

WEAVING HOPES

Translated by Cecilia Chapa

Interview with Sebastián Núñez Cruz and María Luisa de Núñez

Sebastián: This little shop is basically a family business. All the family works here and we sell to people from all over. We perform different tasks, beginning with raw cotton and ending with a finished product. For example, we make tablecloths, table runners, place mats, and curtains and drapes of different sizes. We also train the workers. We help those who are in need. Here we have young, low income students. They help me [in the shop] and I help them by giving them a job. Little by little we move ahead with our shop of what is called pedal loom textile craftwork.

Did you design the equipment and everything?

Yes, everything.

Where did you learn?

A relative, who has been in Heaven for a long time now –he’s dead- taught me when I was very little.

Sometimes it is very difficult to keep the shop going. Sometimes we are in the red. But we keep on working. Because not having any money is not a reason to stop working. We have to keep working. We have to look for work. As owners, we have to advertise more, the young ones too. They keep to their work schedule. And we help them go to school. So, we keep going. Everybody is welcome. We invite everyone to come. Our goal is that those who come, domestic or international, buy our hand-made goods.

Tell me, how does the family organize for work?

Well, my role is mainly marketing and advertising. My wife and children work on gluing and attaching the warps. My wife spins thread too. And when we need someone to go up on the loom, my wife rides her loom.

And what does Doña María Luisa do here? What is your job?

Ma. Luisa: My job is to help my husband, and to go out to sell.

Do you sell?

I sell everything, from place mats to anything else they craft here. Here I choose the pieces for sale. And it’s me who brings the money to buy raw materials and everything else. Because you can see that we don’t yet have any financial aid.

Where do you sell your goods?

On the streets or to friends. Only that way, because we don't have a place at the markets.

At the markets?

We don’t have a place in them. [We can’t get into them.]

And what about the craft shops?

No, because the truth is we don't have the support [to sell there].

Why?

Because, how can I say it? Because we are not recognized. The recognition of what is genuine craftwork is very poor, like our goods, for example. Our craftwork's recognition is very poor. Foreign products, from several places, are better known, and [acknowledgement of] our craftsmanship is very low. [Tourists don't know our genuine craftwork.] In fact, we do sell, but we have very little support from the Institute [Instituto MARCA Chiapas, de artesanías y productos de Chiapas]. In fact, my husband has diplomas, we have received awards. We've been awarded first, second and third places, and we've been interviewed by the media. We have fifty or sixty awards. But that's all! This shop has many awards and diplomas, but we don't have [financial] aid [from the government].

We would like that someone to acknowledge our work and help us a little. What I need is micro-credit, which I've always fought for, to be able to buy raw materials. But it's not like that. Foreign crafts are the ones known, [machine-made crafts] from the Guatemalan and China. However, our products are unknown. In a few words, Chiapas' craftsmanship has been diminished. It has been relegated to a very low place. They [buyers] don't know which are the genuine handicrafts. Therefore, what I've been fighting for is a marketplace to sell our artisan pieces, but I've not been successful yet. It is true that we have won first places. Yes, it is. For instance, [we've won] the Fray Bartolomé [de las Casas] State award. We have won that diploma, but we've gone no further. This [loom] has traveled; it has been to Mexico City. It has been in other places like Tabasco and Veracruz. They [State Government] have taken the loom [to shows], but it stops there. We don't have a market for our products. Our sales are only among friends. We sell a little to tourists or I go door to door. We don't want to display our artisan pieces on the sidewalk because then it would be [like the] low quality crafts. The reason we work on quality is so we are able to sell our crafts. So, that's what we do.

What happened to these children?

They are orphans. They don't have a father or a mother.

Sebastián: And one of them is sick. He's in Tuxtla's hospital.

Ma. Luisa: He's been there fifteen days. The lady over there has no home. She has nothing.

Sebastián: That's why she's here, with us.

Ma. Luisa: She's here [living] with us. She's here because, as I tell her, at least here we eat tortilla with salt.

Sebastián: This is for making tortillas. It is the *nixtamal* from which we all eat. It's what we live on.

Ma. Luisa: To go on, because their entire house was crushed as a result of the problem in Tabasco. [The flood] damaged the whole town of Juan de Grijalva. The hill came down on top of them and their homes are gone. The kid over here doesn't have a mom or dad. He lost his home. It was crushed. The same happened to the kid over there. They have their grief and sorrow. And I tell them, don't worry, we can all sleep here. And to eat, at least we have the *pozol*. I tell them, don't think that it's only a little *pozol*, eat it and don't go out on the street. It doesn't matter that you're not my flesh and blood, it hurts me

because I'm also human. I can feel the sorrow too. I've lost no one. I haven't lost my family, but for me it is as if I've lost everything because I can see they are in pain. Thus, I'm the one supporting them for now. But, for the same reason, I need [financial] aid too. So I can help people, like those children, better. I have four children who have no mother. I've four children. Right now two are in the hospital. They've been there for fifteen days.

What happened?

He has some problem and will have an operation. And in truth, as I tell you, it hurts me because nobody opens a door so we can sell more of our products to feed other children. And I am always looking for that help. I go out to sell two or three of our artisan pieces to buy half a kilo [about a pound] of tortillas. [...] And so it hurt me very much when the Government sent someone to take away the [sewing] machine, because it made me feel worthless. The deception, as I told you, hurts very much. It would have been better if they hadn't given it to me [in the first place]. It is the same as giving a piece of candy to a child and [suddenly] take it away. I don't know. It really upset me that they took it away.

Of course.

It really upset me. Because the Government treats us like trash. And that's what hurt me very much. If [the Government] didn't want to give [the sewing machine], then they shouldn't have said so.

Yes, of course.

It would've been better not to tell me. It would've been better not to give it to me because I don't like deception. And that's what hurt very much. And at that time I was giving a lot more to the people from that damaged place. The Government says: "I've already given enough help to the people of Juan de Grijalva." It's a lie! It's not true! There's no help. It's not true! So far they have not provided all the help that is needed there. That's why all these people are here with me. I have eight children without family. That's what I have.

You have a really big heart. Right?

We can only have them here because I have a small family. I only have two children [of my own], but with the kids that I took in, well, now I have ten children.

You have ten with you now?

Yes, I have ten. Right now we are ten all together.

And what happened with the ones that were going to the North? When I last came, in February [2008], some said they were ready to go. Did they leave?

Of the youngsters, two left for the North.

What happened to them?

We've heard nothing yet.

You don't know anything, whether they arrived or not?

We know nothing. We don't know if they got there okay or not.

When did they leave?

In February.

Yes, when I was here they were about to leave.

They were desperate. And their mother was left with nothing at all. She was [...] and we cannot say: "You know what? Get to work and I'll pay you. For, how could we if we struggle to have something to eat? The only thing I can offer is my home and tortillas. I cannot pay for more. Not even the Government opens a door for us to have a job.

But you have a job. You have work. You have an excellent family business.

But what we want right now, what I want, as I've always said, is a secure market and that someone gives us a microcredit. That's what I want. Because, as I tell you, give me 100,000 pesos [about \$10,000 US]. [That someone would say] You know what? Get to work. And I would make them yield, my 100,000 pesos. I would pay them back, as I always say. I'll repay them, I tell you! I'll pay my debt! But what I want is a loan so I can buy raw material. That's what I want.