

The History of CASEM from 1982
Interview with the “founding ladies”

To understand CASEM, it is necessary to go back to the way things were prior to 1982. The economy was based entirely on milk and cheese production by the Productores de Monteverde SA., but there was a decrease in milk production. It was essential to look for diversification of income-generating activities. Tourism was just beginning to emerge but the region had only one little Hotel de Montana Monteverde and a few Pensiones with a total of no more than 20 rooms. Locals had no electricity or running water, and women used to spend at least six hours a day cooking, and that many more bringing up water from the river to do the family washing.

Big families were necessary to help with all the work, and it was a patriarchal society with men in complete control of decision making. Women had no knowledge of or access to birth control, and they had no rights as individuals. If they wanted to attend a meeting or shop, they could only do so with their husband's permission; and they had no say in the spending of money. As a rule, times for women to meet, to share their points of view and to talk to each other about their needs came only every two or three months, when the priest or the doctor would come to visit the area and provide their services.

Given all that, it is easy to see why many women were eager to find ways to improve the quality of their lives, and why the time was right for eight women to come together to form a small crafts organization in 1982. Many were skilled in handicrafts which they used to produce souvenirs for the few biologists who visited the Monteverde Cloud Forest as researchers.

It was not easy to grow the organization due to lack of transportation, the lack of resources and, above all, the opposition of the male family members that saw CASEM as a threat to their traditional way of life. Not only the men but also the older people were critical of the women, and it was a never ending struggle to maintain their self-esteem and enthusiasm. They had to lie to get out of the house and meet secretly to work on their crafts, and, of course, they were completely unsure of any future successes.

Several women were key to the survival of this fledgling organization. One was Patricia, in whose house they met and sold the first five years. At least 20% of them were illiterate, and they had to learn everything from each other. Another was Jean Andrews, a Tica who had received treatment for polio as a child in the USA, married a researcher and gave 10000 through a church donation to supplement the hires, make sales, dances and parties used to raise enough money to build the fine store which was completed in 1987.

Surely, however, the dominant figure then and now was Dona Nery who was one of the original eight, and who has seen the organization through the difficult relationship with the Coffee Cooperative, the loss of members in the 1990's, and the painful and lengthy repayment of bank loans. According to Ileana, the wonderful bi-lingual staff member, Dona Nery never takes a vacation, is on site almost daily, and has taught herself the

intricacies of accounting and bookkeeping to manage the myriad details of the retail trade.

The membership is rising again, is currently 98, including three male members, and there are many plans for the future. Dona Nery hopes to expand the inventory and crafts through education and new classes for the artisans. She is always on the lookout for new products and objects which will bring more customers to CASEM.

Global Volunteers has sent two groups every year since 2000 (now available on almost every program), and the results of their labors are very visible: Finished work and meeting area in the back; An entire kitchen where lunches are prepared, beautiful tiled floors throughout; Two bathrooms in the process, and lots of painting. Also, Global Volunteers teams repainted the art gallery; made mechanical and electrical repairs, and built several bookcases and shelves to Dona Nery's specifications -- which now hold office records and various craft materials for the classes which are held in the upstairs workroom.