

Erin Fessler  
Social Enterprise Coordinator  
Mujeres Activas de Potrero, Abriendo Mentes  
Potrero, Costa Rica  
September 29, 2015

## **Introduction:**

Wow, I can't believe it's been more than three months since I first arrived in Costa Rica! I have loved becoming a part of the small community here, and have developed some really strong relationships with women in Potrero as well.

When I first arrived, the challenge was to figure out what exactly the women's group stood for. What was the mission? How did we want to carry out that mission? etc. To give you a little background, Mujeres Activas de Potrero (MAP), began organically out the community involvement of Abriendo Mentes, which is an educational organization. The organic development meant that there was not a set structure established, and the group went through many phases of different initiatives and goals as Social Enterprise Coordinators came and went. I have been put to the task of (1) revitalizing the social enterprise portion of the group, and (2) determining what else the women in the community are looking for. My intention is to stay here long enough to see my work through, and stop the cycle of program turnover.

### **(1) Revitalizing the social enterprise**

When MAP was still young, some women expressed interest in learning how to sew, so machines were acquired, and they began to learn in the English classroom when class was not in session. As they learned, the bags that they were making started to pile up, and they decided that they should start selling them. The Shop opened as a storefront where the women could sell their goods, thus not only becoming empowered through their new skill, but also by the economic benefit that came along with it. Unfortunately, The Shop was not established with a strong foundation in terms of accounting, finances, etc, so over the years they have had trouble making ends meet. As finance major, and someone who is interested in using their education to make an impact on the world, this seemed to be the perfect opportunity for me to do so. Over the last few months, I have worked on establishing a pricing and accounting system, a standard product mix, a system by which to pay the women, and more. Hopefully this new payment system, along with the flexible hours that it will allow for, will involve more women and bring more money into their homes.

I have also begun to promote sewing as a service. We have been providing tailoring services for some time, but there are sewn goods apart from clothing that are in demand as well. For example, we have sewn curtains and outdoor slipcovers for one woman who had just moved to the area. Another project consisted of making small mats for a teacher to use in her classroom. It is a great way for the ex-pat community to get involved with MAP and to get to know the real problems that are faced by locals in this area.

One particularly great relationship builder was our project making *trajes tipicos* for boys and girls at the local international school. They needed traditional outfits for their independence day dance, so we put out the word, took orders, and made outfits for five boys and six girls. Given the nature of customized clothing, the children came in for measurements and fittings with their parents, where they got to know a little more about our organization. The independence day project was a great success. We not only built relationships, but we had all hands on deck as a few extra women in the community joined in to participate. With all of these different projects, I am happy to report that we have broken even all four month's end since I have arrived, months that are typically in the red.

As of this month, we are putting the new business systems and standards into action, which will hopefully make The Shop and it's finances even more transparent and buoyant.

## **(2) New programming**

Just yesterday, we held a meeting for local women, to tell them of the changes we were making in the sewing group, mainly that they will have a concrete payment system and that hours will be flexible. In the past women were not paid unless The Shop broke even, and the hours were rigid, so many were turned off by this. There was a positive response to these changes, so I think that we will have success in growing over the next two months. What's more, in the past, programs were decided on without getting collective community input, so I opened up the floor to ask what they would like to see in the community for women. I am currently sorting through the feedback, and at the beginning of next week I will debrief on the meeting with my director and other volunteers interested in helping out. The next step is to have multiple smaller meetings with the women who were interested in each different program. From there we will gauge interest, and pilot them if enough women are truly committed.

I cannot wait to see what MAP has grown into by the time I write my next report!