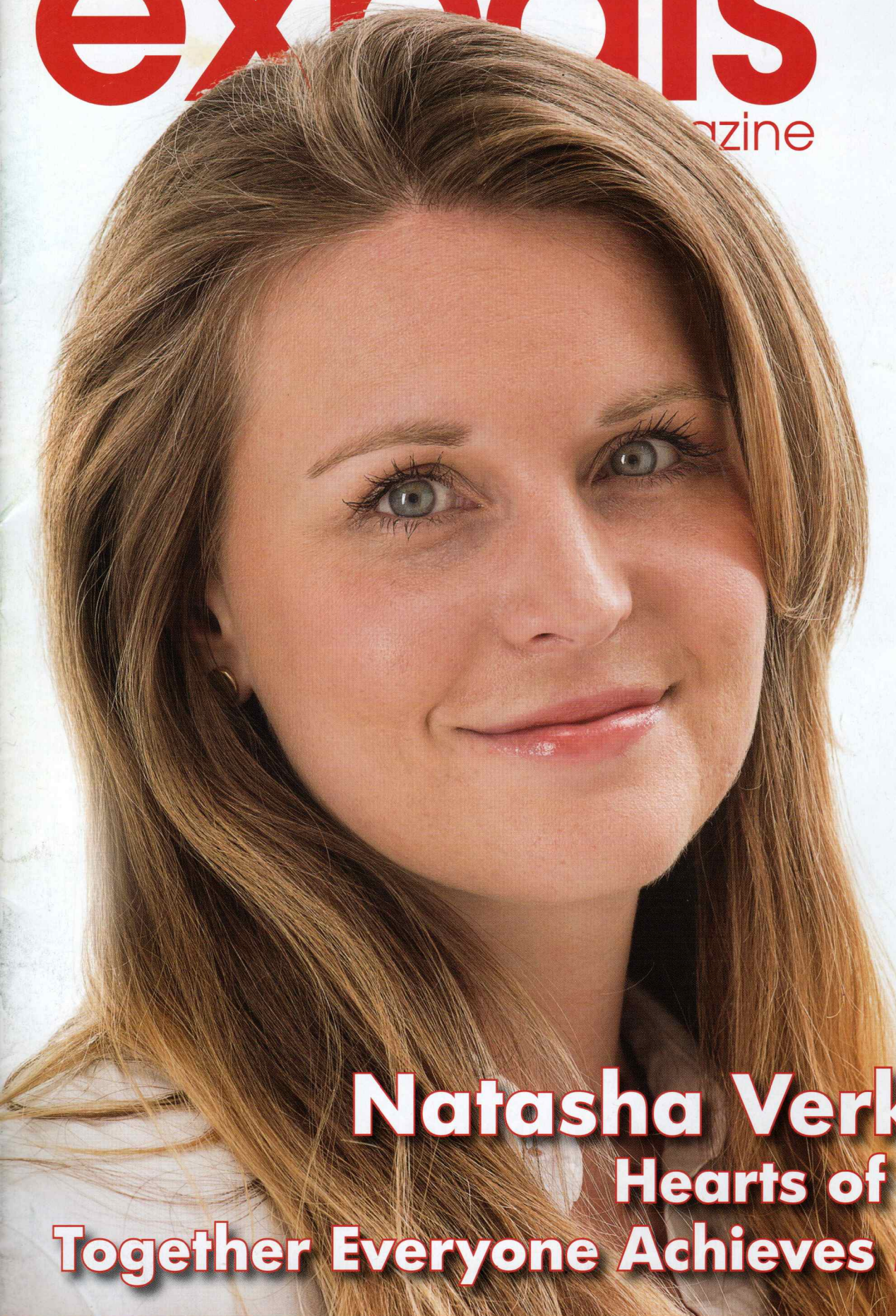


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**Natasha Verkley**  
**Hearts of Gold**

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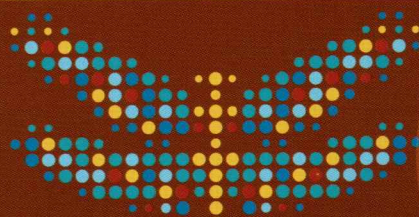
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# CUENCA expats

magazine

ISSUE  
**3**

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# Outstanding Dental Care

## From the Smile Makeover Specialists

**A**lthough you may have never suffered from cavities before, as we age, we enter a second round of cavity prone years. One of the major causes of cavities during this period is dry mouth. Dry mouth is not a normal part of aging but rather a side effect of over 500 medications. Medications which are taken to treat an array of conditions such as allergies, asthma, high-blood pressure, high cholesterol, anxiety, pain, depression, Parkinson's and/or Alzheimer's diseases as well as many others. This fact alone is one reason why it is important to talk to your dentist about the medications you taking. Your dentist will even have recommendations on how to relieve dry mouth and thus reduce the chance of cavities. Some recommendations include:

- Use of over the counter oral moisturizers
- Drink more water, and drink before you are thirsty
- Use of sugar-free gum or lozenges which stimulate saliva production
- Purchase of a humidifier
- Avoid foods that irritate dry mouth (i.e. coffee, alcohol, carbonated soft drinks and acidic fruit juices)
- And consult with your physician on the possibility about changing medication or dosage

Communication between dentist and patient is vital for the best results. I, as well as my team, strive to treat patients as we would like to be treated. Our team is highly qualified for an array of dental needs such as: oral rehabilitation (bridges and crowns), endodontic, periodontics, and pediatric dentistry.



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I know what you're asking yourself. You're wondering how I'm doing.

I bet it would surprise you to know that I am wondering the same thing about you.

You've been going through a lot lately. So many things have changed in the last year. Life, in general, can be a huge challenge, but then, add relocation to a foreign country, being surrounded by people that don't speak your native language, and having to start from scratch at almost every level—YIKES!

For many, this can be overwhelming.

For me, this new language is hard. Learning Spanish is the most difficult thing so far, but also the most rewarding. I have made the choice to not give up. This is now a part of my new life.

Then there are those moments of physical and emotional exhaustion. Have you experienced those yet? What about that occasional second-guessing as to whether this was the right move? Or, heaven forbid, you've experienced that dreaded D word, depression. Let's do our best to stay out of that place.

You do remember that these are supposed to be the best years of our lives. Don't forget that.

And don't give up. Embrace these challenges—love them—they will make you stronger; eat them up as if they were candy.

Try these simple things if you are experiencing a rough patch:

- If you need a friend, be a friend. No pretense, no judgments, just be your kind self and you will be a magnet for new relationships. This really works.
- Get out of the house. Walk around, sit on a park bench, smile, go to an event, sip coffee in an outdoor cafe, say "buenos dias," "de nada," and "mucho gusto" as many times as you can until it becomes second nature.
- Try to remember that you are doing something here that so many people can only dream about.
- And for me, the most important thing is, "no regrets". Do you know why you hear that saying so often and why people tattoo that on their bodies? Because it is so important. Let that bad stuff go. Forgive it, and forget it, and I guarantee that you will be happier. And don't forget to forgive yourself. None of us are perfect.

These next 20 years are going to be the best years of our lives. Let's get to it.

George

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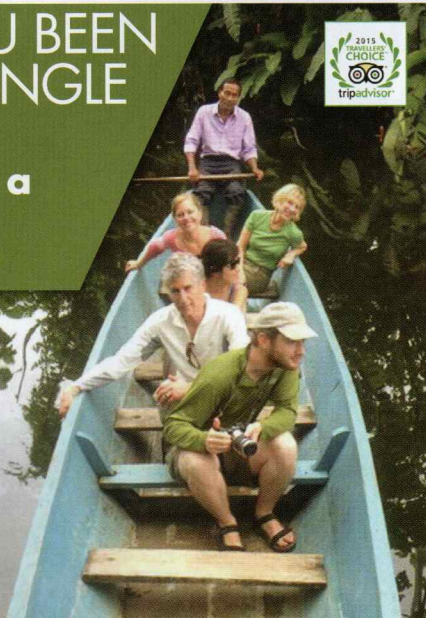
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# Natasha Verkley

## Hearts of Gold

### Together Everyone Achieves More

By Lynne Klippel



From left to right: Johanna Vaca  
Natasha Verkley, Colleen Eschenburg





Christmas giving event



Expats with Christmas giving

Natasha Verkley loves a challenge. When she became the Executive Director of Hearts of Gold, the charitable organization was in the midst of a big transition and a serious cash shortfall. The last 18 months have been filled with problems to solve, miraculous events, and hours of work from hundreds of dedicated volunteers who believe in Cuenca and want to make it a great place for everyone. Even with all those obstacles, Hearts of Gold gave \$75,000 to community organizations in 2014 and aspires to do even more this year.

Natasha's eyes sparkle when she talks about empowering people. As a child, the twenty-nine-year-old dreamed of becoming the Prime Minister of Canada because of her passion for social change and helping others. That dream led her to work in the Prince Edward Island Legislative Assembly, in Mexico, and later in South Africa on a microfinancing project. Natasha came to Cuenca in 2013, joining her parents, Richard and Sheryle Verkley, who started Hearts of Gold in 2010.

In 2013, Hearts of Gold went through the rigorous process to become an officially recognized Ecuadorian foundation, requiring extensive paperwork and on-going monthly reporting on the finances and activities. The Ecuadorian government monitors all foundations to ensure that funds are used properly and that the program plans submitted by the organization are implemented as intended.

Hearts of Gold discovered an important niche during that process. There are many Ecuadorian charitable organizations in Cuenca working hard to serve specific populations. These organizations, however, are so busy providing services that they

don't have time to create a sustainable infrastructure, proper program planning, fundraising, or to complete the proper reporting to the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion (MIES) which can lead to unfortunate closures. "Hearts of Gold partners with these local charities to take some of the organizational burdens off their shoulders so that they can spend more time helping children, families, and seniors. It is a great marriage of the two cultures, working off each other's strengths, cooperating

together. After all, what does someone from Calgary Canada or Colorado USA know about direct services in Cuenca Ecuador? By allowing our partners to be the experts in the field we have found ways to coordinate our cultural strengths and to help where they struggle most," Natasha explains.

Organization, program planning and fundraising are not always sexy, but they are crucial to the long-term survival of community programs. Natasha shares, "Imagine if someone wanted to donate books to some underprivileged children. Without proper planning, assessment of need, funding, and infrastructure, those books could be the wrong ones or sit unused, with no teacher, no distribution system, and no way to measure the impact of that donation on the community. Hearts of Gold works with their partners in this process so they can do more good in our community."

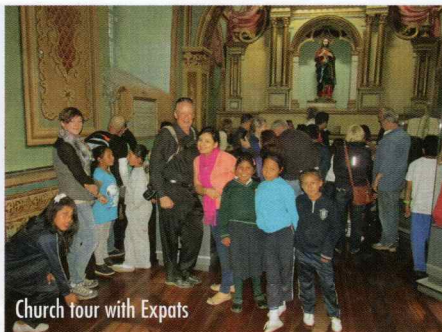
Hearts of Gold also vets each partner carefully, looking for alignment of mission, transparency, and open communications with financials. This ensures that all given funds are going directly to preapproved programs that strengthen the community. It is important for our donors to know that when money is raised for a certain partner program it is our responsibility to make sure the money goes to where it's supposed to, for what it's

"The 4th Annual Hearts of Gold Christmas Gala will be at Quinta Lucrecia on the 4th of December. This year's event will include a wonderful evening of fun and festivities along with something very special – someone will win a car for Christmas!"





Expats crafts with kids



Church tour with Expats



Expat tutoring kids

supposed to. These funds have gone towards purchasing school supplies and school shoes, nutritional needs, home repairs, and even to the implementation of sustainable solutions like the CETAP-Lucy Chicken Coop. Hearts of Gold also connects sponsors with children who are in need of ongoing educational, psychological, and physical assistance.

Hearts of Gold's approach to helping their partners in strategic planning, program design and reporting is so unique that MIES has asked them to train other non-profit agencies in Cuenca. In essence, Hearts of Gold also helps as a "Foundation Coach" to other institutions. Natasha is excited about this growing direction, and has begun similar relations with the Prefecture of Azuay to open the first food bank in Cuenca. The food bank is opening in Turi and in the future will include a small restaurant so that it can become partially self-sustaining.

In the end, Natasha and the Hearts of Gold organization are all about empowerment and sustainability. "We saw that most of the mothers of the children who attend the El Arenal program at Feria Libre could not pay the participation fee, making it very difficult for El Arenal to sustain their program. So, we started looking for solutions to help

these women make a fair wage. One idea for a future program is the creation of a marketable product the women could make that would strengthen their entrepreneurial skills giving them a sense of empowerment. By investing in the mothers, we would be able to maintain their dignity, enable them to create a better life for their families and help El Arenal become more sustainable as the mothers could then contribute financially to their program costs."

One of the difficult things for Natasha has been the swirl of rumors about Hearts of Gold in the expat community. "People say all kinds of things like we have a Swiss bank account with all the donation money in it, that I am pampered, little rich girl, that the money doesn't go to the kids and that Hearts of Gold pays for lavish offices. If people knew how much we've struggled just to keep the doors open this year, while supporting all our programs, they would be shocked." With the reporting guidelines imposed by MIES, the Hearts of Gold finances are reviewed every month with each penny carefully tracked. Natasha and her team work many long hours in a small donated corner of the Gringo Tree office. There is no evidence of pampering anywhere, just hard work, and heartfelt dedication.

Transparency is a key value for Natasha and Hearts of Gold. Anyone is welcome to make an appointment and come in to talk about the programs and look at their financial records which are also online. They have implemented a tracking program that enables funds to be routed to specific programs or to the Rapid Response Fund, which is available for emergency situations. The foundation was also thoroughly vetted and approved by CAF America, a 501(3)(c) organization in the United States, which allows US citizens to donate to Hearts of Gold and receive a charitable tax deduction.

"For me, Hearts of Gold is, in all respects, the volunteers and donors. Without the volunteers and the people who support and believe in us Hearts of Gold would not exist and my team and I wouldn't get to do what we love every day." Natasha is tremendously proud of the volunteers, saying "Cuenca is filled with remarkable people. Many expats want to give back and volunteer. Hearts of Gold has benefitted from volunteers working directly with us, one of our partners, helping with our special events or donation collections. One volunteer even made this article opportunity possible. There are also some expat volunteers with grant writing experience. We have



Group of girls being funny



Miriam Luse and Frances Hogg Lochow  
at Hearts of Gold Christmas Gala  
December 2014



worked with more than 250 volunteers over the years and we are adding new ones every week."

While Hearts of Gold is powered by the volunteers, all the paperwork, programs and activities require the dedication of three full-time employees. Joining Natasha are Johanna Vaca and Colleen Eschenburg. Johanna or "Jo" serves as the Program Director, using her previous experience with MIES and her understanding of Ecuadorian culture to build culturally relevant programs and bring in corporate support from some Cuenca businesses such as Nutra Leche, who donates milk to all the partner organizations. Colleen, the Office Coordinator, attends to the volunteers and office activities of the foundation keeping the day-to-day running smoothly. "It's fun to think that the day to day of Hearts of Gold is run by three young women, one from Canada, one from Ecuador, and one from the United States, all supported by this amazing base of Expats who believe in what we do. We are not only close co-workers, but we are also a family, a family with Hearts of Gold," smiles Natasha.

Currently, Natasha, her team, and a dedicated group of volunteers are busy putting together the plans for the 4th Annual Christmas Gala coming up on December 4th at Quinta Lucrecia. This year's event will include a wonderful evening of fun and festivities, along with something very special—someone will win a new car! Working in partnership with MetroCar Cuenca, the local Chevrolet dealer, Hearts of Gold will be raffling a 2015 Chevy Aveo. "It's important for people to know that no donor funds were used for this car," Natasha says. "This is a wonderful opportunity for some lucky ticket-holder to win a new car and for everyone to share in the excitement of the Auto Lotto."

Hearts of Gold has a history of great work in the Cuenca community and a vision for the future. With your help, we can make that vision happen. See you at the Christmas Gala on December 4th!

Hearts of Gold is always looking for volunteers who would enjoy helping with the star-studded gala or working in some of their partner organizations. If you have a heart for helping others, contact [info@heartsofgoldfoundation.org](mailto:info@heartsofgoldfoundation.org).

*Lynne Klippel is a best-selling author, ghostwriter and publisher who specializes in non-fiction books and information products. She's lived in rural Paute since 2012. For more information on her work visit [www.SageMountainBooks.com](http://www.SageMountainBooks.com).*

## Hearts of Gold Partner Organizations

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Direction of Culture for the Municipality of Cuenca  
Hearts of Gold and the Municipality have established a pioneering thematic language and cultural exchange program to help foster community ties between Cuencanos and Expats.



**CETAP LUCY**  
CENTRO DE ESTIMULACIÓN TEMPRANA Y ATENCIÓN  
PSICOPEDAGÓGICA

### CETAP-Lucy

CETAP-Lucy is an organization dedicated to the well-being of 35 children in the rural community of Chilcapamba. Hearts of Gold has co-created a child sponsorship program that provides a before and after school program, nutrition, sexual education courses, and various therapy programs such as family counseling.



**EQUIDAR**

### Equidar Program from the Prefecture of Azuay

One of Hearts of Gold's newest initiatives is a partnership with Equidar to create the very first food bank in Azuay Province, and the 2nd in the country. This groundbreaking project was co-designed by Hearts of Gold and features continuous support from Equidar and the Azuay Province.



### La Fundación El Arenal (El Arenal)

El Arenal is a foundation serving 80-100 at-risk children and adolescents operating in one of the poorest sectors of Cuenca. They offer a pre-school program, an after-school program, and a nutritional program which Hearts of Gold co-funds with the Municipality of Cuenca.

### Escuela de Educación Básica Particular



### NOVA Educational Center (NOVA)

NOVA is one of Hearts of Gold's newest partners and is an inclusion school where special needs children & normal children are educated together, fostering acceptance and compassion between children. Hearts of Gold currently helps with institutional needs such as teacher training and infrastructural improvements.



**Q: Is dental care important for dogs?****Answer:**

Dental care is important for dogs, as well as humans. When we are not responsible in caring for our dog's teeth, they will eventually develop periodontitis which initially causes bad breath, and leads to pain, lethargy, lack of appetite, and finally heart problems that could end with valve damage and heart failure.

As soon as you get a new puppy, begin the training. First, ensure you remove the food dish after the puppy's last meal of the day, then clean his teeth.

For the first few days, start by putting your fingers in the puppy's

mouth, and playing with him. When he is used to this, begin using the finger toothbrush and rub his gums with it, so he gets used to a brush in his mouth. Do this for a week or so, then add toothpaste to the brush and use it for another week. Some pups will try to bite: do not scold him, just play with him and make the brushing experience something delightful. At this point, you can begin using a soft baby toothbrush daily after your pet's last meal.

If you cannot do the brushing daily, take your pet to your veterinarian every four months to have his mouth cleaned. This preventative measure will help keep him healthy and save you money in the long run.

**YOUR PETS**

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**Answer:** Once you receive your Ecuadorian permanent resident Visa it is stamped inside your passport. Even though your Visa status is permanent, when your passport expires, you'll need to transfer your Visa into your new passport. Gringo Visas can assist you in this process, no matter where your Visa was issued.

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The documentation required is similar to obtaining your original permanent resident Visa.

- A written request in Spanish to the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana with an explanation why you need a new Visa stamp
- A completed Visa application form in Spanish with a passport-size photo attached
- You will also need a current Migratory Movement Certificate, showing international travel in and out of Ecuador

- Color copy of your old passport ID page and Visa page – Notarized
- Color copy of your cedula or Certificate of Empadronamiento – Notarized
- If your passport was lost or stolen, you'll need to provide a copy of a police or Embassy report for the missing passport
- If you have a Pension Visa, you will need to provide an original receipt of your most recent benefit statement
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**Q: If I buy a house in Ecuador, do I need to hire an attorney?**

## REAL ESTATE

### Answer:

The short answer to this question is yes and for many reasons. Real Estate is complicated in the US, but there are a tremendous amount of laws on the books that protect consumers. Even still, most of us wouldn't think twice about hiring an attorney when closing on a new real estate transaction. In Ecuador, generally speaking, the sale of real estate is less regulated. You may also find that sellers here may try to convince you that an attorney is not needed.

Considering the added challenges of doing business in a foreign country like cultural difference and language

difficulties, hiring a good lawyer becomes more important in your endeavor to successfully buy or sell real estate.

Along with hiring an attorney, here are some rules of thumb to ensure you have a successful real estate transaction:

1. Never give the seller a deposit without first consulting an attorney and drafting a formal written agreement.
2. Use an attorney that has no association with the seller, their real estate agent or a middle man.
3. Get a referral from someone you trust.
4. Since all contracts must be in Spanish, it is important to have an attorney that is bi-lingual or has someone on staff that can explain things to you clearly.

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**Q: Why would I send a printed card when e-cards are easier?**

## COMMUNICATION

With today's frantic pace it seems eCards are the popular way to send remembrances. If you are like me, though, you receive hundreds of emails, and eCards are often lost in the mix. They do have their positive side in that they are easy, arrive immediately, and don't cost anything. But is that the message you are trying to send? Or are you trying to let the recipient know they are special and you put thought into what you are sending?

Printed cards show you actually took the time to find just the right card for that special someone. Cards can be held in the hand, put on a desk or can be a keepsake that is lovingly put into a scrapbook to be kept forever. Printed cards can even evoke emotions that the sender could never have fathomed.

I would like to share a story about our daughter, who is a 14-year cancer survivor. We were at a meeting where Sherry told

about a very special time during one of the hardest periods in her life as she was going through cancer treatment and battling for her life. Over a short period of time she received hundreds of cards from people she didn't know. It turned out Mike's coworkers at Sprint had organized a campaign to shower Sherry with cards filled with love and positive thoughts. Not only did they lift her spirits when she got them, but they did so for years after. She put all of the cards on her bedroom ceiling, and on the days she couldn't drag herself out of bed she would look up at the cards and feel the love emanating from them. They stayed there for two years and gave her the strength and courage needed to simply face each day.

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Chicken Entree



Pedro Vivar



David Andrade



Mateo Ambrosi



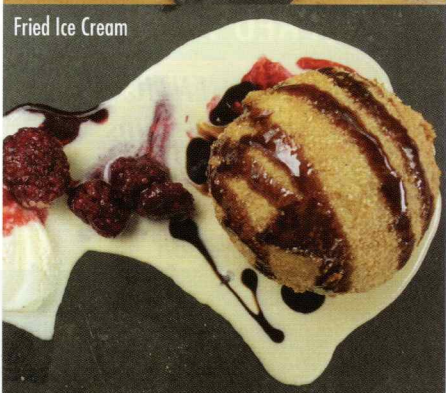
Beef Tips



Shrimp Appetizer



Spinach Salad



Fried Ice Cream

## La Cour Restaurant & Bistro

*Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.*

*- George Bernard Shaw*

When you open a new business there are many challenges and pitfalls. When you take over a successful existing business, you are faced with different challenges, including people's attitudes. While Roux was a popular restaurant and people liked the owners, the great news is that the new owners have been there all along. With a name change and new menu, you are going to want to give La Cour a try.

Risk aside, two of the chefs and a friend have thrown caution to the wind and decided to chase their passion of gastronomy and tackle the challenges of entrepreneurship head on. "As an employee, you're limited to the changes you can make," owner/chef Pedro Vivar says. "We've got a lot of new and innovative things that we are going to do – from changing the menu, to planting an organic garden, to creating a co-op with other restaurants to make sure we have access to the finest ingredients."

One of the most important aspects the new owners want to stress is their philosophy in creating a comfortable and laid back atmosphere where people can have a nice enjoyable dining experience. "One of the big reasons we decided to

buy this restaurant versus finding a new location is the outdoor garden area. It is so beautiful and relaxing – it really fits with our personalities, business goals and what we are trying to accomplish. We want everyone that eats here to be completely relaxed."

While many things have changed, including the name, some things will remain the same. The kitchen is being manned by the same chefs who are now owners, Pedro Vivar and David Andrade. Each brings a unique perspective and a tremendous amount of experience to this venture. Pedro began his career in Argentina with Presidential Catering. He originally went to school to become an attorney. Upon receiving his degree, he decided to follow his heart and began pursuing his passion for the culinary arts. After spending six years at San Isidro, David received a Master's Degree. He is passionate about food and has honed his skills in many fine restaurants here in Cuenca, most recently, Roux. The La Cour team is rounded off by Mateo Ambrosi who is the restaurant's administrator and also an outstanding bartender. (The watermelon mojito I sampled was out of this world).

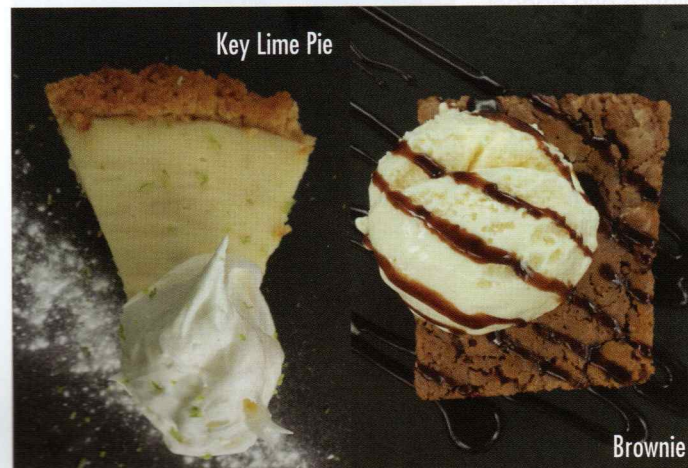
Since there isn't space to wax poetic, I



will get right to the meat and potatoes, or in the case of my meal, chicken and carrots. One of the things that stood out was the presentation of the food. All dishes were served on beautiful slabs of black slate, and presented in an artistic and fresh way. The chicken was cooked to perfection and very moist. It was topped with artichoke hearts, tomatoes, black olives and parmesan cheese, and served with baby potatoes and carrots on the side. We sampled several of the new appetizers on the menu and a salad. The shrimp was cooked in a seasoned, white wine sauce and served with fresh bread. The beef tips were served with a red wine sauce over polenta and topped with caramelized onions. The lightly dressed salad had a spinach base and was topped with almonds, dried cranberries, pears and goat cheese. Although the appetizers were chosen at random, they complimented each other beautifully.

No meal is complete without dessert and we tried three: fried ice cream with mora sauce and chocolate drizzle, key lime pie, and a brownie topped with vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce. It was difficult to choose a favorite, but I think the fried ice cream beat out the key lime pie and the brownie by a nose.

I feel very comfortable saying that you are going to love the food at La Cour, regardless of what you order. It is almost as if the Chefs were previously held back and now they are able to execute their culinary ambitions unfettered. Pedro and David have taken their gastronomy to an entirely new level and we, as patrons, are going to reap the benefits. Buen Provecho!



Key Lime Pie

Brownie



The Patio Area

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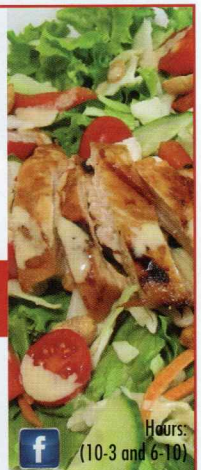


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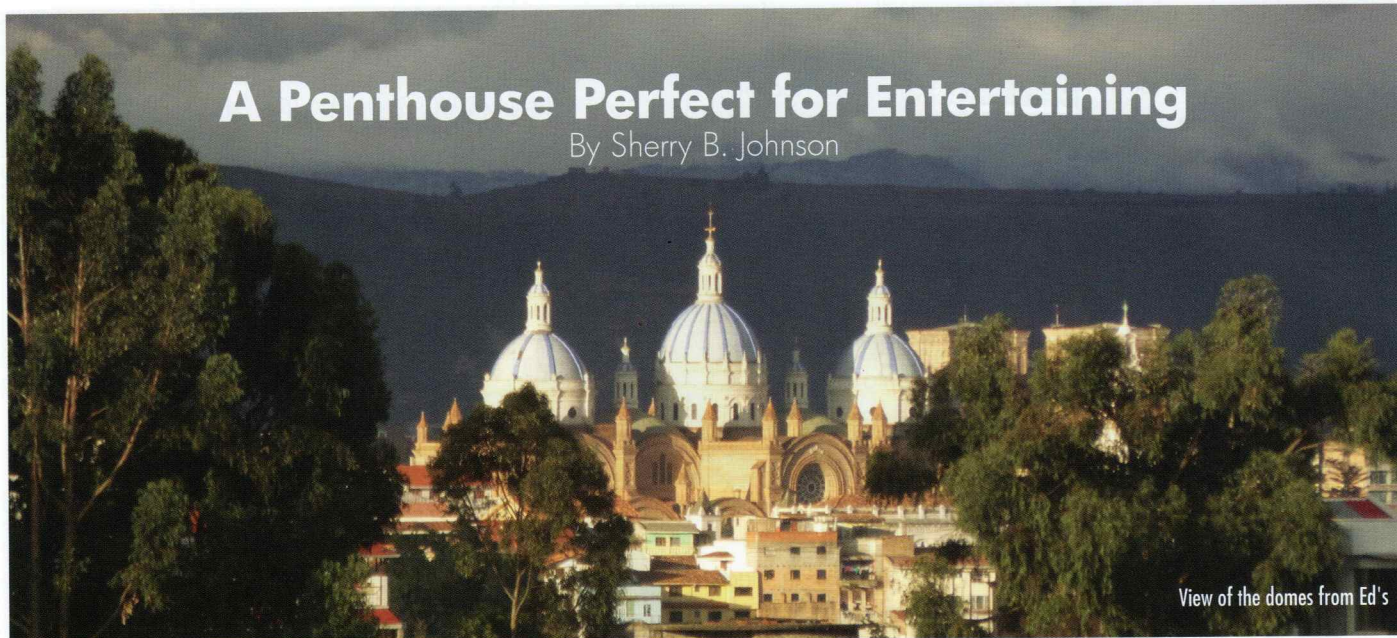
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# A Penthouse Perfect for Entertaining

By Sherry B. Johnson



View of the domes from Ed's

Whether hosting a US State Department cocktail party, making the venue available for charitable events, or throwing his monthly Cuencano/Expat mixer, Ed Lindquist's beautiful and spacious condo is tailor made for entertaining.

Located in the southern part of the city, he has one of the largest outdoor terraces in Cuenca. Spanning the entire length of his apartment, there are three sets of sliding doors that access the terrace, with 180 degree views of Cuenca—from the Cajas to the West, el Centro and the Cathedral Blue Domes due North, to the Church on the hill in Turi to the East. It's a great place to watch fireworks at festival times, or enjoy a quiet drink and the city lights every night. "It took over a year to find this place. Once you decide you want a large terrace for entertaining, you've eliminated all but 50 or so options in all of Cuenca."

The terrace is equipped with an oversized gas grill off the kitchen (gas is connected to the house system for convenience), two outdoor seating areas on either end and even a wood burning fire pit. It is a great spot for outdoor dining, the occasional cocktail party and sunbathing.

From the master bedroom, when you are lying in bed you have a spectacular view of el Centro from one floor to ceiling window, and the lights of Turi from the window on the other wall. The master bathroom and the extra-large walk in master bedroom closet are the envy of every female guest at Ed's parties.

For convenience, Ed converted one of the

bedrooms into a home office with two workstations. From his office chair, he looks through the sliders at a beautiful view of el Centro.

The kitchen is built to US standards (including a dish washer and extra refrigerator for entertaining) and is a chef's dream. Ed's kitchen is equipped better than most commercial restaurants with every kitchen appliance and gadget available, but ironically, he doesn't know how to cook. Ed states, "It comes in very handy for catered parties."

The spacious living area even has oversized leather chairs for relaxing with friends or watching movies. Every room has outstanding views of the city. He states, "since no one can see into the place, I always leave the curtains open to enjoy the view from every room in the apartment."

The house is full of beautiful antiques collected over his travels and brought from the US in a 40 foot container from his historic home on Galveston Island, TX. His only regret is they could not get the grand piano up the stairs, or locate a crane close enough to the building to bring it in through the terrace, so it has been in storage since he took up residence. The area the grand piano was planned for is a large one, with a waterfall feature along one wall and a beautiful large oriental rug, which looks a little out of place now. The good news is when Ed throws his monthly mixers, they roll the rug up and he has the best private dance floor in Cuenca!



Some art that Ed has collected over the years

Ed Lindquist is a strong supporter and Cuenca Expats Magazines are major sponsor of Hearts of Gold. Ed has volunteered his home to be the site for two "Party in a Box" auction items at the Annual Christmas Gala on Friday December 4th. One "Party in a Box" will spotlight scrumptious ribs by Sabatino's Chef and owner Mauricio. Also featured will be freshly made authentic Mexican corn tortilla chips by Maix's Hector. The other "Party in a Box" will feature Thai dishes by Café Eucalyptus' Guest Chef Bodhi. For more information, contact [info@heartsofgoldfoundation.org](mailto:info@heartsofgoldfoundation.org).





Livingroom



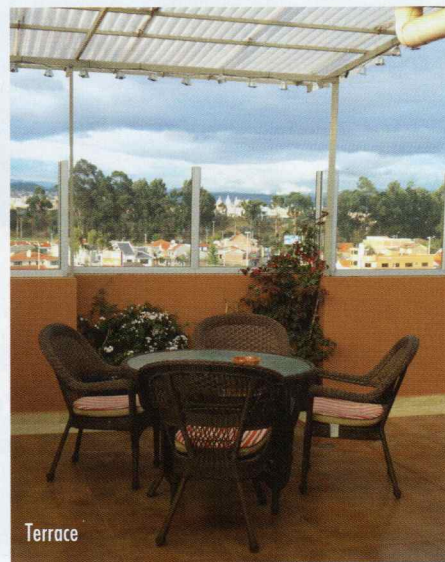
Gourmet kitchen



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Dining room



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Lisa and Jeff Musil moved to Cuenca in August of 2012 with their 11 children. Lisa's parents moved to Cuenca, in a nearby condo, the following year.

**Okay, first of all, the ubiquitous "get to know you" question, "What made you choose Cuenca?"**

Lisa: Well, we were living in Kansas in a 7 bedroom house and we got the call that we had been chosen to adopt a sibling group of seven that we had fostered years before. Our huge house suddenly felt tiny. Then Jeff found out that he was eligible for a medical retirement from the Army. We realized that we weren't tied to that house, to that town anymore. I started looking at places that were warm all year 'round. Texas. Florida. Then I asked Jeff if he'd be willing to move out of the country. He said, "Sure", and our options just opened up. I started googling "best places to live", "cheapest places to retire", and Cuenca kept popping up.

Jeff: My father-in-law and I came down to check it out. We liked the way the city felt—the people were so friendly and the city seemed easy to navigate. So we put a deposit on a house that we'd seen online and moved 2 months later.

**Now, the next obvious question, "Eleven children?"**

Lisa: (laughing) Actually, legally we have 12—we have an older adopted son with two sons who lives in Texas—and two other daughters that we met through foster care that we consider daughters, even though we didn't do the paperwork. So—14. With 15 grandkids if you count all their kids and their significant other's kids. And our youngest 10 haven't even had children yet. I always wanted a big family....

Jeff: I didn't even want kids until I met Lisa. And then I didn't want more than two. But would I choose not to have any of

them? No. I love them all. It keeps life interesting. It's fun telling cab drivers I have eleven kids. At first they think I am making a mistake in my Spanish. Then they ask if we have a television.

**You two have an unusual living arrangement—two houses? How does that work?**

Lisa: When we first moved here we lived in a big house out in Chaullubamba. That was a nice transition for us. It was out in the country and we really got a chance to be a family—since the adoption had only been finalized the previous year, it was a really good bonding experience for us. But after awhile, it got to be a hassle to take a bus into town to get groceries or anything else. It took three cabs to bring us all home after the buses stopped running. We all decided we wanted to be in the city, so I started looking. The only places we found that were big enough for the whole family were either really run-down or mansions out of our price range. We decided to look for two places that were close to each other. I found my place first—at the edge of El Centro, near San Sebastian. I redid the kitchen, and painted, and Jeff tried a few places before he found the one he is in now—just a few blocks from me. The location is perfect now—we walk everywhere—even have a Mercado for fresh fruits and vegetables a few blocks away.

Jeff: It works. I have nightmares and kept waking Lisa up, so now we both sleep all night. I have the boys at my house and Lisa has the girls, and we get together for family dinners. It gives everyone the space they need, and there is less fighting over the television.

Lisa: Plus, I don't have to stay up all night to chaperone teenage slumber parties. We'll eventually be under one roof again, as the kids graduate and move out. Until then, we make do with date nights.





Jeff and Lisa Musil

### What has been the biggest challenge in your move?

Lisa: Missing people. I just went back to the states for my first visit in three years, and I really enjoyed seeing everyone. But since my parents moved here two years ago, that really helps a lot. They are a great support system, and the kids love spending time with them.

Jeff: The language has been tough for me. I have a traumatic brain injury, which affects my short-term memory, so it is a challenge for me to learn new vocabulary. But the kids are learning Spanish in school, so I've started relying on them to translate for me.

### Do you have any advice for families moving here?

Lisa: Get involved with other families. We are former military, so we were used to the concept of "creating family". There are a lot of expats here with kids. And as my children have gone to school and learned the language, they have started making friends with locals, too.

Jeff: There are a lot of meet-up groups online. We met many of our friends at a park group, but a lot of people are coming here now who have already made contacts online. They are a step ahead.

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## Gaia Bar Restaurant

### The Passion of Great Food Complemented by Delicacies from Mother Earth

An exciting new venue recently opened next to the Planetarium. With an amazing location and an awesome outdoor patio, the "al fresco" dining space is a great place to while away an afternoon with a coffee and a good book, or spend the time people watching. As the name suggests, Gaia represents a warm, welcoming space with a nod to Mother Earth and her nurturing spirit, and where better to be located than Parque de la Madre.

Opened by Jose Luiz Zuniga and Byron Fabricio Villacis in July of this year, Gaia is the culmination of their years of restaurant experience and a desire to bring both great service and great food to Cuenca. Jose and Byron met in high school and became good friends. They grew up working in family-owned restaurants, learning the business and earning a good living. They gave up high paying restaurant management jobs in the States to move to Cuenca and open a restaurant together, where they want the service to be second only to the food that comes from the kitchen. To that end, they were very particular about hiring their chef to ensure the food that comes out of his kitchen is both delicious and fresh. With their focus on the experience of dining, not just on the food, they bring a level of service to the table (no pun intended) that rivals restaurants in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. For example, they pay attention to the little things like bringing a

glass of water to the table without your having to ask for it, as you do in most restaurants here. This is just one of many small touches that sets Gaia apart from other local dining options.

With a full bar and great food, Gaia is fast becoming a great place to eat and hang out in Cuenca. Monday through Thursday from 4 to 9 pm they offer two for one drinks specials, and their Bloody Mary's are to die for on Sunday mornings, as well as their many breakfast options – you can order a hearty breakfast from several countries at a great price of \$6. Gaia is open from 8:30 am to Midnight from Monday – Thursday, 8:30 am to 2 am on Fridays and Saturdays for the after party crowd, and on Sundays they are open from 10 am to 4 pm. With such extensive hours, Gaia offers complete breakfast, lunch and dinner menus and the food is always outstanding. I ordered the Gaia Sandwich while I was interviewing them, which has chicken, avocado and other fixings, all topped with a fried egg...AMAZING! We also sampled the chicken lunch platter, a steak sandwich and a veggie sandwich. They truly have something for everyone on the menu. The wait staff speaks English and with great customer service at the heart of their business, they do what it takes to make you happy.

For evening dining on the large patio, when the temperature starts to dip down, they have large heaters to chase away



the chill, and they also offer patrons beautifully embroidered blankets to keep them warm and cozy while they enjoy their dinner. With many choices of hot coffees, teas and lattes on the menu, you are sure to stay warm while enjoying the fresh air.

Jose and Byron are very excited about the reception they have received with Gaia, and they have big plans for expansion. Only the tip of the proverbial iceberg for them, once Gaia is up and running, they are looking to open a Gaia Pizza, and another restaurant offering French Cuisine at some point down the road.

If you haven't already stopped in to give Gaia a try, it's a must! I guarantee it will become your new favorite place for friends and family to gather.



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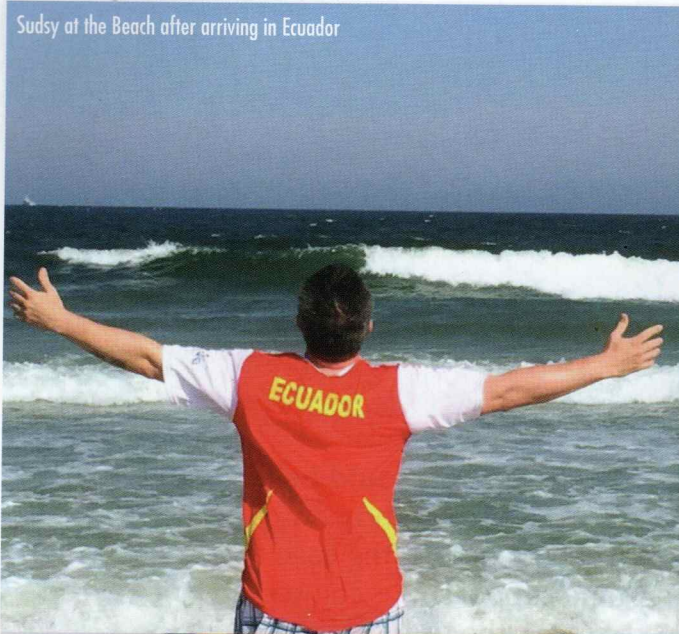
The winner will be drawn at the Hearts of Gold Christmas Gala on Friday, December 4th. You don't need to be present to win.

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Sudsy at the Beach after arriving in Ecuador



# SUDSY MONCHIK

"Sudsy Monchik, is an American racquetball player. As a five-time Pro World Champion, Monchik is considered by many to be the greatest player in the history of the sport." - Wikipedia

Story By Dave Johnson

Photos Courtesy of Sudsy Monchik



Sudsy and President Correa

When it comes to talking to people, I have a "6-foot rule." That is, if you are within six feet of me, I am going to talk to you whether you want to talk or not. I am not going to apologize because, employing this rule, I have met some fantastic people in my life. Of course, I have been snubbed a time or two also, but hey, I didn't want to know those people anyhow.

A few weeks back, I was checking out at Supermaxi and I realized the guy in line behind me spoke English. I was buying a bottle of rum for a party and the cashier had asked me, or at least I think she did, if I wanted a bag for my purchase. I turned to the guy who was well within six feet and said "Normally I would joke with her and say I didn't need a bag because I was just going to drink it in the parking lot...but my Spanish isn't that good." He laughed, and that is how I met Racquetball legend, 5-time professional world champion, hall-of-famer and the new coach for Ecuador's National Olympic Racquetball Team, Sudsy Monchik. Naturally, when presented with an opportunity such as this, I invited him to lunch and asked him if I could write an article about him. I don't remember exactly what he said, but he agreed to a lunch meeting and asked if he could bring his star player. We met up at Hotel Oro Verde and "shot the breeze" over lunch.

At one time in my life, I was a fairly accomplished cyclist (the non-drug-taking sort). I bring this up because I understand what it is like to participate in a sport that isn't mainstream and what it takes to win at an International level. I don't want to compare my accomplishments on the bike to those of a guy that is considered by most to be the absolute best racquetball player in the history of the sport, but I have more of an idea of the time, dedication, training and mental fortitude it takes to be a pro-level athlete than most. That being said, many of my questions were targeted toward his philosophy about what it takes to become a world-class Racquetball player. His answers aren't what you might expect like wake up early, train hard, eat right, etc. Sure he believes these things are important to success, but more importantly he believes a strong mental attitude and passion are the factors that make a good athlete great. And it is this belief that got Sudsy the top job as Ecuador's National Racquetball Coach.

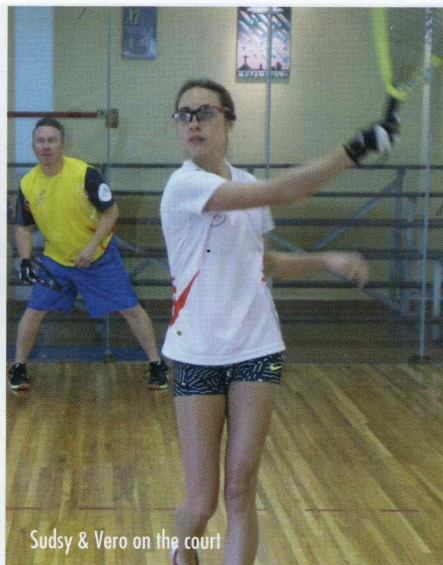


Coaching session with Sudsy and Vero





Sudsy, Vero & her doubles partner, Pazita Muñoz



Sudsy & Vero on the court



Sudsy & Vero cooling down

Serendipity is another thing most people overlook that Sudsy believes has guided his career. Just a few months back, he never saw himself coaching. In fact, he really didn't want to coach. While attending a women's international racquetball tournament, a chance encounter with star-Ecuadorean player, Maria "Vero" Sotomayor, who had just lost to the number-one player in the world changed all that. While walking past her he simply stated "You could have beaten her." This seemingly innocuous statement became the catalyst that brought Sudsy and the Ecuadorean team together.

If you didn't know she was one of the best professional racquetball players in the world, you would still know there was something special about Vero Sotomayor. She carries herself like a champion, but is as down-to-earth as the "girl next door." She exudes warmth, and appears to hang on every word you are saying to her. Unlike so many in this electronic world we live in, she is engaged and gives thought to everything you say. Additionally, she is super intelligent, and wiser than her 23 years. She is worldly, most likely because she has been traveling as a professional athlete, but she isn't the type to make anyone feel inferior because they haven't had the same life experiences she has. But the thing that you notice first, before you become aware of how genuine she is, is that she is stunningly beautiful; super-model material. When someone talks to her about how she looks, she shrugs them off as if everyone is equally good looking and somehow, because of this, you believe it. She is the embodiment of what we wish for in all pro athletes - humble, sincere and genuinely pleased to be making a living doing something she loves to do...playing racquetball. Win, lose or draw, Vero is a champion worthy of being admired, but don't let her school-girl charm fool you. On the court, she takes no prisoners.

The placement of Sudsy as head coach of the Ecuadorian National Racquetball Team shows that the country is serious about the future of their participation in International athletics. According to Vero, Sudsy has already been a game changer. Before he arrived, she thought the way to get better was to spend more time working out. He has shown her and the rest of the team that there is more to being a winner than hard work.

One thing is for certain, with Sudsy leading the team, Ecuador will be a force to be reckoned with in the sport of racquetball.

## THE INTERVIEW:

Q: Where was the last place you lived before moving to Cuenca?

A: Staten Island, New York

Q: What do you like most about living in Cuenca?

A: The people and culture and NOE Sushi (Ha, ha!)

Q: If you could go back in time, would you do anything different, and if so, what?

A: I'm good. Focused on the now.

Q: If you hadn't been born in this century, when and where would you like to have lived?

A: With William Wallace in Scotland.

Q: Who is your hero(s) and why?

A: My mom for pushing me out.

Q: What is the magic formula for success?

A: Accountability and Responsibility.

Q: What was the most important day of your life?

A: The day I was conceived? (LOL)

Q: Do you make friends easily?

A: Extremely!!

Q: Which do you enjoy most: a night on the town or staying in with that someone special?

A: Staying in for sure.

Q: What is your favorite pig-out food?

A: Boneless chicken tenders.

Q: What do you do for exercise?

A: LIVE!! Racquetball. Golf.

Q: If you were president, what is the first thing you'd do?

A: Which country?! (Ha ha!) I would certainly look at the nation's sports situation.

Q: If you could go on a cross country road trip with anyone (living or dead), who would it be?

A: Doc Holliday from Tombstone.

Q: Who is your favorite author and why?

A: You, if you write an awesome article.

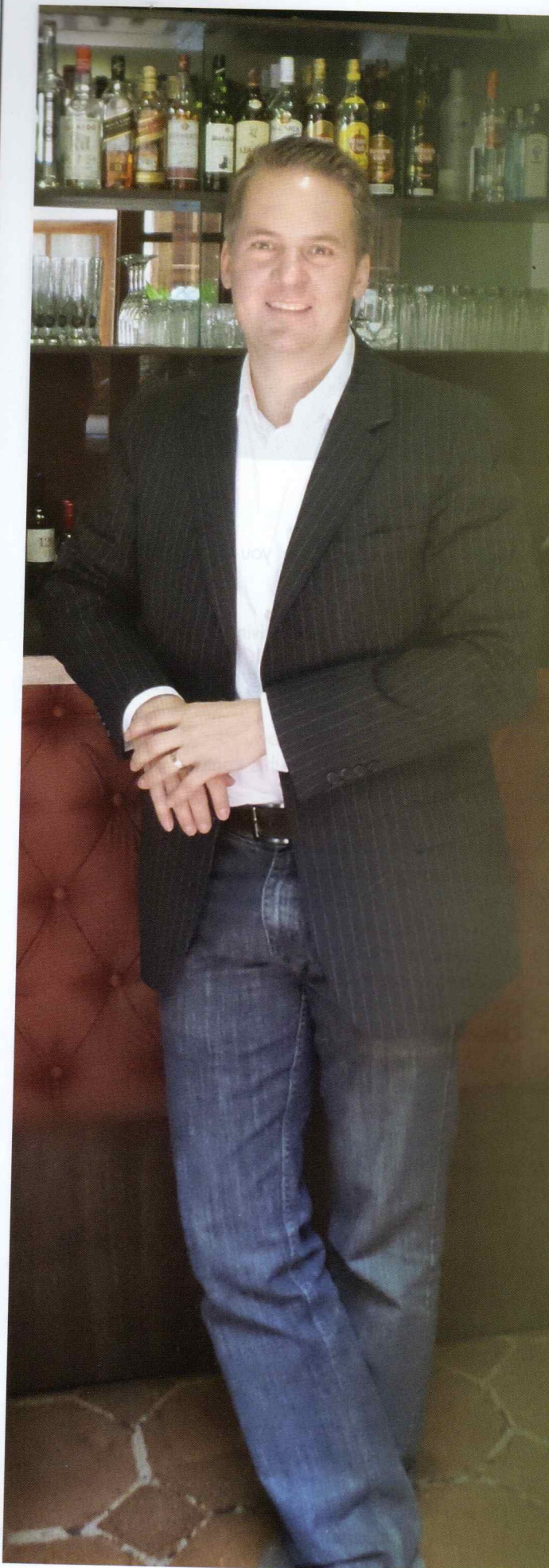
Q: What are you reading lately?

A: Fearless Golf

Q: Do you think television is responsible for illiteracy?

A: No, individual accountability and responsibility are. We make our own choices and decisions.





Q: WHERE WAS THE LAST PLACE YOU LIVED BEFORE MOVING TO CUENCA?

A: I lived near Zurich in Switzerland.

Q: WHY CUENCA?

A: A friend got married in Cuenca and invited me to his wedding. I fell in love with the town and country, decided to sell all my stuff and start a business with him here. A month in I fell in love again. This time with a girl from here.

Q: WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT LIVING IN CUENCA?

A: I love that it's not that perfect, it's developing. It's sort of in a process that is far from being finished. That is fascinating. I also enjoy that people stop on the streets to have a chat and the business opportunities that one can follow here without the need for hundreds of thousands of dollars in investment. Finally, the families are still very much united and meet up all the time.

Q: WHAT WAS YOUR PROFESSION BEFORE YOU RETIRED?

A: At 42, I am not retired yet ;) Before coming to Cuenca, I was a Product Manager for a global company in Switzerland and before that a Business Consultant in England and Germany – where I'm originally from. Now I own and manage the FORUM Hotel and La Brasserie restaurant in El Centro. If you don't know the restaurant, you should come and try our French influenced steaks with delicious sauces...

Q: IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME, WOULD YOU DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT AND IF SO, WHAT?

A: I would be more serious about active motor sports. I have and always had a passion for anything with an engine and did some racing when I was much younger. It was a lot of fun and I was quite good at it but never took it on as a real sport.

Q: WHAT'S THE MAGIC FORMULA FOR SUCCESS?

A: I am still working on that. One ingredient is definitely authenticity. Don't try to do something or be someone you can't deliver wholeheartedly on a daily basis.

Q: WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE PIG-OUT FOOD?

A: This is probably the most difficult question. I love food and there is soooo much of it around. I love steaks, burgers, pasta, chicken wings and that kind of stuff a lot. Indian and the Ecuadorian food are also on my favorites list. But if I had to choose one thing, it would have to be an authentic Wiener Schnitzel. Thinly sliced breaded veal cutlet fried in real butter - if done right is just the best food ever.

Q: DO YOU BELIEVE THERE IS INTELLIGENT LIFE ON OTHER PLANETS?

A: Aliens? Like the ones you can find on the internet? No. If "they" were so intelligent to design a spacecraft to travel millions of light years, don't you think they would also be able to design a way to appear a bit less like us? Especially the size. If I could space and/or time travel, I would also reduce my size by at least factor 1000, so no one could see me when I visit other planets and civilizations. And I am sure it's much easier to manage the issues of gravity if your spacecraft only weighs a couple of pounds.

Q: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN THREE WORDS?

A: 90 percent perfectionist



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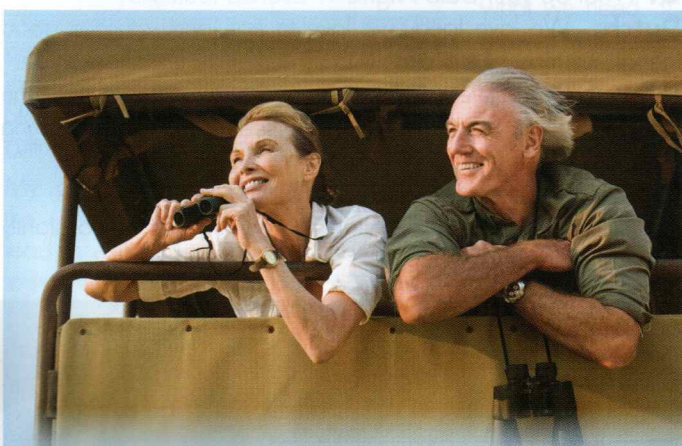
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**CUENCA - ECUADOR**



## Barbara Borrego & Dutch Morgan

**Q:** I understand you have a BIG event planned for New Year's Eve; can you share it with us?

**Dutch:** Barbara and I have been together for 15 years now and decided the time was right to make a permanent commitment in front of friends and family.

**Barbara:** I'm so excited! Cuenca is going to be a beautiful backdrop for the perfect wedding from our terrace.

**Q:** A 15-year courtship, how did you two meet?

**Dutch:** We met in a chat room on the Internet. My wife had died, and after three years I was ready to meet someone and thought I would give the Internet a try.

**Barbara:** I was in the chat room then along with a lady who had a degree in "Dream Therapy." Really? Doug started asking her about her "degree" and she got very defensive and started verbally attacking him.

**Dutch:** Yeah, and Barbara came to my defense and that started things.

**Q:** When did you start dating?

**Dutch:** We chatted over the Internet for 3-4 months before we saw each other. We really got to know each other during that time. I told her I was driving a truck, didn't mention it was really a Mercedes SUV, and asked her if that mattered. She said no, which to me was the right answer.

**Barbara:** When we first met, Doug handed me a box that looked like one of those boxes a wrist corsage comes in. I thought to myself, "If he brought me a wrist corsage, it's over before it begins." I delayed opening it, afraid of what was inside. Finally, Doug asked why I didn't open the box. I told him why, and he said, "Just open it." Inside was the cutest little stuffed bear, just the perfect gift. I still have it.

**Q:** You have been together for 15 years, do you mind if I ask why you never married?

**Dutch:** We were committed to each other, but the timing just never seemed to be right to get married. We were both busy with our careers. I had a daughter who was just graduating from high school when we got together. You know, life just kept getting in the way.

**Barbara:** I think we were both so busy with life and because we knew we were committed, it didn't really matter. For years we had a houseful of young men. We took in foreign students who were interns for large companies. Our "sons" were from Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, Kuwait and India.

**Q:** What brought you to Cuenca?

**Dutch:** We were disillusioned with California and the US in general and wanted to make a move. We sold our house in 2013 and ...

**Barbara:** ...booked a 17-day cruise to Chile to check it out. We didn't like Chile and had heard a lot of good things about Ecuador, and Cuenca in particular, so off we went, arriving December 26, 2013.

**Dutch:** We arrived with just one suitcase each. I even left one in Chile, knowing it was full of items I would never need again.

**Barbara:** Yes, we are a very non-traditional couple in many ways. One being that we just up and moved to Cuenca sight unseen.

**Q:** What do your Date Nights in Cuenca look like?

**Dutch:** We love food, we love to eat, and we love good friends, so most of our Date Nights center around those three.

**Barbara:** And we love to cook and experiment with all the wonderful food you can find here. It seems if we aren't eating food, we are talking about it.

**Dutch:** What's not to enjoy about that.

**Barbara:** In reality, Date Night is every night as we constantly rediscover each other.





## MY LIFE IS SIMPLER IN CUENCA, AND I LOVE IT

By Lisa Musil

After spending over three years in Cuenca, Ecuador, I recently returned to the United States for a month-long whirlwind visit with friends and family. After 5000 miles in the rental car, in which we covered 13 states, I just arrived home and have some thoughts about my observations.

First, I realized how much I missed seeing people who are dear to my heart: we met several young people, walking and talking, who had not even been conceived when we had left the country. To be able to sit at a cousin's kitchen table, holding her first grandson, or to be able to have unlimited late-night conversations with a childhood friend was a priceless experience. I understand the people who leave Cuenca after a year or two—especially when they have grandchildren whom they feel are growing up without them. Separation from loved ones—whether across a country or across an ocean, is never easy, and I feel so blessed that my parents live in Cuenca, also.

My other observations were less poignant. We moved to Cuenca for financial reasons, but have come to love the family-centered, laid-back life that the city nurtures. In the States, I felt like an outsider, looking at a culture I feel I've outgrown.

My daughter and I were amazed by the contrast of prices—fresh, healthy food is expensive, and processed food, laden with salt, sugar, and fat, is easily accessible and cheap. I saw a piece of beef that was five times what I would pay for it here—and I am sure the Cuenca beef is grass-fed.

We made a game of critiquing the television commercials—one ad showed fresh vegetables, but advertised a cream cheese spread that contained, at most, a tablespoon of the luscious peppers and onions the visual featured. Another showed fresh strawberries—but advertised a yogurt with a highly processed sugar-laden strawberry syrup. Looking at the portion sizes, the number of all-you-can-eat buffets, and the sheer abundance of variety of everything (literally 300 kinds of yogurt, compared to, maybe, 40 in Cuenca) I realized why I had been so overweight in the states, and how easy it was for me to drop 50+ pounds by moving here.

After living a relatively simple life in Cuenca for three years, I was struck by the consumeristic culture that imbues every facet of life in the States. Instead of spending time together at a park on Sundays, I observed entire families at the Outlet mall shopping. As recreation. Everyone over the age of ten seems to have smart phones, and they are constantly staring at them. Everyone seems to need bigger, better and new—whether it is a house, a car, or a gadget. And the thrift stores that we visited across the country silently testified to the overabundance of this country. However, the average families we visited were hard workers, and had little extra time or money after meeting basic needs.

I started thinking about my own life, pre-Cuenca, and realized how many hours I had devoted to becoming an expert shopper—storing prices in my head, searching for bargains, clipping coupons, and stocking up on sale items. Now, I go to the grocery store once a week, which doesn't have sales or coupons, and buy what we need. I go to the meat market once a week and buy what we need. I walk to the closest Mercado almost every day and spend \$8-\$15 for the fruits and vegetables my family of 14 will need for the day. I have a favorite place that sells Greek yogurt, and about once a week I walk to that store and pay \$6 a liter for fresh plain Greek yogurt, which I eat with fresh fruit and honey. Once a month (or so) I make the trip to Coral to pick up things I cannot get in El Centro. That is it. My life is not driven by shopping. By acquiring. My life is simpler in Cuenca—and I love it.



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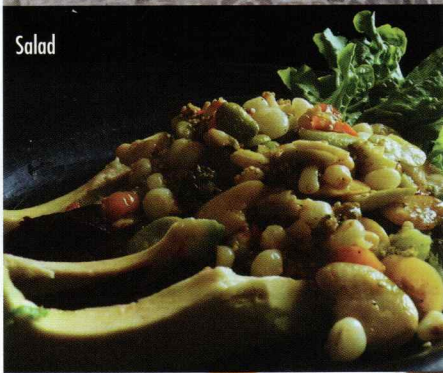
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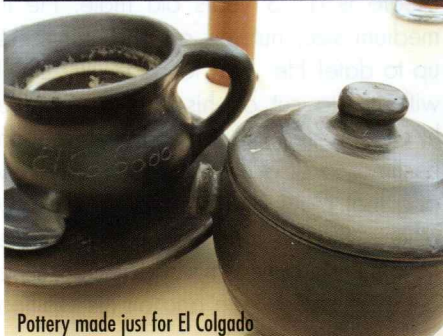




Salad



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The Hanged Man Sandwich



## El Colgado Restaurante The Hanged Man

Combine a passion for the culinary arts, a little mysticism and the desire to serve others above all else and what have you got – El Colgado Restaurante on the Rio Tomebamba in Cuenca. Opened just a couple of months ago by Gustavo Chalco and Carlos Lima, the restaurant's name comes from a deep interest in tarot cards and their meanings. According to Gustavo, El Colgado (the Hanged Man) "... stands for someone in constant meditation. He understands the game of life, but chooses to watch instead of play the game."

Located in the El Vado district, which is one of the oldest in the city and is home to many craftsman and artists, El Colgado is in the lower level of La Casa de los Arcos (the House of the Arches) which is one of my favorite historic homes along the river. Prior to becoming a restaurant, the building had fallen into disrepair and was slated for demolition in 1999. The University of Cuenca purchased it and began the laborious and extensive renovation project. They took great care to bring the building back to its former glory, including bringing artists in to restore the murals using original materials. They reopened the upper floors in 2009 as a cultural center for exhibitions of various art forms, lectures and conferences. The University offered to rent the lower level to their star culinary student Gustavo, who has traveled to the

US, Spain and Peru and earned many awards for his culinary skill.

Friends since they were children, Carlos and Gustavo had not seen each other in 10 years, but they had always wanted to open a restaurant together and call it El Colgado Restaurante (The Hanged Man). When they walked through the building – they realized it was meant to be. Painted on the wall were four stars – representing the elements Earth, Wind, Fire & Water. There are also 12 windows – the Hanged Man is the 12th card in the Major Arcana in traditional Tarot decks. All signs pointed to this being the perfect space for their restaurant.

When you first walk in, you are greeted by a life-sized hanged man, representing the tarot card from which the name originates. This is a great place to snap a photo or two! As you walk through the restaurant, you notice the amazing art hanging on the walls. Gustavo's father is the famous artist, Jorge Chalco, who has hosted exhibits in Cuenca, Quito, Miami, Amsterdam, and Venice. His colorful art brings the walls of the restaurant to life.

Depending on the weather, you have three distinct choices for dining. Carlos is a designer, and the spaces reflect his creative expertise. The furniture was designed for the restaurant, as well as the plates and pottery the food is served on. There is a lovely terrace directly on the Tomebamba River offering a serene



and gorgeous setting to have lunch or dinner and listen to the soothing sounds of water flowing over the rocks. If it's too chilly or rainy for outside dining, there is a choice of two inside dining rooms – one of which boasts large windows framing amazing views overlooking the river.

The food is good and plentiful and along with lunch and dinner choices, brunch is served every day (they are open Tues. - Sat. 10am to 9pm, Sunday 10 am to 4 pm and closed on Mondays) With the beautiful presentation of dishes and hearty portions, you can't go wrong eating at El Colgado. Sourcing foods from the Ecuadorian highlands and the coast, they offer a tribute to forgotten products cooked in new ways such as Quinoa, Machica, and Papas Chaucha. It is estimated that there are over 350 varieties of potatoes in Ecuador alone! The menu will change seasonally as items are available.

Gustavo offers a variety of gastronomic delights full of colors, flavors and aromas. The food is sourced directly from the farmers, so this is true 'Farm to Table' dining. With stuffed baked potatoes, a variety of fresh seafood, tender beef and vegetarian dishes on the menu there is something for every palate. Novoandina is a new Andean cooking style which brings new twists to traditional foods from the Andean culture. Served in updated and innovative ways – the food will keep you coming back for more.

In keeping with The Hanged Man meaning, Gustavo tells me, "I want nothing for myself, but something for everyone else."

The restaurant is hosting an event on October 30th to introduce you to the people who supply them with the fresh ingredients they use in all their dishes. A market will be set up where you can meet the farmers, purchase their goods and then sit down while the restaurant serves you food from these very vendors.



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# WOMAN IN THE CAGE

By Sandy Schott

**B**ars, cages, separation, a human and spiritual divide necessary for protection against the possibility of theft and violence; I get it, but YUCK! We've all seen them, the bars and cages, sprinkled throughout the city, disguised as little stores – tiendas. When a Cuenca newbie, I had an immediate distaste for these places and never shopped in them. They offended my delicate sensibilities with feelings of impending danger, confinement, and isolation. I was disturbed by the notion of these poor men, and mostly women, being imprisoned by bars, interred to keep the threat of who I may be out of the store, immured to keep the little ladies safely inside. I hated it. I often pondered the questions: Who are these women? What do they do all day? What must their poor lives be like? How horribly unhappy must they be to have an encased existence purposed to keep them separated, isolated from the rest of humanity, the world?

Thankfully, the higher forces of the ethereal plane conspired to put me in a situation in which all of my questions, and more, could be answered. I was given the opportunity to expand my understanding and soften my heart. Six months ago we moved into a beautiful apartment. Directly across the street, a little caged tienda! The first thing I said to my husband was, "Oh, great. A woman in a cage. Pooooor thing!"

Everyday since, I have watched her, studied her schedule, her behavior, her customers.



I have thought of my old questions, waiting for answers to come. Each morning, I have opened my curtains, as I made the coffee. Most days, she has already opened for business. Sometimes, while at my upstairs window and she at her window of the cage, we wave to one another and smile. One day, I actually got brave enough, while down on the street, to pop over and introduce myself, as the woman who lives in the upstairs window. She said she recognized me. We had the sweetest interaction. Surprisingly, I found her to be the nicest, happiest, little old lady I've ever met. Unhappy? Fearful? No.

I have continued to engage her every chance I get. She is my gum and milk lady. I buy those items from no other. We greet one another, just about every day. She asks after my husband, current guests, and my absences. I see how hard she works EVERY SINGLE DAY, with very long hours. I see her busy with daily chores, of keeping her store stocked and organized.

I see her regular customers, who often stay and visit with her, long after their transaction is complete. I see how some stop by to visit without buying anything at all, seeking only her company. I see how, at times, she will come to her window, and leaning on the shelf, quietly watch the traffic and busyness on the street - sometimes exchanging a wave and smile with me, her friend who lives in the upstairs window. I even see how some men often visit her and flirt, as they pass by – apparently another reason for the cage!

Needless to say, this woman in the cage and I have developed, I dare say, a very sweet friendship. I often watch her as she opens in the morning and locks up at night, caring after her safety. I think of her warmly and fondly, and no longer shudder at the sight of the cage, but think only of my warm, smiley friend. Her life is not one of danger, sadness, fear, and isolation. She is a social figure on this block, popular, joyful, and kind. With the passing of our 6 months, nothing about her life has changed; however, everything about my perception of her, her life - this woman in a cage - has been completely altered. My life is richer for having known her, my beautiful friend Soledad. Yes, her name means isolation in Spanish. Coincidence? I think not. Rather, I think the universe is teaching me yet another exquisite lesson. For, it was Henry David Thoreau, who said, "I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude." My sweet, sweet, Soledad.

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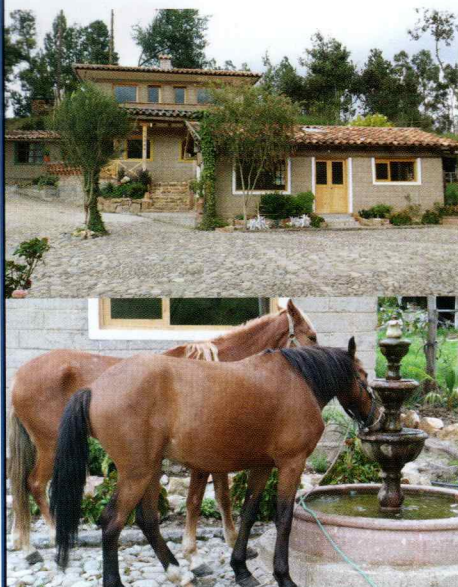
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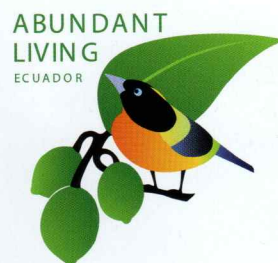


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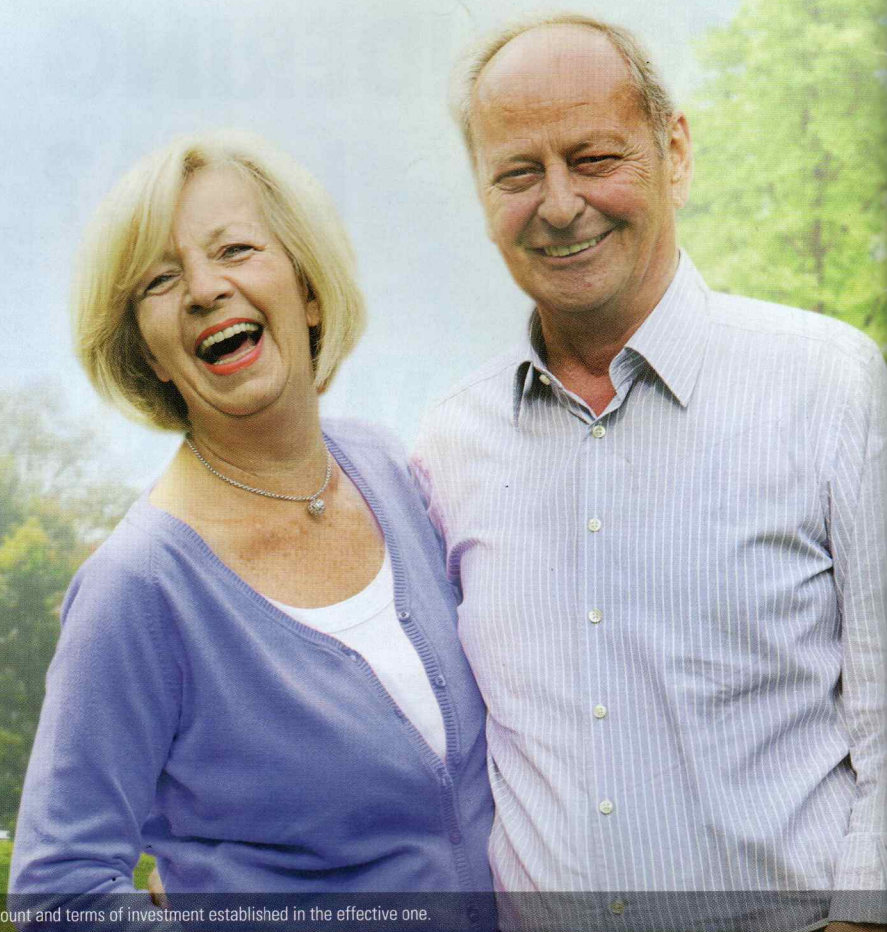
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