

## **The Fort That Became a Fountain**

*By Laura Liz Gil Echenique*

It was around two in the morning when I left the house. The heat was the obvious reason for my sleepless night. I got into my bike, my star transport means; there are many stars in this city. The fact I was pedaling really hard reminded me of the oil I forgot to put on it.

A soft breeze eased the unbearable humidity of the weather. The words I had heard yesterday still resonated in my mind. I could not help overhearing them while I was fixing the water pipes in the room next to the one where a workshop for the community was developing.

*In Cardenas fortresses were built during colonial times to protect the city. In the decade of the 20s of the past century this mission started and in less than forty years we became a church that found its home very near one of these fortresses.* I like to exercise my memory, and the ability to remember details is what has allowed me to be in charge of the maintenance of the water ozone purification system, which I carry out together with Rosi, my friend and accomplice in this task.

The voice of the lady facilitating the workshop had a particular rhythm. I could hear it melodiously interspersed with the comments of the participants; that's why it took me so long to finish with the repairing. I liked listening to her while I was working on that which gave meaning to the morning ritual of filling the bottles for the people. The lady was giving lots of information, but I remember a particular moment in her talk: *In the year 2012 we received with joy the support of the brothers and sisters of the Presbyterian Church of Saint Charles, New Orleans, to install the Living Waters for the World purification system. The fort became a fountain.*

*The fort became a fountain.* This idea came back to my mind with every turn of the pedal. *The fountain fort.* And Rosi and I were in charge of making the system work correctly. I increased the speed; responsibility made me pedal harder, hurrying to get there. We had installed the system a just few weeks back. The statistics about some cholera or stomach upset cases increased in Cárdenas. The line to get clean water also increased at El Fuerte (The Fort), since people began to trust because those who drank this water had had no stomach or kidney problems so far. At the beginning, as in any new activity, people were skeptical. There were those who questioned the cleanliness of our water. Some of them even took samples to test them in

specialized labs. They verified its purity and the difference from the water that came from wells that supplied the community.

It was 2:30 am. We had installed the last filters only two weeks ago, but it was necessary to check them again. Filters are supposed to last longer, but the water in Cárdenas was so contaminated that they got blackened so soon. Each time we opened them, we realized that all the problems of upset stomachs and diarrheas came from this filth. Then we were so happy to contribute to wellbeing and healing.

I came so early because the line started at 4 or 5 in the morning. Some came and still come from distant places. The number of bicycles parked there could well be considered an exhibit. Some of the regular people had offered to help filling and giving out the bottles. Sometimes we had to ration the water so that everybody on the line would get some of it. When this was the case, we felt sorry about having only two tanks of water, and we asked them to come back later. That is why I got up at 2, 3 or 4 in the morning, to have clean filters, full tanks, and pipes ready. The Fort had to be my forte so that the fort would continue to be a fountain.

I guessed that even though the line started early no one would be waiting before 3 in the morning. When I got to the gate I found a bicycle and sitting on the floor, with wide open, reddened eyes from lack of sleep, I saw a young, twentyish girl. We looked at each other first. It is difficult to speak at that hour in the morning, because sounds and voices carry in the silence of darkness. I opened the gate for her to enter and I gave her a glass of water. She sat down. She had brought with her two five-liter bottles; I looked at the bottles and at the young hands of the woman who had not slept. I turned the pump on so that the water would start getting to the tanks and finally asked her why she had come so early.

“I have not slept at all,” she said. “I come from the hospital. My two-year-old son was hospitalized three days ago, and his diarrheas have not stopped. I was told to give him clean water and a nurse suggested that I should come here. But I am not religious.”

Many people did not come first because they thought that the water was only for the members of the church. “Water is for everybody,” I told her. “The fountain at The Fort is for the community, so that neither their children, nor their families get sick; and so that mothers like you do not have to worry about their children not having clean water to drink.”

When water finally got to the taps, the young mother filled her bottles and left for the hospital. She promised to call to keep us updated with news about the child. I continued thinking of her, of her concern and of her prejudice to come and ask for water. I remembered the story of the woman of Samaria whom Jesus asked water of the well, and later spread the word among her people (John 4:5-42). I remembered that water is a message of love for everyone equally, and I felt so full. I reclined on a bench, and fell asleep with the lullaby of the sound of the system purifying the water, waiting for the first in the line and the volunteers.

“The water is a miracle,” I overheard someone speaking and woke up. “The miracle is the people who tends to the system so that we can drink from this water,” answered someone from the other side of the line. I think something got into my eyes, because I felt like crying.

I opened the gates. Volunteers began to fill the bottles for the people and I was looking at the whole scene, and thinking of the young girl, the Samaritan of the well. I also thought about the church, about the pipes, about Cárdenas. It’s been four years now that we have been looking after the system and working so that the water stays clean. The boy came out of the hospital all right, and when I remember this I feel immensely happy to know that the fort is more than a fountain; after giving out seven hundred forty three thousand gallons, it has become an aqueduct.