

# THE COSTCO CONNECTION

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## Standing strong

Boston Marathon bomb survivor and Costco employee Jeff Bauman talks about his memoir, *Stronger* 29

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Valeria Encarnación Esparza (left) and Jimena Ochoa share a moment at Entreamigos during a summertime workshop.

# Among friends

## Entreamigos connects the community

JULIAN MITCHELL

By Irene Middleman Thomas

ON AVENUE TERCER MUNDO, in the tiny town of San Francisco, in the Mexican state of Nayarit, a rather utopian vision has come to life.

Avenue Tercer Mundo ("Third World") is where 40-year-old Nicole Swedlow, a native Californian and Costco member, has created Entreamigos, a popular community center that bridges the gap between the American expatriate population and the locals, many of whom struggle economically.

### Among friends

Founded in 2006, funded primarily by private donations and relying heavily on volunteer support, Entreamigos ("among friends") is a 16,000-square-foot educational, cultural and community facility, and a registered United States 501(c)3 nonprofit. Some 1,000 to 1,500 people visit Entreamigos weekly, enjoying its free language, cultural and sports classes; recycling center; café; organic community garden; homework help; cultural events; and more. Entreamigos has 26 paid part-time staffers and 25 to 50 volunteers in any given week. It is often visited by corporate groups and universities practicing social responsibility and sometimes receives 80 to 200 volunteers at a time or for special projects.

The center's free bilingual library has more than 5,000 titles for both children and adults, an art gallery and cinema room, a large computer lab (with free classes and Internet access), homework help and reading circles. The library and the sports facility offer classes in Spanish, English, belly dancing, gymnastics, karate, Pilates, guitar, sewing, screen printing, history and culture, and much more. Textile, glassworks and screen-printing workshops at the Imaginarte Eco-Design Center use recy-

clered products and sell the new creations at the gift shop.

Entreamigos' recycling center is one of the most recognized and productive community recycling centers in the region, and focuses on creating small-business enterprises for locals with the recycled items. The Recicla thrift store helps to clothe the needy residents of the area, and residents can use the center's system of currency, earned by attending parenting workshops, volunteering and other ways. The member community gardens serve as food sources and for education. Entreamigos is also the official emergency shelter for the community, storing supplies in case of natural disaster.

Entreamigos matches donors with needy

### MEMBERPROFILE

**Name:** Entreamigos Community Center

**Founder:** Nicole Swedlow

**Year founded:** 2006

**Employees:** 26

**Address:** Avenue Tercer Mundo, No. 12 San Francisco, Nayarit, Mexico

**Email:** [info@entreamigos.org.mx](mailto:info@entreamigos.org.mx)

**Website:** [www.entreamigos.org.mx](http://www.entreamigos.org.mx)

**Comments about Costco:** "I love Costco. It is the most consistent choice for quality and quantity in this region in Mexico. With a few thousand visitors a week and more than 100 kids a day at Entreamigos, we buy lots of toilet paper!"

—Nicole Swedlow



IRENE MIDDLEMAN THOMAS

students. This year, 60 children received full scholarships, and nearly 100 receive aid in the social assistance program annually. The program holds students accountable for attendance and grades, and provides them with individual help to develop skills necessary to succeed. The school assistance program, involving 98 children from 44 families, provides free tutoring, mentor programs and parenting workshops. Four-week summer workshops at the center match hundreds of children with volunteers.

### Change and progress

San Pancho, as San Francisco is affectionately nicknamed, is a delightful Pacific coastal town replete with cobblestone streets, lush bougainvilleas, turquoise waters, soft sand beaches and some 2,000 permanent residents, about an hour's drive north of Puerto Vallarta. About 10 years ago, Swedlow, who had owned a café in Key West, traveled to San Pancho for what was to be a short stay. "I was just going for six months when my first child was a baby," she says. "The idea was to spend some quality time with my kid and try to figure out what was next in life. A few years later and another baby, I found myself still in Mexico and had fallen in love with the community of San Pancho."

That was about the same time she saw that tourism was beginning to change the small community. "The local community wanted and needed the financial benefit of more work and new industry, but it wasn't clear how to make the most of all of the changes," she says. "Entreamigos was conceived as an opportunity to share resources among the arriving foreign community and the local community, built and operating on the idea that everyone has something to teach and everyone has something to learn."

Teaching arts and crafts at a rented storefront, Swedlow invited local artists to sell their work there in exchange for a reduced commission rate, and asked them to join her in offering classes to the community. The store and project took off, attracting interest, donations, visitors and artists. In 2009, the Nayarit government granted the use of a huge abandoned warehouse to Entreamigos, and, with donations and volunteer community help, the new center opened.

Swedlow, who was honored last February by the Dalai Lama with the "Unsung Hero of Compassion" award, beams as she looks around at Entreamigos. "It feels beautiful to me," she says. "Everyone feels completely entitled here. This space is their space." ☺

Irene Middleman Thomas is a Denver-based writer who has studied, lived and worked in various parts of Mexico.