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Rotarians build hope for Guatemala Mayans

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They started out building homes for the hurricane-ravaged inhabitants of a tiny village in the mountains of Guatemala.

Now, they are building something a lot more important, and a lot more difficult.

"Now it's hope we are building, more than anything else," said Diamond Rattansi, president of the Mississauga Airport Rotary Club.

Rattansi's 20-member club has joined with a group of central American expatriates who call themselves the Halton Peel Central American Relief Effort (HPCARE) to try to rebuild the lives of the Mayan natives, whose village was flattened by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

For the past three years, members of the group have travelled each spring to Timushan to make lives there a little bit better, building five homes and then providing the advice and materials to get a community centre constructed.

Last week, the club got something it never expected to receive -- a personal thank-you from the leader of the local Mayan community.

Speaking through an interpreter Santos Vasquez said, "I'm so pleased and thankful I am here in Canada. This has been like a dream. I never thought I would be here."

Vasquez was able to travel to Canada because a UN Global Summit of Indigenous Entrepreneurs happened to be held in Toronto.

"I have to thank Hilda Rossi and Rosie DiBiasi because they are the ones who have made this dream come true," he said of the group's founders.

The community centre, which contains a medical clinic, a library, a carpentry shop, baking ovens and 14 sewing machines, has made a huge difference to the community, Vasquez said. The village is now looking at the possibility of developing a co-operative farm and is actively seeking ways to market its only crop, coffee.

In an interview, Rattansi, a native of Tanzania in East Africa, said he had never witnessed conditions like those in the "forgotten" mountain village.

"I saw some dwellings that were literally made of sticks and mud. The family, dogs and chickens all live under one roof and they all sleep on the mud," said the Mississauga businessman. "What a difference a small investment can make, as we have seen. But there is so much still to be done."

Upcoming fundraising events for the cause include a 5-kilometre run, walk or ride, Sept. 27 on the waterfront trail in Burlington and Oct. 5 luncheon at the Fogolar Country Club in Oakville.