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# NPH Rancho Santa Fe community



winter 2006

## Burrito Sabanero Christmas



It's a silly little song about a donkey, so it's somewhat embarrassing to admit this. But for two consecutive Christmas Eves, the Burrito Sabanero has reduced me to a giant blubbing blob on opposite ends of the emotional spectrum. Last year, the setting was the fantastically alive Dominican nail salon in my New York neighborhood. I had wandered in, hoping a manicure/pedicure would help me pull myself out of my depressive funk: I wouldn't be spending Christmas at the Ranch, something that had become a tradition for me since I was first a volunteer here in 2000. I couldn't afford the pricey airfare and couldn't use my frequent flyer miles to come until mid-January. I tried to comfort myself - saying that I would see the kids in just a few weeks. But it wasn't working - because after four Ranch Christmases, I know what I am missing. Polished and primed, I waddle over to the toe fans and neon nail dryers and plop down. Someone turns up the Spanish radio station.

Tuki Tuki Tuki Tuki, Tuki Tuki Tuki Ta...  
Apurate mi burrito... It's all I need to hear. I can feel the pools forming in my eyes and within seconds I am choking back sobs. Posed like a rag doll with

all four lacquered-up limbs under their respective machines, I am defenseless to even reach for a Kleenex. The tears come fast. Here I sit - exposed. This strange, pale freckled white girl amongst all these beautifully put together Dominican women, weeping inconsolably over the donkey song. I try to explain to the concerned patrons sitting around me how the kids at the Ranch sing this song every year, how my heart is breaking because I'm not there right now. None of it comes out right. I collect myself enough to slip on my coat and shoes and slunk out into the dirty Manhattan snow sludge - embarrassed and even more depressed.

One year later, it's 4:30 am Christmas Eve and I am once again bawling over the Burrito Sabanero. It's okay though, because I'm in the privacy of my own room and the singing is coming from a pack of Ranch kids going home to home with a traditional wake-up serenade. Tuki Tuki Tuki. Tuki Tuki Tuki Ta. This year, my tears come from that warm blessed feeling of being home for the holidays - so I just let them fall. It is an especially emotional Christmas Eve morning for me, because my own parents are on their way to Honduras.

I'll pick them up at the airport later today and they will see first-hand what draws me here year and year again. I perch myself near the window and soak in the kids sweet voices - singing loud and unabashedly in the pre-dawn darkness with home-strung guitars plinking underneath. They are singing and celebrating our big, loud, wonderful family of 550 and love in abundance.

Virtually all of the staff members are on Christmas vacation, so our oldest Pequeños are home from school taking care of their little brothers and sisters. It



always amazes me how responsibly and lovingly they take on the job and how smoothly things seem to run. As sunset falls, we have a family-style Christmas dinner. Bunches of boys have arranged a massive quantity of picnic tables into a giant circle on the cement

soccer field. We eat the traditional nacatamales and head to the church for the Christmas pageant – complete with Christmas carols and several different spins on the Nativity story. One skit talks about how Jesus comes calling in all different forms, including the internal CB radios and cell phones. Technology has officially arrived at Rancho Santa Fe.

All of the volunteers have cobbled together small gifts for their “hogares.” My original little chicas from five years ago are now full-blown adolescents and, while there is a sweetness and naivety about them not usually found in their North American counterparts, they are still – God bless them, TEENAGERS. Not always the easiest group to please. My parents brought the goods for the gift bags from the States – playing cards, nail polish, some foam bracelets and a few candies each. On the way to the airport that afternoon, I’d also made a last-minute trip to the crazy open-air market in Tegucigalpa to get them new flip flops. I bargained down to less than a dollar a pair for some pretty yet durable pastel ones in a variety of colors and sizes. The girls’ current sandals are in sorry shape, so I am really excited to give them their gift. But again, these are teenagers I’m dealing with. As I finish sneaking the bags into their beds and climb into a bunk, I worry they’ll be disappointed.

Around quarter to five, I hear cellophane crackling. One chica has found her bag. A few minutes later more rustling, then whispering. It’s still dark, but I can see the shadows of the kids clustering together, laying out their loot. Excited chatter builds. I lay there and listen with a big grin on my face. It’s a true Christmas miracle - HAPPY teenagers. As light creeps into the dorm, one of them spots the sandals, which I grouped together by sizes around the two-foot Christmas tree. “Sandalias!” They form a curious little semi-circle around them and one of them asks me if they are for them. Of course, I tell them, but I wasn’t exactly sure how to work this part, since I didn’t know everyone’s shoe sizes. (There are 31

of them!) Suddenly a clump of panic lodges itself in my dry throat: What if there isn’t enough of a particular size? What if they fight over the colors?

## What if this whole **dumb shoe** idea turns into a **horrible** Christmas melee?

These are all questions I should have thought about before, but I was just too caught up in the gift-giving excitement. Before I have time to worry further, the girls have already formed an orderly line, appointed Managers in Charge of Sandal Distribution, and each chica is happily slapping around in a flip flop in her size and preferred color. Christmas Miracle Number Two.

A few hours later, we embark on another Ranch Christmas tradition – giving to the poor. Each of our kids is asked to bring at least one of his or her own things to give to families in the towns surrounding the Ranch. My girls gave up a meal so we could also bring some basic pantry ingredients. Our groups all set off in all different directions. Five of my chicas surround my mom and move in tandem with her every step like a princess’ court. They hold her hand and lead her lovingly down the rocky and often steep path to Tamale Queso, a tiny village a couple miles from the Ranch. Cindy, one of my 14-year olds who is now taller than me and doesn’t seem to like anyone these days, has my Dad arm in arm at the front of the group. He doesn’t speak a word of Spanish, but somehow now they are old friends. At one point they are skipping. Skipping. Christmas Miracle Number Three.

We visit at least a dozen families who are gracious

and grateful. These are our neighbors, most of whom have many people living in a room or two, in simple wood or adobe houses with no running water or electricity. Even so, you get the sense that they don’t spend a lot of time dwelling on what they are missing in life. Being welcomed into their homes is a very humbling experience and a reminder that we are extremely blessed to have the lifestyle we do at the Ranch.

Late that afternoon, we gather for Mass at the Ranch church. All the kids are showered and looking their best, although everyone is tired from their long walks. In his homily, our priest talks about the real meaning of Christmas and I swallow another wave of emotion as I realize that I am, quite literally, sitting right in the middle of it. I look down the row at the tiniest toddlers, sweet sleeping angel faces passed out domino-style on the laps of the older kids. A few rows beneath me I see my parents, covered in a mound of pre-schoolers. The kids are velcroed to them like they’ve known them for years and are curiously inspecting their every pore. A minute later, as if on cue, the whole church is belting out, you guessed it, the Burrito Sabanero. Suddenly, it overwhelms me: Christmas is about family, which you sometimes find in unexpected places. And the single greatest gift anyone can hope for is being part of a big beautiful family that makes room for everyone, even silly little donkeys and the silly little women who cry over them.

