

Local group planning missionary trip to the Third World

By DANIEL SCHWAB

When Belle River native Louise Elliot first visited El Triunfo, Guatemala in 2001, she was taken aback by the extreme conditions of poverty experienced daily by the villagers who lived there.

Still reeling from the devastations of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and Hurricane Stan in 2005, many residents of El Triunfo were living in bamboo huts with dirt floors and walking around barefoot.

Elliot, along with seven adults and three teens from Woodslee, Belle River, Windsor and LaSalle, traveled to the Third World

country in an attempt to improve conditions in the hometown of their friend Eddy Gutierrez.

Gutierrez, a political refugee from El Triunfo, was brought to Canada in 1992 through arrangements made by the Refugee Relief Committee in Windsor. He was taken in by the St. John the Evangelist Church community in Woodslee and, before long, his brother Hugo and Hugo's wife Rosa joined him.

It was Rosa's longing for her family and friends left behind in the impoverished village that led to the first humanitarian expedition to

El Triunfo. Since then, members of the Guatemala Hope organization, a non-profit group led by Elliot and dozens of local volunteers, have made four trips to the country to promote self-sufficiency for the 1,000 residents of the village.

On Oct. 14, the group held a live and silent auction event at St. John's Parish Hall in Woodslee to raise funds for a fifth trip scheduled for Nov. 10-20.

The fundraiser filled the hall to its capacity with 200 supporters. The event raised close to \$11,000.

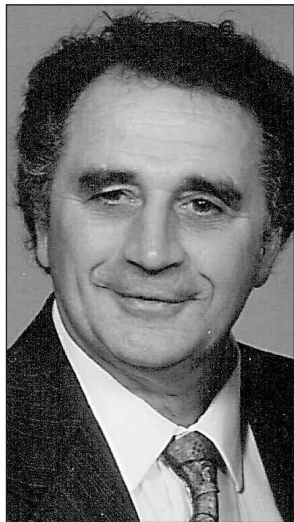
Part of the plan for the upcoming mission is to re-establish the free medical and dental clinics that treated residents from 16 surrounding villages during the group's time there last year.



Guatemala Hope volunteers Carolyn Fuerth, (front row, left) Rosemarie Dulong, Ken Mailloux, (back row, left) Tammy Vickard, Barb Fitzpatrick, Fallon Funkenhauser and Louise Elliot pose in front of a display board during the group's silent and live auction fundraiser at St. John's Parish in Woodslee Oct. 14. Twenty-one members of the not-for-profit charity will be traveling to El Triunfo, Guatemala in an attempt to improve conditions for impoverished residents and promote self-sufficiency within the village.

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Sue Rock, president of Guatemala Hope, said she is expecting as many as 800 villagers to visit the clinics for treatment.

The 21-member group will also be working to distribute 45 scholarships to the village's school children, enabling them to receive education beyond Grade 6.

They also plan to organize an agricultural program that would improve conditions for corn and peanut farmers and provide them with new tools.

"We thought this was a perfect opportunity to share our wealth and help the poor," Rock said. "We've come a long way in terms of our philosophy."

Part of that philosophy includes providing the villagers with vocational training, instead of simply supplying financial relief, said trip co-ordinator Carolyn

Fuerth. "They are much more aware of their opportunities," Fuerth said. "They've come to realize their poverty has nothing to do with who they are."

More than 70 percent of El Triunfo residents are illiterate, and nearly three-quarters of the population is under 15 years old.

"With our immigration laws, unless they have higher education or finances or speak English, they can't come to Canada," Elliot said. "The only opportunity for them is scholarships."

Since Guatemala Hope incorporated in 2003, the charity has purchased seeds, fertilizer and community land for El Triunfo farmers. They have also built homes and a Catholic church. The group already has plans for a sixth trip scheduled for late February.

Now that the foundation is set let's work together to continue to make Tecumseh the premier place to live, work, and invest

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