

Small loan, big difference

By Kristi Heim

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For Sandra de los Santos Garcia, a \$30 loan was a life-changing experience.

Ten years ago, she was homeless, struggling to raise two children on her own and eke out a living selling candy in a slum in Nicaragua.

She never expected to fly on an airplane, let alone give a speech to 1,200 well-heeled Americans in the Grand Ballroom of the Westin Hotel in Seattle.

Yet there she was yesterday, telling the story of how she built up her small business through a series of microloans funded by the Seattle nonprofit **Global Partnerships**.

"A lot of women are very poor and abandoned in my country, just like I was," she said through an interpreter. "But they offered me a loan, and I took the risk."

Garcia, 41, received money and training through the Leon 2000 Foundation, a Nicaraguan organization that works with **Global Partnerships** to administer the loans.

With her first loan, Garcia bought products to stock a small market, which she named Casandra after her favorite soap-opera character, a gypsy.

When she paid back the first loan, she qualified for the next. Garcia has since taken out and paid back 18 loans, gradually doubling the size of her store and saving enough money for materials to build a cement block house.

The family went from sharing one bed to having bedrooms of their own, and Garcia is now working to put her three sons through school.

Global Partnerships was founded in 1994 by Bill and Paula Clapp and became a public nonprofit organization in 2002. It had a budget of about \$2 million last year, raising more than \$300,000 from donations by individuals and businesses in its annual luncheon.

The group funds microcredit programs in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The idea of microcredit is to tackle the problem of extreme poverty by helping people build businesses to improve their lives and create more economic opportunity in their communities.

The sums are not large — Garcia's largest loan was for \$770 — and the investments are not grand. One borrower used the money to rent a truck to sell more charcoal used for cooking in her village; another to start selling eggs door to door. But the loans are helping transform families in areas with some of the worst poverty, said Marcos Antonio Hernandez, executive director of Leon 2000 Foundation. The group has given loans to 8,500 people in Nicaragua, most of them women like Garcia. Women are better at paying the loans back, Hernandez said.

"She's a living example of a Nicaraguan woman that works and fights even in the face of all the adversity in her life," he said. "She developed herself and bettered her life and now she's a successful businesswoman."

The journey from her neighborhood in Leon to downtown Seattle left Garcia a little overwhelmed.

"I had never traveled before. I had never been on a plane before," she said. "But here I am with all of these wonderful people." Still there was a note of a sadness among the excitement.

"I only think about my people," she said. "I see so many things people have here. In my country so many children don't have lunch."



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

*Sandra de los Santos Garcia is a small-business owner in Nicaragua who was able to climb out of poverty through the help of microloans given through **Global Partnerships**, a Seattle nonprofit. She spoke at the Westin Hotel yesterday.*