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A clear awareness of what I am to do with my life, that is what my connection with Dr. Behrhorst gave to me. I grew up in Patzicia, one of nine children in a very poor family. Today, I am the director of a program which provides loans and training to hundreds of women in 70 communities in the Guatemalan highlands. What enormous changes I've been able to experience!

The first time I saw Dr. Behrhorst was when he was walking around our town, Patzicia. Of course, he stood out. He was a gringo. But more so, he stood out because he was walking together with Mayan women. In those days, in our town, that was unusual. Later I learned that the women with him were Hortensia and Margarita, two young Mayan auxiliary nurses. This memory of Dr. Behrhorst was confirmed repeatedly through the years; he was comfortable and warm with all people, poor, rich, old, young, educated or illiterate. He didn't show preferences and prejudices.

That day, I walked right up to him and the women and asked him who he was and what they were doing in Patzicia. Imagine! I must have been 14. He explained to me that they were there to learn about peoples' living situations and try to understand how to help keep people healthy. He told me about the clinic and said, "Come on over sometime and see the clinic."

My first bus trip into Chimaltenango was not so much to "see the clinic," but to sell peanut butter there. There was a project in Patzicia that my girlfriend and I participated in, learning how to make peanut butter. Then, of course, we had to sell it. Someone said that gringos eat peanut butter! So we went to Chimaltenango to find the Gringo Doctor. Fortunately, there were other gringo volunteers there too and all our peanut butter was sold. I was convinced that gringos eat peanut butter! (My friend, by the way, later developed her own peanut butter business; she supplied many stores, including some in Antigua.)

That day, I saw Dr. Behrhorst instructing a group of Mayan men as they followed him from room to room in the hospital. These were community health promoters in training. Impulsively my friend and I asked if we, too, could learn about health like those men did. Dr. Behrhorst said,

“Yes, you can. Be here next Monday. And here is bus fare for you.” At that time, I had completed only three years of primary school. That’s how it was for most of us then.

We showed up the next week, and continued to do so once a week for more than two years. I will never forget the food we were given for our morning break: two hard-boiled eggs and a cup of coffee. I never had had such a “rich” meal in my life—never ever before.

After the training, I determined to put into practice all that I had learned. I began to attend sick people who came to our home. But I had also learned a lot about important ways to help people be well, through agricultural improvements, hygiene, etc. This interested me a lot, and I tried to pass on that knowledge as well. I also began teaching people to read and write.

By 1975, I began working at the Behrhorst Clinic as an assistant to Dr. Behrhorst. I learned a lot more about diseases and medicines, but most of all, I learned what kind of dedication Dr. Behrhorst had to those who needed help. He and many staff worked long days, Monday through Friday, and then, often on weekends, we would travel to villages to do rural clinics. No days off, of course, but I remember these times as wonderful adventures. One evening when we were in Quiché, Dr. Behrhorst said, “You look tired. Get a good night’s sleep. I’ll be the one to make breakfast, and I’ll knock on your door when it’s ready.” Imagine!

During the years of working in Chimaltenango, I was able to complete primary school, middle school, and even high school, getting my diploma in accounting. I was the only girl in my accounting class, and that diploma opened yet another door for me a few years later. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was setting up a program to extend credit to people in rural communities. I was hired as a rural extensionist because of my accounting training. The need for credit in the communities was especially severe then since many were seeking to rebuild their lives after the terrible violence. This was 1985. I used so much of what I had learned through Behrhorst approach in working with people as I began this challenging job.

This job, by the way, led me to yet another job with the government, working with local Improvement Committees (now COCODES) in the department of Sololá. I did this work till 1990 and really enjoyed it although there was always danger and every day had new challenges.

I never was really far from my Behrhorst connections and continued to volunteer as I could, including in the leadership of the General Assembly and later in the board of directors.

Once, before he died in 1990, Dr. Behrhorst gave me advice which shaped the next chapter of my moral commitment to my people: Structure a program for women. By 1991, Mujeres en Accion (Women in Action) was born and has been growing and maturing ever since. It was born as a help for women trying to survive in very hard times.

The Violence had left many women widows, without their husbands present to do the farming. Many women I had worked with through Behrhorst, UNDP and the government work, suffered from lack food and other minimal resources. Often, I would be asked, “How will I feed my family? “

A basic principle of organizing is, “Start with what people know how to do.” I said, “You can weave. Weave some placemats, and somehow, I will help you find a way to sell them.” Fortunately, Pat Krause was in Guatemala with a group of Behrhorst friends from the U.S. She took the placemats back to her home in her empty suitcase. The placemats sold quickly, and the next time that Pat returned, she asked for more. Requests continued and Mujeres en Acción was developing a market. The widows were earning money by their own hands, through their weaving.

Today Mujeres en Acción’s major focus is economic development through access to microcredit. We have grown from being able to extend a few small loans of Q300 each to now, believe it or not, managing just under 3 million quetzals in loans! We are an agency, in a way, of the bank, Banrural, and we have three “Credit Promoters” who travel to 70 rural communities to teach and train women’s groups in income generation and money management. We already have graduates, you could say, who qualify for and arrange their own loans directly with the banks.

As I reflect on all that I have been able to do, I realize that it was Dr. Behrhorst who provided me the vision to be dedicated to helping people and to develop my own talents. Whatever lies ahead, I know it will include a moral commitment to put into practice what I have been taught.