of the buffer zone as forest rangers and guides and pushed environmental awareness. It later opened a large restaurant on the highway, creating more jobs as well as outlets for agricultural production and handicrafts. Additional employment opportunities resulted from reforestation programs, supplied with seedlings by tree nurseries developed in the reserve, and from clearing and maintaining miles of hiking trails that let visitors appreciate idyllic vistas of waterfalls tumbling out of walls of tropical vegetation into pristine pools ringed with jumbled boulders. Los Pinos, an environmental center inside the reserve, offers bed-and-breakfast lodging for tourists who increasingly come from the U.S. and Europe. A center was recently installed where university students research plant and animal life in the park.

Other PAG efforts in the reserve focused on farming methods that increased yields and were compatible with the responsible use of the environment. Fruit production was particularly encouraged and a fruit-processing plant was opened. Roads now connect the communities and facilitate the transport of goods to market. The huge El Cajón reservoir separated several of the communities, so, using donated materials, PAG built two ingeniously-designed ferryboats. Workers tied 24 large empty propane gas tanks together with a steel I-beam structure and converted a hay binder, a common piece of farm machinery, into a drive unit linked to a hydraulic system that turns big paddle wheels mounted on each side. Each ferry resembles a giant version of a raft kids would cobble together, but it carries trucks and people smoothly and remains stable even in the violent thunderstorms that sometimes explode over the reservoir. In 2008, the national forestry agency ranked Cerro Azul Meambar the second-best managed park in Honduras, out of 32 protected areas, and signed its fourth consecutive five-year management agreement with PAG.

Photo Caption: PAG's ingeniously designed ferry.

PAG's other big projects include its work in Belén Gualcho, a municipality in the Celaque mountains rising 9,000 feet above sea level, which Thomas first saw from horseback during his relief work in 1974. The population is primarily Lenca Indians, long among the poorest and most isolated people in Honduras. "When I first went there, the local people were migrant labor for everyone else," Thomas said.

"They were only getting one corn crop a year; they had to look for work so they could feed themselves. I thought I'd like to see the little guy win one every once in a while." Years later, he returned with PAG. "We started with soil conservation and improvement, later, health care and literacy," he continued. "We added pieces as we went along. One day, we found some old peach trees with tiny, hard fruit.

We thought, 'If they could grow, we could get other peach trees. And if peaches could grow, then apples could.' We bought 1,500 apple trees from Florida to experiment. Three years later, they began to produce fruit. 'Holy Cow,' I thought. 'This could be a business here.' The IAF gave us the first real support. Peaches were more of a problem. We tried several varieties but nothing worked until we grafted budwood onto the local root stock. Bang! It took off."

Part of IAF's funding was to finance the planting of 50,000 apple trees, but the project blew right past that target and in just a few years 250,000 trees covered the slopes and valleys. Working with APROCEL, the Cellaque Producers' Association that it helped create, PAG built packing centers in several communities; cold storage and processing plants to produce juice, cider and preserves; a network of roads to transport the products; and a distribution center on the Pan American Highway that links Honduras with El Salvador and Guatemala. Farmers suffered a devastating blow in 1998 when Hurricane Mitch wiped out both orchards and roads. PAG helped many replant, and production is back up to several hundred tons of both fruits each year, but still below what was hoped for. Using its own heavy equipment, PAG also rebuilt 120 kilometers of farm-to-market roads in seven months so that farmers could get their fruit out again to the middlemen who sell it in San Pedro Sula and country towns through western Honduras.

Photo Caption: Jesus Vásquez' apple orchard, Belén Gualcho.

The experience convinced PAG to avoid dependence on one cash crop. The storage and distribution infrastructure already in place and the acquisition of three large refrigerated trucks enabled a move into large-scale vegetable production. That shift required another major infrastructure effort—an extensive irrigation system completed in 2009 that taps water from the mountains. With labor supplied by local residents, PAG built three large dams and 11 community water tanks and laid 89 kilometers of main irrigation lines, over a quarter of it a pipe six inches in diameter, plus supply distribution lines and drip irrigation lines reaching into the farmers' fields. (PAG continues to stretch the distribution and drip lines to additional farmers.) PAG's scaled system calls for each farmer to plant an average of an eighth of an acre with new vegetable crops each week and harvest an eighth of an acre. A computer tracks how much will be harvested each week and where, data that enables APROCEL to market the produce smoothly. Eventually, PAG expects up to 600 farmers to have at least one acre in vegetables. "Some of the earlier farms are now making as much as \$1,000 a month," Thomas said this year. "Just this last month, we sold over 66 tons of vegetables to 10 buyers around the country, including Wal-Mart and the La Colonia supermarket chain. Eventually this area will supply significant food to El Salvador. We've already begun exporting lettuce there and to Guatemala as well."

Despite PAG's long-term commitment to the communities where it works, its staff tries to keep the final handshake in mind. "We've really tried to focus on this in the last 15 years—to plan how we are going to get

out before we go in," Thomas said. "Let's figure out some way that the project's going to be standing on its own at a certain time. It may not work out to be exactly the time that we imagined, because we can't know all the variables. But at some point, you want to see the project completely sustainable."

In Belén Gualcho, the irrigation system should continue to support APROCEL long after PAG is gone. Before PAG began work on it, each farmer who would benefit from the system agreed to a monthly user fee of \$7 for every tarea (unit measuring 629 square meters) irrigated. With a minimum of 500 farmers cultivating an average of one half-acre of vegetables (some already have six acres in production), that means \$17,500 in user fees paid monthly to APROCEL, which expects to assume full control of the project in three years. The levy finances credit, technical assistance and marketing services. By nature, some projects can't be self-supporting. The legal services program, referenced earlier, was initially funded by the American Jewish World Service. But PAG negotiated with municipalities and convinced them to cover space and utilities. "For a while, we continued to pay the salaries of the paralegals,"

Thomas said. "But now we've convinced the municipal governments to put that cost right into their budgets."

Photo Caption: Norma Leticia Vásquez, daughter of a farming couple, Belén Gualcho.

Beyond the goal of institutionalizing projects is the question of PAG's own future when Thomas eventually steps down. Many major accomplishments have rested on his ability to tap into church networks in the U.S. for funding and on his uncanny sense for where there might be a load of lumber or old vehicles and machinery waiting to be donated. "I know that makes it harder for whoever comes after me, all these personal contacts I have," he admitted. "But I've been working on grooming people who could step in when I leave." That grooming includes university scholarships as well as Thomas' own mentoring, and he has committed to four more years at the helm to allow time for a smooth transition. Whoever steps in, he or she will be taking over an organization that has been shaped by Chet Thomas' experiences, all the way back to his rural childhood in Western Pennsylvania. Throughout his life, Thomas has thought big without forgetting the gritty details of rural life. PAG's projects compare in scope and ambition with those of development organizations that work on a large scale. They aim at transforming entire regions. They just recognize that it takes a long time.

Grassroots development is generally seen as an approach constrained by limited amounts of money invested for limited impact with the hope that some improvement will result in lives of people in a community. It is not taken as seriously as the multimillion dollar projects undertaken by the World Bank or USAID to which most development assistance funding goes. PAG projects show the potential of the grassroots approach if applied strategically and patiently. They also make one question why funding agencies, including the Inter-American Foundation, don't commit to the long haul in the same way. To its credit, the IAF has funded PAG repeatedly over the last 20 years. But it has tended to see each funding decision as discrete and limited to the

proposed project. Only in a few situations has the IAF supported a specific development process over the long term, generally because a Foundation representative was able to grasp the strategic vision of an organization or movement. It may be that the IAF is too prone to play "small ball" as opposed to going for home runs. It may be that the three-year project framework, as common at IAF as anywhere else in the development business, works against support for a strategic vision that grows out of involvement at the grassroots.

Chet Thomas' work demonstrates the key principle of the grassroots approach—that true development begins at the bottom, with one-on-one encounters with individual human beings. "We'd like to see every farmer growing all the food he needs for himself, plus a cash crop for the market," he emphasized. To get there, PAG agents sit down with a farmer and hand him a piece of stiff paper.

They ask him to draw his house and the fields on his farm. "We've done hundreds of these," Thomas explained the exercise. "You say, 'OK, here we put the basic grains, corn and beans. On this other part, we'll put a cash crop, a permanent orchard—apples, peaches, mangoes, avocados, cacao—whatever grows well there.' We talk to the woman: 'OK, you want food available to feed your family, like yucca and sweet potatoes, fruit crops, citrus trees, avocados, spice trees, especially a lot of plantains.' So you draw it in. And then the other areas can be put into fish tanks or goats, chickens, hogs. Pretty soon, you have this whole piece of paper filled up. You don't do it all at once. Farmers can't afford to take a big risk. But you say to them, 'Let's do a little risk. And if you get good results, then we can do other things over here.'"

PAG calls the outcome of this bottom-up planning the finca tradicional mejorada, or improved traditional farm, and it sounds a lot like that farm Thomas fondly remembers in Gobbler's Hollow, lacking only the snow and the maple syrup.

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Photo Caption: Adrián Díos and sons Heber and Adrián, Belén Gualcho.