



Friends OF COLOMBIA

NEWSLETTER OF THE COLOMBIA RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends of Colombia,

In this issue you will find two great examples of successes made possible, in part, by the support of Friends of Colombia, you!

First, I am pleased to announce that the Ministry of Medellín has invited our ESL teacher training team to return to Colombia to present another week-long workshop to ESL teachers in Medellín in June. This will be the fourth time that the workshop has been presented; once in Manizales, once in El Carmen, and now twice in Medellín. Clearly, our team of RPCV teachers and local colleagues are making a difference.

Next, you can read our feature article in this newsletter which is about the successful transitioning of The Colombia Project to a self-sustaining, international program. FOC has helped to support this microfinance program for many years and we are pleased and proud to witness its expansion. Helene Dudley was the founder of this project and writes about its growth into a self-sustaining program. (Page 6)

Finally, RPCV Jerry Norris describes the invaluable support—in both money and hands-on assistance—provided by FOC and PCVs themselves to aid in relief from the devastating earthquake that struck five Departments in Colombia in 1999 (Page 4). This year marks the 15th anniversary of this natural disaster.

A brief report on us: Our active membership seems to be holding at about 400 members even though our e-mailing list is over 1000. We would like to encourage the remaining 600+ to become members and to consider a Lifetime Membership. Please see the membership form at the end of the newsletter.

We continue to develop our database and are concentrating on keeping an accurate account of email addresses. As our Membership Chair will verify, this is a challenging task. Our snail mail address list is 1500 so we are missing about one third of the email addresses. You can help in this regard by updating us on a change in your email address and forwarding to us the email addresses of other RPCV Colombia persons you know. Email foc.memberlist@gmail.com.

I wish to thank Pat Kelly, our editor, for taking us into the 21st Century with our e-newsletter. We have received many well deserved compliments on the content as well as the design. Thank you, Pat.

I hope you enjoy this issue. You may keep in touch by emailing me at president@friendsofcolombia.org or our editor, Pat Kelly, at pkellycom@gmail.com.

Sincerely yours,
Arleen Stewart Cheston, President



SPRING 2014
ISSUE

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FROM THE *Field*

BACK TO THE FUTURE: A Volunteer Returns to Colombia, and Stays

BY GARY GONYA

Nice place to semi-retire! Adventure into business world of restaurants! Great weather, great people, beautiful country! An ad for Colombia? Yes, and the story of my life.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a reunion. This summer will find me—RPCV Gary J. Gonya—and my Colombian wife, Diana M. Gaitan, traveling from Medellín, Colombia to Orlando, Florida to attend the First Gaitan Family Reunion on Diana's side. Of the 100 attendees, we will be the only ones arriving from Colombia as all others now live in the U.S.! This "flip-flop" of countries has taken place during the last 50 years!

I served in Ibagué, Tolima from 1966-68, where I met Diana, who was born in Ibagué. Upon finishing my tour of service in Peace Corps, Diana and I were married by Pope Paul VI at the famous XXXVIII International Eucharistic Congress held outdoor at Templete (today still found in Parque del Salitre) in Bogotá on August 24, 1968. This "little chapel wedding"/ "low-key ceremony" was attended by over 600,000 people including Cardinals and Bishops from all over Latin America as well as Pope Paul VI (first

(Below) Gary and Diana were married in Bogotá on August 24, 1968, by Pope Paul VI.



real traveling Pope)! Many things brought us—an international couple—together, love itself plus a call to service to others. Both of us were inspired by Saint (today) Pope John XXIII, who opened the "doors and windows" of religious change through Vatican II. We also felt called by our own citizenship of our countries to be of service to others. JFK and RFK inspired me, while Presidential candidate /martyr Jorge Eliecer Gaitan inspired Diana.

In early 1969, we moved to my hometown of Fremont, Ohio. We worked in education and entrepreneurship as well as volunteering /service in church and government in Ohio, then Pennsylvania and New York. During this time, our three sons were born and joined in the family adventures. We also continued our contact, support and guidance for José Orlando Castañeda, a "rags to riches" story of a young Colombian boy I had taken in back in Ibagué, Tolima. José Orlando later became a college graduate/ lawyer/judge/writer!

Today, all of José Orlando's family members also live successfully in the U.S. They in turn have passed on the caring, volunteering and service philosophy we support. The third goal of Peace Corps certainly lives on in many strange ways!

The following years found us inviting more of the Gaitan family to the U.S. but also making more return trips to Colombia for baptisms, weddings, tourism and maintaining relationships. Teaching, education, and research work took us to Spain and the Panama Canal while service-related volunteering during national crises and natural emergencies took us abroad. We were involved in a Sister City outreach of Toledo, Ohio with Honduras for Hurricane Mitch; in Colombia for earthquake relief in Armenia (See story on page 4); and missions and parish outreach to orphans in Nicaragua through Mustard Seed programs.



(Above) Christopher Gonya, the Gonyas' youngest son and his wife Katie dressed up like Diego and Frida for taking out kids on Halloween.

As a "Youth Development and Physical Education" PCV in Ibagué, Gary taught grades K-6 in schools, and he visited local seminaries and prisons to teach. He trained teachers. And he employed sports as a conduit for further teaching—through traveling clinics, building sports fields and teaching and playing basketball. And, of course, he met Diana.

BACK TO THE FUTURE (CONT'D)

Service to church and community found us involved in politics as we served on city and statewide commissions, trained people for the U.S. census, worked and served as county party chairmen for elections of Ohio Governor (former Peace Corps head) Richard Celeste and U.S. President Jimmy Carter.

Papal connections continued as we attended 25th wedding anniversary ceremonies in Bogotá and then served as representatives from the International Eucharistic Congress of Colombia to visit personally with Saint (today) Pope John Paul II in Rome and also to visit the tomb of Pope Paul VI who married us in 1968.

After the weddings of our three sons, we served in a different but very pleasant way as “professional nannies” for our six grandchildren for many wonderful years.

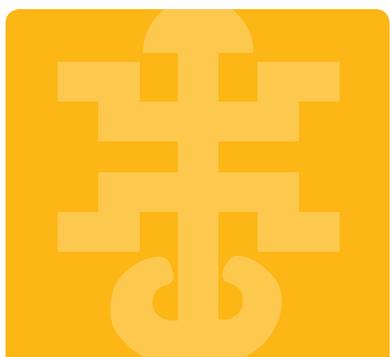
The culinary world, with Diana as Chef and me as “Sous Chef” again brought us back to Colombia on several occasions. We opened a Tex-Mex restaurant called *Fajitas* in Cartagena that became a hot spot for tourism and international dining during the peak seasons in the famous walled city on the northern coast of Colombia. Of course, besides the culinary businesses,

volunteerism, church-related service and teaching continued for us. Later, we opened restaurants in Medellín named *Ay Caramba!*, *Fusion Boogaloo* and *Arriba! Arriba!*

Since being in Medellín, we have worked with and served at schools of *Fundacion Marina Orth*. Recruitment of volunteers for kids at risk in these schools, teaching English at schools and assisting with growing of school garden programs have been recent achievements.

Finally, as this written journey began with a family reunion story, we will end with another. As you will be reading about our journey between two worlds and countries—the U.S. and Colombia—we will be attending in early July the fourth Gonya Family Reunion (Gary’s side) with our sons and their families in the Boulder/Vail regions of Colorado! The Love Relationship between two international people, who certainly “have a foot and a heart in two countries” still lives on.

For us, the worlds of culinary arts, education, service, volunteerism, politics and business are alive and well! We’re still trying to inspire and not yet retire! We prefer to “let our feet do the talking.” Some people might ask, “Why return to Colombia”? We would respond, “Why Not”?



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The culinary world,
with Diana as
Chef and me as
“Sous Chef,” again
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The burger bar and logo for one of the Gonyas' restaurants in Medellín, *Arriba! Arriba!*



After PEACE CORPS

AN EARTHQUAKE TO REMEMBER

BY JERRY NORRIS, COLOMBIA VI

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the devastating earthquake that struck Colombia in January 1999. The emotions of that time can be recollected now in relative tranquility, making it difficult to remember that five Departments suffered severe damages: Caldas, Quindio, Risaraldo, Tolima, and Valle del Cauca. The most heavily damaged was Quindio, where out of 1,700 classrooms, 990 had to be demolished and most of the remainder had to be rebuilt. A final mortality count wasn't possible, as numberless people were buried in mudslides and never found. Many towns and villages were completely obliterated, including those where Volunteers once worked. The International Red Cross issued a plea for funds to assist some 425,000 people whose lives were immediately affected, with at least 150,000 of them being homeless.

Friends of Colombia joined in with many other nongovernmental organizations and private sector groups to bring the plight of

Colombia to world attention. It formed the FOC Earthquake Committee, composed of such diverse members as a Special Correspondent to Vanity Fair Magazine, a faculty member of the Yale University School of Medicine, a Member of Congress, the President of Liberty Mutual Insurance International, the President of the Bank of St. Paul, MN, a representative of Catholic Charities' and a Senior VP of Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, an investment house, etc. Congressman Sam Farr, a Colombia RPCV, led a group of his colleagues to sign a letter to then President Bill Clinton, requesting that USAID increase its disaster assistance budget to Colombia well above the \$2 million mark that had been set. A Supplemental Appropriation was fixed at \$10 million in emergency aid.

This joint public-private partnership is detailed in the Colombian Archive at American University which houses records of the contributions raised by FOC, as well as those from other groups. FOC alone raised \$30,000; Casa de Colombia (a



Photo by Bob Karp

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AFTER PEACE CORPS (CONTINUED)

EARTHQUAKE (CONTINUED)

Washington- based group that supports pediatric clinics) contributed \$22,720; Philip Morris International gave a grant of \$70,000; Chase Manhattan Foundation contributed \$5,000; and the Colombian Embassy in Washington independently received checks totaling \$39,095. Together, these various entities were instrumental in responding to the Colombian Government's most urgent need other than humanitarian assistance: cold hard cash.

Still, alongside of cash contributions, many RPCVs offered via the Crisis Corps to spend up to three months in the affected earthquake areas, with one, Gary Gonya, visiting damaged *barrios* and *veredas* to help Colombia's then First Lady Pastrana and her National Volunteer Committee with relief supplies. A particular poignant letter was sent to the Earthquake Committee by a former PCV teacher in Calorca, which was wiped off Colombia's map. After being informed of the earthquake, he said as he walked into his U.S. university class that morning: "My mind immediately went to the faces and personalities that have come to influence me so much over the years. These individuals have remained vibrant and alive for me as I have shared their stories with countless numbers of my economics students over a thirty year



Photo by Bob Karp

teaching career. These 'mini lessons' in life that I experienced and shared with Colombian people now served to provide the spark that eventually resulted in several of my students joining the Peace Corps. I thought of another group of students that I had taught—the young women of the Institute of Calorca. I still have a list of their names that accompanied several gifts that they presented to me on my last day of teaching at the Institute. As I walked into my economics class, I tried to share my thoughts and feelings with my students, but on that day, I was unable to do so."

While it is true that no one is promised tomorrow, perhaps the response by FOC and its collaborating partners to this devastating earthquake did manage to give some of its victims a grip, however tenuous, on tomorrow.

The 5.2 magnitude earthquake caused five Departments to suffer severe damages: Caldas, Quindio, Risaraldo, Tolima, and Valle del Cauca.



COME TO NASHVILLE THIS JUNE!

It's not too late to join us for the National Peace Corps Association's third annual Peace Corps Connect gathering June 19–21.

Friends of Colombia will sponsor a special program on Friday, June 20, followed by a Colombian dinner and evening of socializing.

Sign up now at www.peacecorpsconnect.org.

Project UPDATES

THE COLOMBIA PROJECT GOES INTERNATIONAL

BY HELENE DUDLEY

Sometimes you have to take the plunge and grow your wings on the way down.

That is what The Colombia Project did last fall when Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of South Florida decided to implement significant changes in oversight. As of January 1, The Colombia Project (TCP) became TCP Global—a group of independent, pro bono consultants to help other organizations adapt The Colombia Project model.

The first pro bono project actually occurred over the last two years in Colombia, working with Rotary Clubs in Florida and Barranquilla (CRBO); first, to secure Rotary International funds and then mentor CRBO to adapt the TCP model. Each CRBO partner serves a special needs group from the most impoverished communities: families with a mentally or physically challenged individual or a severely malnourished child or a child with facial deformities, etc. In essence, CRBO

functions like the TCP board functioned for 14 years in recruiting and training partners, disbursing funds, and providing oversight for the 5 partners. TCP Global team members visited CRBO three times to negotiate the Rotary grant and monitor implementation.

CASA COLIBRI, a humanitarian nonprofit serving 300 Mayan communities in the northwest of Guatemala, requested TCP Global assistance to add microcredit to its existing tool kit of anti-poverty initiatives. A May meeting and fall trip to Guatemala are planned. An August visit is scheduled to an RPCV-run school in Niger which would like to make microcredit available for its graduates.

As TCP Global seeks to grow wings, a key wing component is finding similar implementation partners. Since many Colombia Project administrators belong to the St. Vincent de Paul order, TCP Global offered its assistance to the SVDP order worldwide. Rotary programs in the developing world are also potential partners. With its strong Peace Corps roots, TCP Global remains particularly interested in



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(Above) Helene Dudley of TCP, Marvin Doku of CRBO and PCV Natalie Rodriguez visited Stephanie in May of 2013 during her loan application review. (Above right) She used loan funds to buy block making equipment so she no longer has to rent. Business is booming.

PROJECT UPDATES (CONTINUED)

COLOMBIA PROJECT (CONT'D)

helping RPCV country of service groups add microloans to existing programs.

The other wing to be grown involves a loan tracking system. A critical lesson learned is that administrators gifted at helping the poor are often not gifted accountants. After accounting reconciliations negatively impacted two loan programs, The Colombia Project developed a simplified system, requiring administrators to send only a monthly log of receipts (new funds from the U.S. plus repayments) and expenditures (new loans and administrative expenses), and the daily balance. This information is recorded on a TCP spreadsheet which generates management reports for assessing eligibility for more funding and identifying issues that need intervention. It also generates summary information on paid, current and at-risk loans, partner earnings and statistics of interest to donors. As TCP Global expands, this process needs automation to allow remote input to a cloud-based system replicating the Miami spreadsheet in multiple currencies and languages. TCP Global has the specifications for the system and examples of the spreadsheet to be replicated. If there are any program developers in the FOC community or entities that could provide ongoing web-hosting, TCP Global would like to hear from them (helenedudley@yahoo.com).

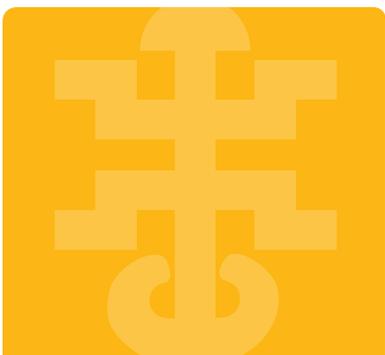
At this time, TCP Global does not solicit or receive funds, but continues to support its partners. TCP funds were transferred to Colombia in January, available for existing partners as needed. TCP is grateful to FOC and individual members who provided funding and encouragement over the last 14 years. With FOC support, the community of Genova received \$13,400 through 2011 which has supported 300 loans worth over \$80,000 while earning \$13,000 for community projects. Genova disburses \$1,000 in loans each month

from its permanent loan pool. Thanks to an effective local board, the program in Obando thrives despite the departure several years ago of the nuns who started the program. Combined, the seven current partners issue over \$50,000 in loans each year.

While entrepreneurs and their families benefit directly from the \$300,000 loaned to date, communities also benefit by having more goods and services available: internet, copier and phone service, construction supplies, nearby food, clothing and paper goods outlets, repair services, etc. The Colombia Project Facebook page has numerous photos of loan recipients living in humble circumstances, but with one or more children in college. In Ariguani, successful loan projects empowered women entrepreneurs to become community leaders. While the financial data on the loan program confirms that it is a good investment, even more important is the unquantifiable ripple effects on families and communities.

This is what TCP Global would like to replicate in other countries. For more information, visit www.colombiaproject.org or contact helenedudley@yahoo.com.

(Above left) With help from the ROTARY Barranquilla micro-loan program, NU3 tire repair project employs five and is opening a branch on a busier road. (Below) The Mayor of Sabanagrande, CRBO Rotarians Marvin Doku and Edgar Sierra along with TCP Global team members Helene Dudley and Dave Snyder, municipal and departmental social workers and loan recipients from Sabanagrande.



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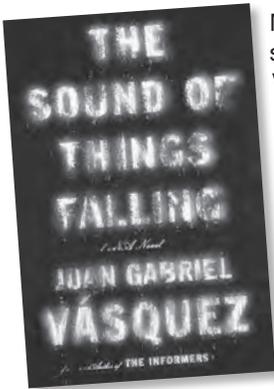
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Books, BOOKS, BOOKS

CONSIDERING THE SOUND OF THINGS FALLING

BY JERRY NORRIS, COLOMBIA VI



Mario Vargas Llosa states that Juan Gabriel Vásquez “is one of the most original new voices of Latin American literature.” A casual reading of his latest novel, *The Sound of Things Falling*, would confirm that statement.

Set in Bogotá, the narrator, Antonio, a young university law professor, becomes involved with Ricardo, a former pilot who was recently released from prison. After his law class, Antonio frequents a billiard hall where Ricardo shares with him intriguing shards of his past life. One day, as they were walking down a street, they become the target of a drive-by motorcycle shooting. Ricardo is killed and Antonio is wounded—physically and mentally—and he goes through a painful and revelatory recovery.

When one life is ended and another destroyed, the initiation of things falling begins by triggering a domino effect. Why was Ricardo imprisoned and why was he shot dead on the streets of Bogotá? In answering these questions, Antonio’s marriage unravels, he loses command of his law classes, and his comfortable care-free world slowly dissolves. The only way he can regain his former life is to figure out why Ricardo was murdered—to understand Ricardo’s story.

The author starts that story in 1969, engaging (a fictional) Peace Corps to advance the narrative. That year Elaine, whom he describes as Peace Corps Volunteer number 139372, lands in Bogotá after five weeks of training at Florida State. She finds housing with the Laverde family and soon falls in love with its younger son, Ricardo, whom she marries, and she bears a child called Maya.

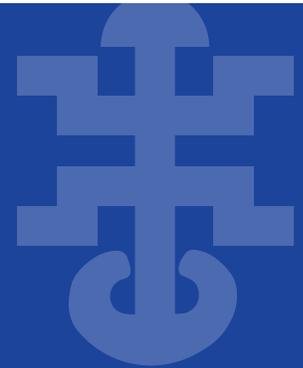
In addition to Elaine, Ricardo is inflamed with another passion: to make a name for

himself and to restore the Laverde name to its rightful place in aviation history; to leave his mediocre life and “stop counting *centavos* as his mother does every morning.” When Elaine asks him what he will do, he responds: “My work doesn’t pay very much but a pilot like me is never going to be short of work.”

One of their best friends is Mike, a Regional Coordinator for PCVs in Caldas. Ricardo tells Elaine that “Mike had taught things to the *campesinos*, changed their lives. Along with other Volunteers with agricultural skills, he’d taught *campesinos* techniques, what fertilizers to use on marijuana, how they could produce four hundred kilos per harvest, put it in plastic bags, put the bags on a plane, take off with it full of one thing and bring it back with something else. Mike pays about twenty-five dollars for a kilo, and from every trip we come back with sixty, seventy grand—sometimes more.” Eventually, Mike convinces Ricardo that shipments of marijuana were bringing in pocket money compared to what they could be earning. He tells him “how a few Peace Corps veterans who had just spent three years in the Cauca Valley had turned into overnight experts in ether and acetone and hydrochloric acid [to produce coca paste] and where they assembled bricks of the product that he could fly out and on a single trip and earn thirty million dollars, of which the pilot could keep two.”

Ricardo buys into Mike’s new plan and is caught one day on a flight to the US by the DEA. Soon, Mike shows up dead in *La Miel* River, shot in the back of the neck, his naked body thrown face down on the riverbank. One can read into this that the drug cartel ratted on Ricardo, and took care of Mike to ensure dominance of their expanding market.

Elaine, after an inexplicable eight years as a Volunteer, returned to the US following Maya’s 18th birthday when the streets of



We invite
your
comments...

FROM RPCV MARGARITA
SOROCK (COLOMBIA 1964-66)

Vásquez is anxious to tell the story of his generation—one of misadventures, no doubt—and he feels a particular kinship with those who have experienced the fear of life that he was forced to endure. Elaine Fritts is dismissed as an idealist, someone who is not to be taken seriously, someone who makes constant compromises with the system to survive. Her ideals—having an enriching experience, making a contribution—in Vásquez’s words, have become clichés.... Perhaps his next novel, undoubtedly worth reading, will strike a balance between the mythical-magical, and the gloom and doom versions of life.

Send your comments on Vásquez’
book to pkellycom@gmail.com.

BOOKS, BOOKS, BOOKS (CONTINUED)

THINGS FALLING (CONTINUED)

Bogotá became lethal. After Ricardo is released from prison, she flies back to Bogotá to rejoin him, but her plane crashes and she is killed.

This is the incredible back story of Ricardo's life, told to his friend Antonio by none other than Maya, Ricardo's daughter. Apparently knowing of their friendship, Maya contacted Antonio. Somehow, she had obtained a tape from the black box in the airplane crash that killed her mother. When played, the sound of things falling by the pilot is heard on the Warning System ... "terrain, terrain, pull up, pull up" ... then silence as the plane slams into a Colombian mountainside. Antonio, mesmerized, plays the tape over and over again. The mystery of his friend's death, along with the fate of Ricardo's family, is now known. He now hears the sound of things falling.

COMMENT:

Falling is a novel: its author has a license to mix facts with fiction. Yet, when responsible publications, such as NPR Books, publish reviews with opening statements that

reference "Peace Corps hippies who peddle drugs", serious questions should test that literary principle. A novelist is a gifted writer who can combine facts and fiction inextricably in his publications. While it is a fact that an American Airlines jet crashed into a Colombian mountainside, it is a figment of his creative imagination to say that a PC staff member had been murdered for his initiation of drug processing and trafficking to the US when there is no record of any such crime. Ricardo is enthralled with an illusion of his heroic grandfather flying combat missions during the Korean War, unburdened by the fact that Colombia's sole contribution to that conflict was a single infantry battalion. And while there were agricultural PCVs assigned to the Cauca Valley, it is a mythical transformation of fact to believe that the indigenous peoples they worked with were in a suspended state of animation, breathlessly awaiting since pre-Inca times the arrival of complete foreigners to awaken them to a new knowledge of how to convert coca leaf from its centuries old use in religious ceremony to a secular application in lands so distant from their own as to lie beyond their imagination.

EXCERPT FROM *THE SOUND OF THINGS FALLING*

The day of his death, at the beginning of 1996, Ricardo Laverde had spent the morning walking the narrow sidewalks of La Candelaria, in the center of Bogotá, between old houses with clay roof tiles and unread marble plaques with summaries of historic events, and around one in the afternoon he showed up at the billiards club on 14th Street, ready to play a couple of games with some of the regulars. He didn't seem nervous or disturbed when he started to play: he played with the same cue and at the same table where he always did, the one closest to the back wall, under the television with the sound turned down. He played three games, though I don't remember how many he won and how many he lost, because that afternoon I didn't play with him, but at the next table. I do remember, however, the moment Laverde settled his bets, said good-bye to the other players, and headed for the corner door. He was passing between the first tables, which are usually empty because the neon lights cast strange shadows on the ivory balls in that part of the hall, when he stumbled as if he'd tripped over something. He turned around and came back over to where we were; waited patiently while I finished a series of six or seven cannons that I'd started, and even applauded a three-cushioned one briefly; and then, as he watched me mark my score on the board, he came over and asked me if I might not know where he could borrow a tape machine to listen to a cassette he'd just received. I've often wondered since what would have happened if Ricardo Laverde had asked one of the other billiards players rather than me. But it's a meaningless question, like so much of what we wonder about the past. Laverde had good reasons to choose to ask me. Nothing can change that fact, just as nothing can change what happened afterward...

Vásquez is "one of the most original new voices of Latin American literature," according to Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa, and *The Sound of Things Falling* is his most personal, most contemporary novel to date, a masterpiece that takes his writing—and will take his literary star—even higher.

—from Amazon.com



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Donation specifically for *Paso a Paso* \$ _____

TOTAL ENCLOSED: \$ _____

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