

Eileen Giron

Salvadoran Business Woman, Disabilities Activist and Artist

by Catherine Boldt

L'auteure a rencontré en entrevue une féministe handicapée, femme d'affaires du Salvador, artiste, propriétaire d'un



Eileen Giron and Manolo Orellana, floor manager of the ceramics workshop.
Photo: Catherine Boldt

petit atelier de céramique ainsi que d'une modeste plantation de café.

Eileen Giron lives in San Salvador, El Salvador. She is the General Manager of a ceramics workshop and owns a small coffee plantation. She is an artist, feminist, and disabilities activist. She is a wheelchair user and founder of the disability movement in her country and continues her involvement in ACOGIPRI, an organization of people with disabilities.

Eileen embodies what the entrepreneurial spirit is about. She never lets anyone's preconceived notions of what a disabled woman can or cannot do intimidate her into living by anyone else's rules. She tries to pass on that attitude to other disabled women in Central America with workshops, seminars and newsletters. On a recent visit to El Salvador, as a Consultant with the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (ccd), and its women and literacy project., I had the opportunity of interviewing Eileen on her experiences in combining business and activism.

Catherine: Did you imagine when you were younger that you would grow up to be the entrepreneur that you are now?

Eileen: No! I grew up in a small town and people there were very easy going. I never had very special dreams and I was well taken care of in my home. I didn't like to study at school but I liked to read a lot. When I was a teenager I started to study French. I already knew English. So, after French I started to study German. Then I had this dream of going to Europe. I went to Europe with my family but once I was there I knew I had to come back by myself. It took a long time for me to go to Europe by myself. But,

once there I started to meet a lot of people with disabilities that were either in a club or an association. I realized how many services were available for disabled people, although not as many as there are in the United States. But there were a lot compared to the total absolute lack of services in El Salvador. When I came back I didn't feel as uncomfortable being together with other disabled people as I felt before leaving for Europe. We started a self-help group in 1979 and that turned into a cooperative in 1981.

Catherine: Who had the idea that the ceramics workshop would be a good business?

Eileen: Maybe in those days we were not thinking it would be a good business. I don't think we were at that time very good business people. The idea was that even very severely disabled people could do it and that was the main idea. No matter how disabled someone was they could work on ceramics. Once we started we began to think more as business people with a vision for the future in terms of trying to train the workers in ceramics which was not very popular here. We were able to do that. If I were to have to start again it would be very important to have some training in management because training in the workshops by itself is not enough. We made a lot of mistakes in the beginning. When we founded the cooperative we were a few people on the Board of Directors. I thought initially if I went to the office only three hours a day that would be enough, but not even eight hours was enough.

Catherine: Who trained the workers in the art and craft of ceramic method?

Eileen: We were able to get some cooperation from the Ministry of Education. They had some people who had been trained in Europe and Japan and the Ministry offered them

to us full-time. When their term had finished they were involved with our work so much that they also became members of ACOGIPRI. Since they were members they felt committed to come if we had any technical problems.

Catherine: How long did it take for you to become self-sufficient?

Eileen: Maybe if ACOGIPRI's activities and work would be dedicated only to the ceramics workshop that would allow us to be self-sufficient.

ACOGIPRI is not only a ceramics workshop, it is also a small association. We have about 50-60 active members and on paper there are many. Although it is a rather small association, it does a lot of work. So that is why sometimes it is not self-sufficient. For some specific activities we get grants. But some activities we pay for because we think it is worth it. At the same time, sometimes it is not fair for those that work at the workshop because I think they could have a better salary. But then on

the other hand, I see that there are also a lot of other people who need some support. Although we are not able to give them money we fund transportation to bring them to meetings and things like that.

Catherine: Even though you have a relatively small membership in ACOGIPRI you reach out to a lot more people than you have as members.

Eileen: That's right, because we have our newsletters and we have some small support from the media. A lot of people know about us and it is inspiring for a lot of people.

Catherine: How many people do you have working there?

Eileen: Twelve. I would say that for a ceramics workshop that is a lot.

Catherine: Do you have a marketing strategy?

Eileen: Yes. Since we have very few administrative staff what we do is visit craft stores. We visit them and then they come and see what we have. We sell in our own store and other stores in the capital. We also sell in Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Puerto Rico. For the first time we



*Cecilia Contreras sanding tea pots at the ceramics cooperative.
Photo: Catherine Boldt*

have an order from England. Over 2,000 pieces in total. We are making soup bowls, coffee mugs and plant pots for Oxfam in England. I understand that they have a lot of stores.

Catherine: Is it an advantage or a disadvantage for people to now you are cooperative of people with disabilities?

Eileen: I really think it is not important. I would say that most of the people who come to our store, maybe 90 per cent, are looking for a product and they don't care who made it. Sometimes we have had a few people ask why are you selling your products so expensively? They have the idea

that because we are disabled people we get everything as a gift, like the material. They think that we don't have to buy anything. People have very traditional thoughts about work related to disabled people. Their thoughts are very paternalistic.

Catherine: Did you receive the contract with Oxfam based on the fact that you are people with disabilities?

Eileen: No, so far as I know they help groups that are disadvantaged.

They buy from other groups in El Salvador that live in parts of the country that were badly hit by the war.

Catherine: How has your ceramic shop been received as a business?

Eileen: I think very well. As I said before it all depends on the quality and the way the product looks. The customer's first impression is very important. Many of our customers are foreign people.

Catherine: How are you received as a woman from Central America who is a business woman, an artist, and activist? With all those roles how do people react to you?

Eileen: I would say in general, very well. The thing is that I know a lot of people and I think that makes a difference. When I am taking the role of an activist people are very careful. Sometimes I am not well accepted because at times I am not very nice when I am speaking, especially to people who do not have disabilities. As a business woman when I am among business people, I think I am accepted very well. I have a lot of friends in the arts community because I used to paint years ago. I went to an art school and some of the people I studied with are famous because they have dedicated themselves only to painting.

Catherine: Do you think that being such a creative person has given you an advantage in business?

Eileen: Yes, I think it has helped. I think the factor of having people working is also very creative. The people we have in the workshop are artists. It is amazing that some of them don't know how to read and write but they work with their hands like people who have gone for years to an art school. That's very fulfilling.

Catherine Boldt runs her own disabilities consulting company called Boldt-Upwrite. She is a member of the International Committee of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) and a Board Member of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRAW).

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