

One foot here, one foot in HONDURAS

Al Wigood has been volunteering 30 years with World Accord and doesn't plan to stop until he 'falls off the perch'

BY ANDREW VOWLES

The turning point for Al Wigood came about 1995. During a volunteer visit to a village in northern Honduras, he was surveying a plot of land with the town council leader. The man explained that the village kids attended a school in a nearby town, where they were ostracized as outsiders.

Gesturing to the plot, he turned to Wigood and said, "One day, there will be a school on this property." He just wasn't sure when or how it would happen.

Says Wigood, "I got a bright idea."

By then, he had volunteered in the Central American country for about five years through World Accord, a Waterloo-based international development organization.

Each year, he spent about a month helping to lay cement floors and replace roofs on the ubiquitous cement block and plaster houses. Now he had a potential solution for the village leader.

Referring to his numerous contacts back home in Canada, he says, "If I could talk 10 people into providing \$800 each, we could build the school."

Leaving the council leader in charge of constructing the foundation, Wigood flew home to Kitchener and got busy. Not only did he raise the needed money, but he also organized a volunteer team of acquaintances to travel to Honduras to help erect the school.

Nearly 25 years later, Wigood now spends half of every year in his second home in Horconcitos in Honduras, where he continues to lead groups of volunteers from

In late January, Al Wigood will mark his 89th birthday with numerous friends and acquaintances, including his adopted Honduran family.

PHOTO BY NICK IWANYSHYN





PHOTOGRAPHY IN HONDURAS BY JEANNE AMOS

“The trips wouldn’t exist without Al. He believes in supporting people struggling to improve themselves.”

RICHARD KIRSH
WORLD ACCORD VOLUNTEER

across Canada on annual building trips sponsored by World Accord. Earlier this year, they completed their 44th school and added their 160th classroom to existing buildings. Last year, he watched about 100 students graduate from the high school he helped build, now attended by more than 600 teens.

This winter, Wigood plans to lead new crews in building a science lab in the high school and in erecting three new schools. While in Horconcitos in late January, “Don Al” will mark his 89th birthday with numerous friends and acquaintances, including his adopted Honduran family. And he’ll toast his 30th year as a volunteer in Central America with World Accord.

All of this prompts the inevitable question during a conversation one evening at his summer home, a 32-foot house trailer in a park occupying a loop of the Grand River in south Kitchener: Just how long does he plan to keep going? Wigood is ready with his standard one-liner: “Until I fall off the perch.”

Seated in an upholstered rocker on the wooden porch outside his Prowler Fleetwood, Wigood grins from under his cream-coloured Tilley hat. “Welcome to the Rio Grande” reads a wooden sign hanging from a moss-covered paddle at the entrance to his lot. At the back of the site, the river slides brownish-grey and silent beneath the willows.

Earlier, he had led the way down from the electronic gate in his Corolla with its vanity licence plate declaiming his Canadian nickname: “Old Buck.” About 100 trailers cluster near the river in Kitchener’s Pioneer Sportsmen Club, a private 47-hectare campground located on the site of a former gun club dating back to 1929.

Wigood, a one-time competitive shooter, joined the club in 1950; when the trailer park opened in 1980, he and his wife, Hazel, picked their spot by the river. By 1989, they were looking forward to

spending retirement there and in their cabin cruiser on Lake Simcoe. Then came Central America.

After selling his Active Towing business locally, Wigood had spent about 12 years driving a truck back and forth across Canada for Home Hardware. One night he got talking to Terry Fielder, a former hardware store owner in New Liskeard who had sold his business to become executive director of World Accord in Waterloo.

Rooted in a Canadian church congregation, the non-profit formed in 1980 to work with partner groups in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nepal. That night in 1989, Fielder had given a presentation about the program to his congregation, where Wigood was also a member.

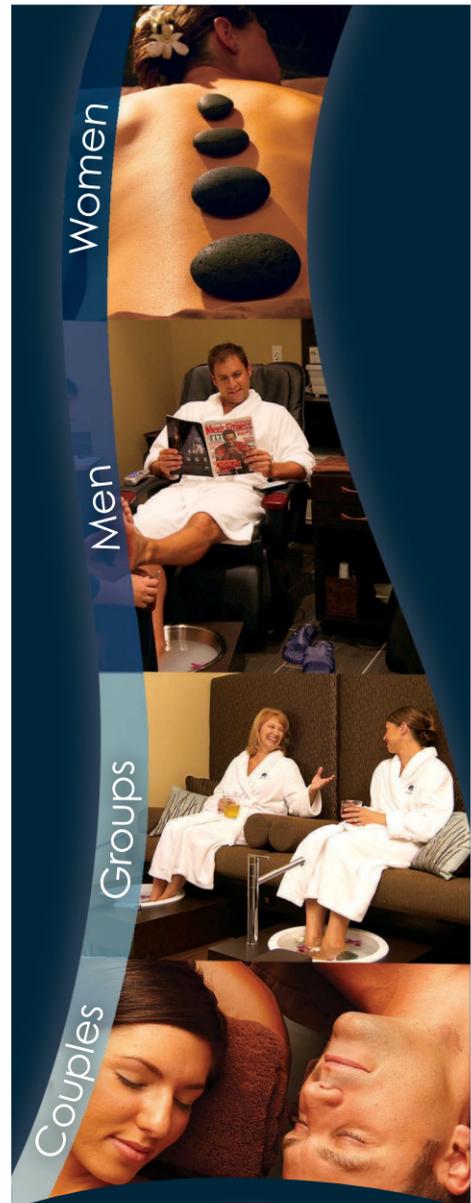
Wigood began donating money to the program and eventually accepted Fielder’s invitation to visit Central America.

There, he says, he encountered “conditions I couldn’t turn my back on.” In both Honduras and Guatemala, he saw children dying of malnutrition, diseases afflicting communities, and villages lacking schools and health facilities.

A civil war was still being fought in Guatemala, where they met a social worker whose clients were what he calls “the poorest of the poor.” Many villages were home to talented weavers who were unable to afford raw materials; the social worker dreamed of being able to supply what they needed for their craft.

Recalls Wigood: “Terry and I scraped together all the cash we could spare and filled a closet in her home with weaving material.”

That led to today’s program called Women in Action – Mujeres en Accion – a partner agency with World Accord. Now based in almost 30 Guatemalan communities, the project offers training, runs a microcredit loan program, helps improve farming practices and ensures education



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for children. Wigood helped build program offices and several houses; he still visits the country once a year just to observe the project.

Most of his time in Central America is spent in Honduras, where World Accord is partnered with the Program for Rural Reconstruction in about 40 villages comprising a total of about 20,000 people. Established in 1983, the Honduran non-profit organization aims to foster rural community development through various initiatives. These include training farmers, providing seeds and fertilizer, and offering basic education, including subsidies and scholarships for school kids. There's also rural school construction projects involving Canadian volunteers like Wigood.

"The thing that attracted me to World Accord was that they work with a partner that has a plan and knows how to execute it but just doesn't have the finances to do it," Wigood says. He continues to raise money through an annual Christmas letter sent

across Canada. "I have a 300-name mailing list. I've never raised less than \$16,000. We raised enough (last) year to support 163 kids to continue to high school."

Individual fundraising by Wigood and others has become more critical to the program. World Accord was formerly funded by the Canadian government as well as money raised from church congregations and other donors across the country, including the Rotary Club of Kitchener-Conestoga. World Accord's last full federal grant was in 2008; as of last year, the founding church will no longer provide core support. From about \$700,000 a year for all four countries, World Accord's budget will fall to about \$520,000 this year. That makes donations from groups and individuals more important than ever, says David Barth, who succeeded Fielder as executive director in 2009.

"We're scrambling now," Barth says. Barth and two other staffers run the program from an office in a light industrial

mall in north Waterloo. Contrasting World Accord's low overhead with that of many international development programs, Wigood says, "10 per cent of all the money I raise for Honduras stays in the office. Ninety per cent goes to the project, and I get to see how it's spent."

Wigood's initial month-long visits stretched into several months at a time. Today he spends half the year – roughly from October to April – living in his "second home" in Horconcitos, located about two hours' drive in either direction from the capital, Tegucigalpa, and San Pedro Sula, the nearest industrial centre.

There, home is a cement block and plaster house on a quarter-acre lot on the edge of town, near a medical clinic and the local soccer field. The house is owned by the program, along with the Toyota Land Cruiser he drives there. A few years ago, he talked neighbours into moving into the house. They still live there, looking after the house while Wigood is in Canada.

"We are now a family," he says, adding, "I've got the best cook in Honduras."

Wigood has volunteered most of his life, including ministering decades ago to prison inmates in Cambridge and Guelph. Born in 1930 in Puslinch, he grew up on a farm and attended school in Guelph. "My parents were always helping someone."

Recalling his father's funeral, he says, "I don't know how many people came up and said he was a good man. If they say that about me when I fall off the perch. . . ." What makes a good man? "A good man is one that cares for his fellow man."

He started running a gas station at age 20, and eventually owned three outlets in Kitchener and Waterloo before launching the towing company. Active Towing turned 50 in 2017 and is now owned by one of his six children.

Al and Hazel were elementary school-mates; Wigood was 19 when they were

married in 1948.

Hazel died six years ago, two days short of their 64th anniversary. Heart problems prevented her from flying; she never visited Central America but, says Wigood, "she was one of the greatest things I had going for me, she encouraged me."

Before volunteering in Central America, Wigood had never laid cement blocks or done plumbing or electrical work. Fielder describes him as a reluctant leader.

"He didn't think he could possibly lead groups," says Fielder. "He's that unwilling participant who in his quiet way is a leader."

Today Wigood organizes volunteer work crews in building schools and homes from the ground up. Each year, the program runs three construction trips, each lasting two weeks and involving up to a dozen people from across Canada. Volunteers cover their own airfare and are accommodated in dorms in Horconcitos.

On a trip last winter, Barth and Wigood

were in a work crew laying hundreds of cement blocks on a building site. "He really puts a lot of folks to shame," says Barth. "He was part of the chain gang building a school and he kept up with everybody."

For his part, Wigood concedes he's slowed down a bit, quipping: "When I was 80, I quit roofing."

Jeanne Amos, former director of advertising and general manager of Grand magazine, was looking for a retirement project last year when she heard CHYM radio host Adele Newton talking about her own World Accord trip. This past January, Amos spent two weeks helping to mix concrete and sling blocks for a school addition.

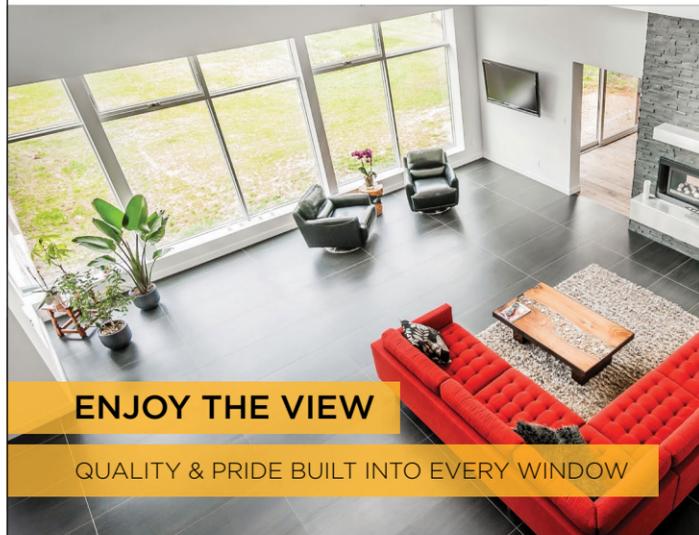
Before arriving, she had viewed Honduras with some trepidation. The country of nine million people is plagued by violent crime and has one of the highest homicide rates in the world.

Indeed, Wigood was hijacked and robbed

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once while travelling with Barth and two others in Guatemala, but he says he has never had a problem in Honduras. "The violence is mostly criminals shooting criminals. There's government corruption to no end. Politics is so corrupt it's unreal."

Describing Wigood as an organized, calming force, Amos says he shows compassion for team members and Hondurans alike.

"His eyes would well up talking about the kids – why we're here, what difference we can make," Amos says. She was inspired to organize a fundraising event this fall to pay for building materials for next year's projects.

This year will mark the 13th build trip in Horconitos for Megan Gilbertson, a plumber in Guelph. Now 26, she first signed up for the program at age 14. "I go back because it grounds me in some way. I've learned so much more from people there than at home," she says.

Gilbertson says Wigood is a master at connecting with people, including strangers in communities that might initially look askance at foreigners. "It's amazing how small a bridge is needed to make community," she says. "Al has always been very good at making those bridges. He doesn't see a hole or river between us and them. He just says: 'These are my people.'"

Toronto's Richard Kirsh worked for decades for the Ontario government before retiring; today he volunteers to organize logistics for the annual construction trips to Honduras. When he met Wigood in 2000, he was concerned about his age. Nearly 20 years on, Kirsh says he doesn't know what he was worried about.

"The trips wouldn't exist without Al. He believes in supporting people struggling to improve themselves."

He recalls a Honduran man who asked Wigood for a loan to buy a bus. After Wigood finally handed over some money, the man bought one vehicle, then another;



Al Wigood is an active participant at building sites. "He really puts a lot of folks to shame," World Accord executive director David Barth says.

now he owns a successful bus line. Kirsh says Wigood "identifies with people who work hard. He has a lot of regard for the common working person."

How does Wigood explain what drives his work in Central America? "It's a passion, I guess," he says. "I have a desire to help give people a hand up and to be involved with a program that has been successful."

Besides leading official projects with World Accord, Wigood has helped numerous families around Horconitos: building and rebuilding homes, collecting school supplies in Canada to deliver to kids, providing gifts and loans. "I've been kind of busy spending my kids' inheritance."

He attends town hall meetings, has been named godfather to several children, and is routinely invited to weddings and graduations. "Through December there's a graduation almost every night. I think they have their graduations when they find out I'm available."

He flashes a silver-coloured ring on his right hand, a gift from a woman whose house he rebuilt over her protestations that she had no money to pay for it. "On the

last day, she knelt before me and yanked off her wedding ring and put it on my little finger. That's the kind of payday I get." Jokingly referring to the ring as his anillo de compromiso, he adds, "I sent a message to my family here telling them I was 'engaged.'"

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the world; more than half of its population lives in poverty. What difference is Wigood making for those nine million souls? Ask Fielder. He says part of the funding that Wigood raises in Canada has paid for schooling for girls from rural Honduras who might never have completed their education.

"That will be transformative not only in the lives of those girls but in the whole community," says Fielder. In 2015, a ceremony in Honduras marked the opening of a school built by World Accord and named in memory of Fielder's late wife, Sandra, a former teacher in Waterloo. "My wife was an educator. It's a door-opener. When nothing else can work, sometimes education is enough."

One boy who attended a school built by Wigood graduated and eventually landed a job with a microcredit loan organization. Now married with a young daughter, the man built a house for his family and is now a church pastor.

"If I hadn't done that he'd be planting corn," Wigood says. "I can only do what I see in front of me. All I can do is encourage other people."

Barth offers a different take. Wigood has "provided possibility and a sense of hope for thousands of children and families over the years."

Wigood doesn't foresee retiring to the Rio Grande anytime soon. "I don't feel any different today," he says. "I know it's got to end, I just hope that I'm able to work up to the end. I enjoy the work, enjoy the people. That's where my friends are."

Adds Fielder: "I think he hopes he dies in Honduras. The entire region will be at his funeral." 

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