

Dancing to Her Own Tune

MANY IN COSTA RICA BENEFIT FROM THE WORK OF BEVERLY KITSON

by leah dobkin

Whether she is, building a public library in a small Costa Rican town, or helping American families escape the civil war in El Salvador, or pulling a seven foot snake from under her kitchen sink Beverly Kitson is up to the challenge. She has lived and worked in the U.S., St. Thomas of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Jamaica, the Philippines, El Salvador, and Costa Rica, but Costa Rica is her true home. She retired to Nosara, a small town 250 kilometers from the capital of San Jose on the Pacific Coast in the Province of Guanacaste. It used to be a farming and cattle-raising community. In the late 1960s, an American bought and subdivided the pasture land into building sites. It has been a growing, environmentally conscious enclave for expatriates ever since. Germans, Austrians, Swiss, Canadians, and U.S. expatriates live there.

In 1970, Beverly and her husband David bought an ocean view property in Nosara, Costa Rica, built a 2-bedroom cabin, and vacationed there with their children. David was the Deputy Director of the Peace Corp in Costa Rica and later the Director of the Costa Rica Academy in San Jose. Beverly was a professional dancer and founded the Escuela de Danza, dance program, at the Universidad Nacional. She also taught education and English at a variety of educational institutions.

Together they raised a son and daughter abroad. Their son, Alden was two years old and their daughter, Colleen, was two months old when they moved to Costa Rica. "We wanted our children to learn Spanish while it was easy. They would have Spanish in their brain and the brain doesn't forget. Once stored, the children could make use of their Spanish if they chose to and our children have," said Kitson. Alden works for an electric company in Guatemala and Colleen teaches Spanish and ESL in Florida.

The children were raised in a small town outside of San Jose surrounded by country-side and attended a bilingual school. They played outside all the time with Tico (Costa Ricans) children. The family had horses and she would let her children, as early as five years old, ride the horses by themselves. Beverly said "Neighbors would ask me if I were scared the children will get hurt? I would reply no, I have complete confidence in the horse."

HELPING AMERICANS ESCAPE, BUT STAYING BEHIND

The family lived in El Salvador, during the 1980's when guerillas and insurgents were attempting to take over the country. Beverly's children were teenagers at the time. Her husband was working for the Agency for International Development (AID), and she worked for the U.S. Embassy as their Community Liaison Officer. Her job was to make sure the American wives, mothers, and children were happy. She lived in El Salvador during the major offensive. Her job changed from making sure U.S. families were happy to saving their lives by quickly getting them out of the country.

Beverly said: "In November of 1989, during the offensive the insurgent guerillas came to the upper middle class neighbor-

hoods. It was pretty noisy with guns and bombs going off around our home. The men couldn't go to work because it was too dangerous. My husband, son, and I found it interesting and exciting, but my daughter was sometimes scared. The gun fire usually started in the evening and kept going all night. The offensive lasted about ten days and we hunkered down. My role as Community Liaison Officer became very important at this time. All American families and non-essential staff had to be evacuated which involved tracking down the number of children in each family, gathering them up and assisting the Embassy to get them out safely."

COHABITATING IN THE JUNGLE

Beverly's life had quiet, peaceful times too. The family sanctuary was their cabin in Nosara. They spent weekends and vacations there, but it was not always easy.

"When no one is in the house mice and snakes would take over," said Kitson. "The mice lived in the mattresses. We would store pillows on shelves and when we would return to the cabin there was always a snake under the pillows. You have to kill a snake once it enters your home, otherwise it will come back because it thinks it's his home. Thousands of army ants can march into your home at any time and the best thing you can do is let them. We get out of the house for a few hours. When we return, every insect was eaten; the ants did a great job cleaning up our home. But it can be a problem living with critters."

David and Beverly decided to retire in Costa Rica in 1991, but they didn't want to share their house with snakes and critters, so they tore down the cabin and built on the same spot a four bedroom house that was a bit more substantial. The house is perched 100 feet above the Pacific Ocean and the Nosara River. There are beautiful views from any window, allowing the smell and sounds of the ocean to envelop the house. Beverly often sits on her large front porch, that has a view of the sunset 365 days a year. Her neighbors include howler monkeys, ant-eaters, coati mundis, who look like raccoons, and a variety of birds including the rosette spoon bills which look like a flamingo. Beverly says that at times she can spot crocodiles and sharks in the river and ocean below.

Fragrant flowers such as wild orchids surround the house, as does a variety of fruit trees such as grapefruit, limes, mangos, breadfruit, and guanabana, which looks like a melon but has spines and is used for a fruit drink. There is some competition for the fruit. "The monkeys tend to snag the mangos, I take the grapefruit, and the squirrels, coati mundis and raccoons fight over the coconuts. They make such a racket that in the middle of the night you stand straight up in your bed," said Kitson.

Beverly and David's hopes for a happy retirement in this tropical Shangri-La did not pan out the way they expected. Six months after retiring David was diagnosed with cancer and nine months later he died. David loved Nosara and prior to his death helped a number of environmental and community development projects such as beach and wildlife protection projects.

A LIBRARY OF THEIR OWN

Ten years ago, a group of expatriates, headed by John Howells, who wrote the authoritative book for people interested in moving to Costa Rica, *Choose Costa Rica for Retirement*, wanted to do something in David's name. David was a teacher and loved books, so the idea was to have local expatriates create a public library in David's name. They contacted Beverly, who loved the idea and she has spearheaded the intercultural volunteer effort ever since. "When the foreign residents of Nosara began this project ten years ago, many "doubting Thomases" said these people won't read books, they only watch TV, "Wrong!" exclaimed Beverly. "Ticos ordinarily would not come into a library because the libraries in Costa Rica are mainly for research not for light reading, but they came in out of curiosity because it was located in the center of town adjacent to the soccer field and school. What they found was a different type of library that catered to their interests both in reading and in activities and special courses offered. There is a snow ball effect once residents are exposed to books." She added that local people, expatriates and tourists are all benefiting from the library.

HOUSEKEEPER TURNED LIBRARIAN AND OTHER SUCCESS STORIES

Perhaps the greatest success story of the David S Kitson Library is the impact it has on students who use its services. Beverly's housekeeper, Consuelo Juarez, had a strong interest in the library, so Beverly paid her housekeeper's tuition to attend the National University to get a degree in library science. She had to ride over an hour and a half to three hours each way to Nicoya, where the university is located, over dirt roads that are sometimes impassable when it rains. But she persisted, and today she is a degreed librarian in Nosara.

Other students landed good jobs because of the skills learned at the library. Touch typing, for example, is something almost unknown in many parts of Latin America. If you go to any government office or business where keyboards are in use, you'll frequently see bureaucrats and secretaries laboriously hunt-and-peck their way through documents. A bonifide typist

is worth her weight in "gallo pinto" in an office setting according to Beverly. She said that most businesses who have switched to modern-day technology (computer word-processors instead of Underwood uprights), still have employees who are on the two-finger, hunt-and-peck system. A library-trained, 10-finger keyboarder is considered a super star employee and extremely valuable and marketable.

Alonso Cascante who was an electrician applied his newly learned computer skills to do his proposals for his electrical business. He uses the spreadsheet program 'Excel' to submit bids and work orders and his business is prospering. Tanya Rosales learned English in the library conversational courses, and now she is an English teacher in a nearby town.

A large permanent expatriate community and snow birds support the library every year. They even raised \$100,000 to build a new building to more adequately house a bee hive of activities and services. Future plans involve expanded services to school children to teach them how to alphabetize, and use a dictionary and encyclopedia which is not taught in the schools.

The David S Kitson Memorial Library has opened a new world to local residents who formerly had no access to books thanks to Beverly and her volunteers. Beverly Kitson exemplifies how older people living abroad, can make a significant difference in their newly adopted community.

THE GOOD, BAD, AND BEAUTIFUL LIVING IN COSTA RICA

Beverly has lived in Nosara on and off for thirty-six years, but has been living full time for 13 years. She has seen a lot of changes. Nosara got electricity in 1983, and telephones in 1996.

"I'm a good pioneer. I would have been good in a covered wagon. When I first moved to Costa Rica I couldn't get wine anywhere in the country. We had to bring peanut butter here even though peanuts grow in Costa Rica. Now you can get just about anything in the local stores. There are difficulties in daily life such as you can't get the exact ingredients for a recipe and you have to improvise and use your imagination. Some expatriates feel it is a challenge and fun, but for other it's a frustration. For me, some days it's a pain in the butt and other days fun. You have to pay the electric bill with cash, and it's difficult to get cash. I've adapted by writing a check for a larger amount at a food store for extra cash and then go some where else to do it again, as we have no bank in the community. Supermarkets, however, do not want to be a bank. For larger sums, you have to drive to Nicoya which is one and a half to three hours away depending on road conditions to do your banking. Sometimes the road is closed during the rainy season. But this is happening less and less because there is so much development here. It's getting easier." From Beverly Kitson

One of Beverly's greatest joys in Costa Rica is the view from her home and watching the tidal changes in the ocean and river and the sunsets. She plays a lot of tennis, participates in yoga and pilates classes, and works with the Ministry of National Resources trying to protect the beaches and parks. What is most joyful to Beverly is working in the library four to six hours a day. "Working in the library gives me tremendous satisfaction because we are helping people to change their lives. Education has become an important part of Nosaras's resident's lives.