

THE GRIND

FROM EQUAL EXCHANGE YOUR COFFEE ROASTER



Honduras: THEN & NOW

By VIRGINIA BERMAN, Community Sales Manager

After 20 years, an Equal Exchange worker-owner returned to the Honduran coffee farming community where she served in the Peace Corps, wondering, did they survive as coffee producers?

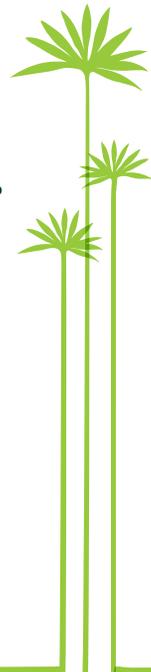


THEN: 1991

After two years of Peace Corps service, I left my mountain village, Santiago de Puringla in Honduras. Those two years changed my life. When I arrived, I was a recent liberal arts college grad, but it was in Puringla that I got the real schooling I was seeking, living and working with subsistence farmers who grew coffee, corn, and beans.

Don Beto stood out from the beginning. He recruited his friends to learn the new ideas of planting. We took field trips to observe model plots of other farmers in nearby towns who'd learned organic farming techniques. When I left Puringla, the farmers were growing in new ways: reducing erosion; conserving the top soil; and reducing their reliance on chemicals. They were seeing improvements in yields.

The challenge? The price of coffee dropped to all-time lows. I learned of the drop in prices when I returned home. I realized the problem the farmers faced was something we could help solve with the U.S. market.



NOW:

This September, I went back to Honduras for the first time, now a worker-owner of Equal Exchange. When I arrived, I heard that Don Beto was still there and had a beautiful farm. I couldn't wait to see him; my heart was in my throat. As I drove up the windy mountain road, it was the same wild feeling of big sky and mountains as it was for me 20 years ago.

My farmer friends had been alerted that I would be coming. I saw some familiar faces gathered to see me. And then Don Beto himself drove up in a pickup truck. Our smiles were so wide and happy they could barely fit on our faces.

Twenty years later our promises to each other are kept. The farmers are surviving on the land, working hard together, growing coffee. I am able to fulfill a dream of buying their delicious, mountain-grown coffee at a price that is good for them, one that truly values their craft and offers dignity and respect. I, with Equal Exchange, can now buy their coffee and share the stories of the people who taught me humility, hard work, generosity, community.