

Latin evening raises funds for Guatemala

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A young Guatemalan girl who was left with nothing after Hurricane Mitch hit her village more than 10 years ago is now attending university.

Thanks to funds raised by Canadian Central American Relief Effort (CCAME), things are different for people living in Guatemalan mountain villages.

Last night at Le Treport Banquet Hall on The Queensway, CCAME held its 11th annual fundraising gala. Close to \$15,000 was raised to continue the community work done by the group in the La Union district of the Merendon Mountains.

"When I first saw Joanne Perez, hiding inside the school she attended, the roof missing ... she had nothing," said Hilda Rossi, a former Mississauga resident who is the organization's founder. "She was in poverty, wearing rags and no shoes. I asked her 'what would you like to be?'"

"And she said, I don't know. I want a new dress."

Today, Perez is studying to be a registered nurse, thanks to CCAME.

Born and raised in Guatemala, Rossi came to Port Credit in 1964 to study English, and planned to return to her hometown to share what she learned. Her mom died three months later so she decided to stay here.

"I've been blessed with so much in Canada. Canadians have a huge heart, all over the world," she said. "I'd like to reach everyone because Guatemala and the indigenous people living in the mountains must reach their heart."

That sentiment also forms the group's motto: "The disaster might be over, but the reconstruction continues."

A group of 20 CCAME volunteers, including Rossi, will leave for Guatemala in March. They'll be doing dental work and reaching out to help as many people as possible.

Since the organization's first fundraising dance, the group has helped to build five houses, two community centres, a community store, sewing projects, education scholarships, dental clinic and medical teams.

Mississauga resident Rosie DeBiasi helped to form CCARE. She says it has changed her life.

"It fulfilled something for me. I've never regretted a single moment," said DeBiasi.

"Everybody should be doing this ... helping out another human being."

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Swingin'. Jaime Solis and Cynthia Pilgrim entertain the crowd during the Canadian Central American Relief Effort (CCAMRE) fundraiser. *Photo by Claudio Cugliari*