

Marta Arango left a deep impression

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She left us during the cold and rainy early hours of November 25th, months after her 80th birthday. Marta Arango was born during different times in Envigado, Colombia, back when the streets were friendly and the shopkeepers were trusting. Her face always lit up when she remembered her father and his friends, who often met for long conversations that the children treasured with great affection.

Don Vicente, who was a painter of religious images, had an inquiring mind that compelled him to study on his own. He was knowledgeable about a wide range of topics, and made his family proud. Doña Luisa, Marta's mother, who was extraordinarily intelligent and outgoing, died long before her time, at age 47. Marta used to say that when she was still in primary school, she thought about becoming a physician, but when she talked with her mother about her plans, Doña Luisa gave her some very wise advice: "Why don't you study to be a teacher, first?" she said. "Once you have those professional credentials you can study whatever you like." She followed her mother's advice, and studied to become a teacher at the renowned Instituto Central Femenino de Medellín, where she realized that being a teacher was the perfect profession for her. Teaching became her lifelong passion.

Marta started teaching at age 18, and she quickly became one of those teachers whose passion for teaching was emblazoned in their soul. Shortly afterwards, she went to work at the Instituto Rural de Pamplona in Santander, Spain, and from there to the United States, thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship, which she had very rightfully been awarded. In the United States she went first to the University of Pennsylvania, and later to Wisconsin, and finally to Berkeley, where she earned her doctorate. Marta always viewed her stay in the United States as vital to her professional development, but knew that her energy and passion needed to be invested in Colombia.

While working at the Laboratory for Educational Research and Development in California, Marta met Glen Nimnicht, a very special North American, who became her partner in life. Glen discovered that he had the soul of a "paisa" after the couple decided to move to Colombia. Together they were dynamite: not only were they a loving couple, but they helped realize the dreams of the poor and the underserved of this land, with special attention to children and their families.

During the mid-seventies, Marta and Glen, with Marta's sister Sofia's support, started the Promesa project in Chocó. That project blazed the path, in many ways, for the early childhood education programs that exist today in Colombia. At that time, it was quite novel to speak about an integrated approach, working with families, and community participation and development. The Promesa project was implemented in one of the most underserved regions of the country, where the State was nothing but a vague fantasy.

The Promesa project, which lasted 20 years and was evaluated extensively, served as the foundation for the Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE; International Center for Education and Human Development). From the moment of CINDE's creation, Marta and Glen invested their hearts and minds into the institution's design, operation and replication worldwide. The innovations that both Marta and Glen created had a huge impact in Colombia, as well as throughout Latin America, Asia and Africa. Projects such as the Promotoras Comunitarias of Comuna 13 (Community Advocates of Comuna 13) are living proof of CINDE's impact. Other examples of programs that carry Marta's and Glen's stamp are the informal early childhood education program, El Programa Integrado Escuela Hogar (Integrated Home School Program), where Marta's other sister Inés was also deeply involved, as well as countless other programs.

Over the years the teacher from Envigado spread her wings and became one of the best of people, known for her boundless creativity, her apt advice, her fresh and bubbly sense of humor, always ready to break the ice and delight friends.

Marta always strove to show respect to every individual, no matter their background, age or place of origin. She was devoted to her family, and maintained an open mind and heart for all, regardless of differences.

Marta left us after having lived a life full of recognition and appreciation. Glen had departed a few years earlier, and now that it was her turn, I'm sure that she went knowing that he was waiting for her at the threshold that separates this life from the one that follows.

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