

# Woman's love for Mexican villagers led to role as liaison for handmade quilts\_30705

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## Woman's love for Mexican villagers led to role as liaison for handmade quilts

**By Ken Camp**

*Managing Editor*

More than 20 years ago, Mickey Burleson and her husband, Bob, began helping women in an isolated Mexican village improve their quality of life by marketing their handmade quilts to buyers in Texas.

La Caldera quilts became sought-after treasures by Woman's Missionary Union leaders who browsed the bookstore at the annual Texas Leadership Conference in Waco, and they began to fetch top dollars at an annual pre-Christmas craft show in Salado.

In the last two decades, Mrs. Burleson estimates the women of La Caldera have made and sold close to 5,000 quilts.

Times and circumstances have changed, and she wants to hand off the ongoing responsibility of marketing the quilts to someone else.

"We feel led to do other things at this point, but I still have a heart for these women," she explained. "Love for the people is in our blood now. But

I can't carry the responsibility any more."

Working with the women of La Caldera always has presented challenges, but whoever takes over the reins from Mrs. Burleson will confront different problems than those she and other volunteers first encountered in the early 1980s.

At that time, the people of La Caldera lived in a dusty village in the northern Chihuahua desert, eight hours by car from the nearest town. Men made a meager living by harvesting the wax from candelilla plants, while their wives tended small gardens and made piecework bedspreads from scraps.

Mrs. Burleson and other volunteers from First Baptist Church in Troy noticed the primitive beauty of those simple homespun bedcovers, and that prompted them to create a cottage industry that soon thrived.

Church volunteers provided the women with a quilting frame and other supplies, and then Mrs. Burleson marketed the villagers' first seven quilts at craft fairs in Central Texas. The quilts were so well-received, the women of La Caldera began to expand their operation.

Initially, WMU groups throughout Texas donated scraps for the women to use, and members of First Baptist Church of Troy supplied them with additional frames and hooks. Later, Texas volunteers advanced the women the supplies they needed, with the understanding that the cost of those raw materials—purchased at wholesale prices from bedding manufacturers and mills—would be deducted from their proceeds once the quilts sold.

"We wanted them to become independent," Mrs. Burleson explained.

Over the last 10 years, the women of La Caldera averaged sales of 300 quilts a year.

Along the way, volunteers from First Baptist Church in Troy—joined by members of churches in Moffatt, Bellmead, Temple, Lorena, Morgan’s Point, San Antonio and Abilene—made regular mission trips to La Caldera three times a year. Working through the Baptist General Convention of Texas’ River Ministry, the Texas Baptists provided medical, dental and optometry clinics, built a church and school for the village and conducted Vacation Bible Schools.

“As we had the opportunity to get to know them, and they came to know the Lord, the women came to feel loved by him and by us. They just blossomed,” Mrs Burleson said.

But in recent years, the people of La Caldera have scattered. The market for candelilla wax dried up, and goat herds failed. Then the Mexican government sold the public land on which the families had been living to a private company, and the villagers were forced to move.

Many former residents of La Caldera relocated to colonias surrounding Ciudad Acuna and Muzquiz. Husbands and older sons work long hours in assembly plants for about \$60 a week.

“They’re making more money than when they were in the outback, and they have electricity and running water—even if it comes to them in a hose,” Mrs. Burleson said. “But the families also have expenses they didn’t have when they lived in the village, and they don’t have the same support systems.”

Although the former residents of La Caldera live up to four hours away from some of their former neighbors and distant relatives, they have managed to stay in contact, start a church in one of the colonias and continue their cooperative quilting venture.

“The women have taken such pride in their work, and they enjoy doing it,” Mrs. Burleson said. “They want to continue to be able to work in their

homes.”

Lack of a centralized location for the quilters will be one challenge faced by anyone who agrees to take on the challenge of coordinating the program, she noted. But the women desperately need someone in the United States with business experience to help them.

“The problem with just dropping the program because we feel called to retire is that the quilters themselves would have a very difficult time selling their quilts in Mexico for what they are worth,” she said.

“They would also have a difficult time getting raw materials, as good quality fabrics are hard to come by in the areas where they live, and even those of lesser quality are more expensive than they are here.

“It would be sad to see them unable to profit from the wonderful skills many of them have developed and the talent they have demonstrated. Furthermore, we have come to deeply love and admire these women, and we would hurt with them and for them if we left them with no opportunity to make decent earnings from their work.”

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“We will be more than happy to work with any group during the transition period. If they want to do things the same way we have, that’s fine, and we’ll be glad to teach them,” she said. “But we are quite aware that there are probably better ways to carry out the ministry, and we would say, ‘More power to you,’ if they wanted to try something new.”

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