

COMMUNITY VOICES

## An Interview of Rosalina Batista



Doña Rosalina Batista is a community leader who plays a key role in the partnership between the communities of Londrina, Brazil; the State University of Londrina; and the health services of the municipality of Londrina.<sup>1</sup> I interviewed her in October, 2001 in Londrina during The Network's annual meeting. Dr. Laura Feuerwerker, Coordinator of the Program of Follow-up and Support for the UNI Projects, translated the interview. The interview has been edited and abridged.

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*I've heard that you've made an enormous contribution to the health of your community. Thank you for agreeing to tell your story.*

I was born in Minas Gerais [Brazil]. I had 11 brothers and seven sisters. We came to Paraná when I was 16. Our family was very poor. When I started work, I cooked for other people. It was difficult to get jobs because when people heard where I lived, they didn't want me to work for them. Because we lived in a bad area, they thought that we were bad people. When I went to buy things and people found out where I lived, they didn't want to sell to me. This discrimination was one of the main reasons that I started working with women.

*Did you have an opportunity to go to school?*

No, the first time that I went to school was last year.

I was married when I was 21. I had my first child when I was 22, my second when I was 23, and my third when I was 24. Eighteen years later I had my last one. I have four grandchildren.

I had a slightly better situation than some people, so I was more aware of discrimination than the very poor people. I started talking to other women to see if we could unite and do something together. I invited four women to my house. We talked about how there was so much sickness in our neighborhood, and we shared other problems.

Before long there were 70 women from eight barrios, so we had to find other places to meet. We formed the Club of Fighting Women. We had to change our name because people thought that since we were a club, we were a group of naked women. So we changed our name to Women's Association. Our first activity was to get covers for the sewers. At that time they were just big holes in the ground. That was dangerous for children and others.

We also wanted to get help with getting food and schools, and we wanted to build our capabilities. We searched for a connection with the municipal government and found a social worker who began working with us. She played an important role in urging us to get organized.

In order to be an official association, we needed to pay money. We got the money by collecting and selling used clothes at a bazaar. We were successful. Everything we did was accomplished by mobilizing the community.

We started to do handicrafts, first in homes. This activity served two purposes. The women learned new skills, and it was therapeutic work. It gave women something to do. We could talk about our problems and issues and plan together as we worked.

We organized ourselves to go to the municipal government to get the streets paved. We also needed health centers. We needed food, so we started community food gardens. We did many things.

Our many activities and victories caused problems. The men got jealous. They started saying that our Women's Association was playing the role of the neighborhood association. First we had gotten support from the neighborhood associations, but then there was conflict and competition.

*Did the number of women in the association continue to grow?*

Yes, we needed \$100 month to rent a place that was big enough for all of us to meet together. A tax was put on gasoline. The money that was gathered went to a fund that supported community initiatives that included helping us with the rent.

As we had good concrete results, women in other parts of the city wanted to organize too. They asked me to come and help them organize.

*In the early 1990s the Kellogg Foundation funded a UNI Project in Londrina. It was an attempt to get the health professions schools in various parts of Latin America to work in partnership with their communities and local health*

*services. How did you begin working with the UNI Project at the University of Londrina?*

Before the UNI Project there had been projects with the university, but they were isolated, and there was no coordinated contact between the university and the community organizations.

Our organization was the first community organizations to propose having a health council for the South Region of Londrina. This council was formed and included many different organizations in the community.

We heard about the UNI Project. We heard that they wanted to work with a neighborhood in the North of Londrina. Our health council went to the university to prove that we were more organized than the other neighborhoods. This was in 1991. We were successful.

In the beginning, things were not easy. Each of the 150 or so organizations and the many neighborhoods within our council needed to learn to work together. They also had different issues and wanted different things, so there were struggles within the organization. The coordinator of our council did not know how to deal with diversity and bring people together. It was difficult to propose actions because we couldn't agree.

Some of the people in the community and health council said that our Women's Association knew how to get things done, so the leadership of the health council was changed.

*Did you become the coordinator of the health council that worked with the university and the health services?*

Yes. The first year we had to recover our political mandate inside the community and in relationship to the other partners in UNI. We had to come back together and establish a new way of relating to the university and the health services.

*What did you do to help the different organizations within the council come together?*

It's important for people to know that every contribution is important and valuable. You have to respect differences. If you can give a few hours or many hours, that's fine. It's not necessary to be full time. What ever you can give is good.

We created opportunities to hear what everybody was doing. We listened to each other and discussed things. In order to unite, we had to hear what the community wanted most to do. We also needed opportunities to create proposals together. This way of working takes more time but it is more powerful than people making decisions on their own.

The community proposed hundreds of initiatives. Each neighborhood had different ideas. They proposed work we could do ourselves, like handiwork and day care. They also identified things we could do with the help of the university. People met in small groups. Some of these groups met together. I went to many

of the meetings. We had to be clear about what we wanted before sitting down at the table with the university and the municipal health services. We had to have proposals that were realistic and could be done.

It was hard work. There were many problems, so we had to decide which ones would have priority.

*Did your UNI partners from the university and from the health services help with identifying needs and making plans?*

Yes, for example, first year students in medicine, nursing, dentistry, physiotherapy, and pharmacology were in a program called PEEPIN. Every week they came to the community for one half day and did what ever was needed, including going from house to house identifying needs.

One important problem that came up in the community was the high level of infant mortality. Everyone contributed to understanding why this was happening. We identified causes. Some mothers were not breastfeeding. Also, there was a lack of sewage services and the need for more health information and health care. These causes were what we needed to work on, so we took actions such as using many different strategies for giving health information to everyone.

Usually people don't understand health professionals when they present information, so medical students and health professionals worked with us in finding other ways to give information, using theater, games, and children's drawings. Pictures were better than words. We got health professionals to come out of their offices and help us. They also learned more about the real problems of our community. They realized that their old strategies could never work.

We worked with the university and the health services, but we knew we had to be able to work independently, so we built our capabilities. We asked people to teach us about strategic planning and other things. Some of the people we hired to help us were from the University of Londrina. Others were from far away.

The university offered university preparatory courses in our community. Some of our people then went to university and became lawyers and other professionals. So we were capacity building in several ways.

We got strength through our victories. When we started, one of our neighborhoods had the highest infant mortality rates. In two years it went from 64 deaths [per 1000 people] to only 12 deaths. Life improved in other ways too. We got paved streets, better water, and covers for the sewage. Some people got electricity. We were able to put pressure on the municipal government to get things done.

We established partnerships with many other institutions. We did initiatives with all three universities in Londrina. For example, we have a center for children and adolescents. All three universities do capacity building with the teachers.

There was a change in the way we work with the universities. Usually universities make decisions and do things from on high. Now we talk together. They listen to us. We decide together how we are going to work. We are respected.

*How do you feel about the participation of the students?*

First students came to our community as part of a course. Now some of them come as volunteers. So they do not only official work but also voluntary work. They have invited me to participate in debates at the university. I talked to more than 5000 students at a national meeting of medical students.

Students from several universities are working with us. Sometimes they help us solve problems. For example, the students solved some bureaucratic problems, so tomorrow a phone line for the Internet will be installed at the library.

Our relationship with the students is very respectful.

We have participated in changing the students' curriculum. We play an active part in deciding on the activities that need to go on in the community. We also help in changing relations and values because students need to learn how to establish respectful relationships with the community. We evaluate the students' work outside the health units. We talk with the students' teachers about their work.

When UNI has a symposium, we help decide which projects should be presented. UNI also has a fund to stimulate research. We were part of a committee that decided on the research projects.

*You and your colleagues are in the midst of building a multipurpose center that you call the Community Virtual Library. On the walls of the "situation room" in the library, there are maps of your community with information about water, electricity, sewage and other health related factors. Can you describe what you do in this room?*

We do strategic planning. We gather and put information together. We figure out a plan. At first the municipal government (the health services) wasn't willing to share its information about our community, but the university helped. Now the government shares its information.

*At the library you introduced a group of us to community people who have been trained to go door-to-door collecting health information about the people in your community. After these community workers have more training, you said, they will provide health education to community members. You also introduced us to community people who gather and sell reusable trash, and you told us that women and men are being trained to do plumbing and other construction jobs. Sewing and cooking will soon be done in two rooms in the library that are almost completed.*

*Then you showed us both a room that will become a computer room and a very large room that will become a radio and television station. How did you and your colleagues decide to get involved in the challenging world of radio and television and computers?*

In 1997 the Kellogg Foundation held a series of seminars to evaluate and systematize what was being learned through the UNI Projects in Brazil and the rest of Latin America. I went to the meeting in Miami. In a session on community development, there was a discussion about how communities could use resources from outside our communities. They talked about the Internet.

In my community we were already using our own resources. Now we wanted to connect with the world. When I got home, we proposed building a Community Virtual Library and connecting with the Internet.

The health council was not able to understand this idea. They couldn't even understand the word "virtual". Our community was used to working on concrete things.

However, the Fighting Women understood the importance of the idea. A social scientist worked with us [the Fighting Women] in understanding the details and writing a proposal. It took us eight months to do these things, but we took this time because we wanted the proposal to be ours.

*Knowing that some of the Fighting Women haven't had the opportunity to go to school, how and why did they work so hard on this project that involves the complex field of informatics?*

Our first thought was that it would be for our children—for their future. But one of our initiatives is also to get everyone back to school. In fact, short, accelerated courses were set up for adults.

*Were you able to attend any courses?*

Yes, last year I got to go to a course.

We not only want to learn how to use computers to get information from around the world, we want to put our idea on our own website, so we can share them with other people. And there is a need for people to do graphics work, so we can learn to do that.

We want to connect with the world, so we also want to have a radio and television station.

Our proposal costs about \$200,000. We already got \$50,000 from Kellogg. That is a start.

We can see that media is very powerful. We want to be able to use this resource to communicate our ideas. We want to educate the community.

*About what?*

About health. About their rights as citizens. About how to get things done. We want young people to be able to express themselves. They are the best ones to reach other young people.

Actually our radio station is already functioning. We are a part of a community network of radio stations. Our radio equipment is in another building, but soon it will be moved to the Community Virtual Library.

*Have you spoken on the radio yet?*

Of course. [laughs]

*What did you speak about?*

Women's rights and problems.

We are also invited to talk on commercial radio.

*I've heard that you are more able than some community leaders to get the attention of the media. How do you do that?*

The politicians aren't believed. Some of the press representatives happened to know our work and made it public. Then they found out that people in our town were interested in knowing about alternative ways for doing things, especially successful innovative ways. Since the public is interested in our initiatives, the press is also interested.

*What is your advice to people from communities around the world that want to work with their universities—their health professions schools?*

It's difficult to say because each community is in a different context. But establishing partnerships is very important. For example, establishing a partnership with the university can give communities access to valuable knowledge and technology. Capacity building is key. Communities can obtain knowledge and use it for fulfilling their objectives and getting things done.

It's also important to get people together in your community and respect their diversity—get from people what they can give.

Many deprived people don't know that they have rights. People need to know they have rights. People need equal rights. People should be aware of what they should have.

Communities need to interchange experiences with other. We need to learn from each other's experiences. Here we are part of a community health movement. We learn from each other.

*You have been working a great deal with women. Is there anything you'd like to say to other women about their role in the community?*

Women have to work to change the future. We have to overcome limits. Women are able to do things. Here in Brazil, women are in the majority. We have to use our power. It's possible for women to do everything without losing their identity as a woman.

*You clearly have a lot to teach us all. Best wishes with your important work, and thank you for sharing your story.*

**Note**

1. This collaborative effort was part of one of the six Brazilian UNI (Una Nueva Iniciativa) Projects supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.