

A Roof for Me, My Family, My Country

Just a short walk west of Paseo de Las Flores, a colorful, upscale mall in Heredia, north of San José, a sea of corrugated metal sprawls across a rolling hillside. Electricity lines are strung haphazardly from homes across trees and angled sticks. Grey water tumbles down foul-smelling ditches.

Guararí, as this shantytown is known, is home to hundreds of families living in shacks cobbled together, with a certain expertise, from scrap metal and wood. The floors are dirt, and the roofs leak.

It is here that *Un Techo para mi País* (A Roof for My Country), a Chilean-based organization made up mostly of young, bright-eyed volunteers, plans to build 20 houses over the next week. The same week, volunteers will also build another 20 houses in the squatter communities of La Claudia and La Esperanza, both in the Caribbean port city of Limón.

The houses are simple, so they go up fast and can be hammered together by inexperienced volunteers led by more knowledgeable coordinators from the organization.

Last month, the organization did a test run with the construction of seven houses over one weekend in Guararí. Five were funded by British American Tobacco. Two others, including the one shown in these photos, were built thanks to Mitch Zychowski, a retired businessman from the U.S. city of Philadelphia.

Un Techo para mi País is looking for more volunteers. For more information, call 2234-6471, or go to www.untechoparamipais.or.cr.

Photos and text by Leland Baxter-Neal | Tico Times



Cristopher, left, is the 3-year-old son of Marlon Herrera and Cristina Campos, the couple who watched as volunteers first tore down half their existing home, above, and then built a new one. When the volunteers arrived on a Saturday morning, Cristopher was ready to go. He hammered the earth, dragged a shovel back and forth across the work site and helped move piles of dirt into buckets. Only occasionally in the way, the enthusiastic toddler spread smiles and muddy hugs.

Due to a minor miscalculation, half of the Marlon Herrera-Cristina Campos family's existing house had to come down to make way for the new one, seen from afar at right. Campos made no complaints, and she and her neighbor, doña Rita, continued to prepare a lunch for the volunteers in their newly open-air kitchen, above. Mitch Zychowski, 58, has funded a soup kitchen in another squatter community, Triángulo de Solidaridad, since reading about it in *The Tico Times* in 2006, and said he is now exploring other ways to help a country that has captured his heart. Below, in the yellow hat, Zychowski works along side his friend, 72.



Marlon Herrera, above with volunteers, and, right, with his wife and son celebrating the finished construction, worked alongside the visiting laborers, adding his own construction expertise.

