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When I Was Elena by Ellen Urbani Hildebrand

Ever wondered what daily life was really like in the Peace Corps? Ellen Urbani Hildebrand's memoir, *When I Was Elena*, will tell you. Hildebrand spent spring 1992 through autumn 1993 in Guatemala, living without the comforts most Americans take for granted and learning a great deal about life among the poor in Guatemala. She dealt on a daily basis with things like scorpions and rattlesnakes in her house, no running water, intestinal parasites and worms, food shortages, superstitions, and even government coups. Fortunately Hildebrand was not an "ugly American," and she was able to face most situations with a natural grace.



Hildebrand felt a particular kinship with the Guatemalan women. Women's lib had not reached Central America. The women accepted the fact that their lives would be hard, sometimes dangerous, and cheap. Hildebrand tried to help them see that they had value to themselves and others. The book is constructed in an unusual way. One chapter is from Hildebrand's point of view, and the next is from the point of view of one of the Guatemalan women. Since Hildebrand obviously wrote both chapters, this could have been jarring; but it's not. Living as closely as she did with her subjects gave the author real insight into their thoughts and feelings.

Hildebrand is a talented writer, using language beautifully to tell her story and that of the indigenous women. Few books are this entertaining while leaving such a lasting impression.

(Sherrie Antonowicz, Administration)

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