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A World Treasure

By Nancy B. Miller

Living in San Agustín Etla is an extraordinary person called Hanni Sager. Hanni is a world treasure. For many years, she's suffered from muscular dystrophy—a serious and painful disease—and she's severely disabled by it. But it's only her body that's suffering, not her mind and spirit, which are deeply healthy. She's a model for us all.

Hanni is a passionate woman with a strength that flows from a fountain of good will and common sense. You could call her opinionated: Among her unshakeable convictions is that anyone who doesn't know how to play isn't fully human. That a just society will see a meaningful integration of the able and the disabled. That what is false is abominable.

With the kids whose lives she has touched profoundly she has always known just when to give a shove and when to be gentle. Over the years, she has produced miracles, not like a good fairy with a magic wand but, better said, like a benign witch with a broomstick of wisdom and compassion. Her love is tough love and there's a lot of it.

Hanni was born and brought up in Switzerland, moved to Canada and became a naturalized citizen. There she ultimately became known as Toronto's Toy Lady. She amassed a first-class collection of toys from around the world, showed them in



exhibitions, and gave lectures about them. Annually for ten years, she put on wonderfully imaginative and hugely popular programs at Toronto's cultural center, Harbourfront. They all centered on toys and play, among them a teddy bears' picnic and a play doll-and-toy hospital where in a real ambulance not-so-real doctors and nurses dispensed prescriptions like "three hugs and a bedtime story" for ailing toys.

For a time, Hanni's disease was in remission, but then it came back with overwhelming force. Her legs had to be fitted, painfully, with braces and she fell into the despair that serious illness can bring. Life, she felt, wasn't worth living. Then one day she received what she thought was

an airline advertisement and started to throw it away. Hardly an ad, it was a ticket from a loving friend that took her to San Miguel de Allende, a place she'd never heard of in a country where she'd never been. That visit was the best medicine she could have been given. She received warm and loving care from new friends and she had the chance to learn about traditional Mexican toys.

Hanni had a chance, too, to learn something about another part of Mexico, southeastern, very Indian Mexico with its warm and hospitable people. On her way to Chiapas, she passed through Oaxaca and—as has happened to a lot of us—knew that that was the place for her. Living full

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time in Oaxaca wasn't yet possible, but annual visits of increasing length only confirmed her certainty that she had to come back, again and again. It wasn't long before Hanni's thoughts turned to what she might do with children who, like her, were disabled. That led her to Piña Palmera, a center for disabled children at Zipolite, near Puerto Escondido, on Oaxaca's beautiful coast. But it wasn't easy work at first. For one thing, the kids there had no interest in working with the fabrics and thread she used so creatively at home and had brought with her. Luckily, she'd also brought one of the traditional toys she'd found in San Miguel, a simple bird-just three pieces, the body and two wings-that flaps its wings when you pull its strings. She took it apart and made a pattern. But still the children wouldn't participate: they just stood around the work table and said, "We can't do that. She's the artist, not us." Not to be put off, Hanni set about making a bird herself, with the children watching. When she had difficulty in drilling the hole in a wing, a boy with one arm offered to help her and he became a toy maker, too. From then on, all the kids-everyone-wanted to join the fun. The joke was that the cooks, the teachers, the therapists, all could be found in Hanni's workshop. Piña Palmera was just the beginning. Over the next few years, Hanni founded three more workshops, two

more for disabled and able children and one for street kids. Learning herself as she went along, she discovered that you have to use very different ways of working with disabled children and street children. The first work slowly and have to concentrate on every movement because of their disabilities. The second are often wild, untamed at first because survival has been uppermost in their minds for so long. However, with time, patience, and working with very small numbers, maybe no more than four or five children at once, Hanni showed them how to produce toys they had never dreamed possible, to understand that they are valuable and creative human beings, a true rarity in the lives of many of them, both able and disabled, street children or not. This was Hanni's goal, always her first purpose, and the change in the lives of many of these children was profound.

I first met Hanni here in Oaxaca while I was on an extended visit some years ago. When she told me her story, I said, "Hanni, this absolutely has to be documented so that others can see that so little is impossible, that so much is possible. Your story will be a guide and inspiration for others whose spirits are as generous as yours." On my next visit to Oaxaca, I came back armed with a small tape recorder and a battery of questions for Hanni. We talked on tape for twelve hours.

When I went back to my home in the States, I transcribed our conversations, inch by arduous inch, and what resulted became the basis of my book *The Wondrous Toy Workshop*, now in print (and available, happily, on Amazon.com and the Barnes and Noble website, bn.com, as well as in increasing numbers of bookstores). The first part of the book is the story of Hanni and her workshops and includes vignettes of some of the lucky children whose lives were so significantly altered by working with this rare woman. The second part of the book is a step-by-step manual for how to set up workshops like Hanni's-anywhere in the world and with very little investment. This part includes instructions and patterns for twelve traditional toys of the kind Hanni taught her young students to make. It will be useful not only to people setting up such workshops but also to people who just want to have creative fun with their children and others. And there's no one, child or adult, who doesn't grow by having her or his humanity and creativity validated. This is why I say-and plenty of others concur-that Hanni is a treasure of this world.

NANCY B. MILLER is a writer, painter, and retired editor. She has been coming to Oaxaca and living here for extended periods each year for more than twenty years. *Chapulines* have not been required to bring her back.

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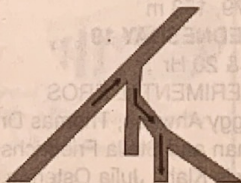
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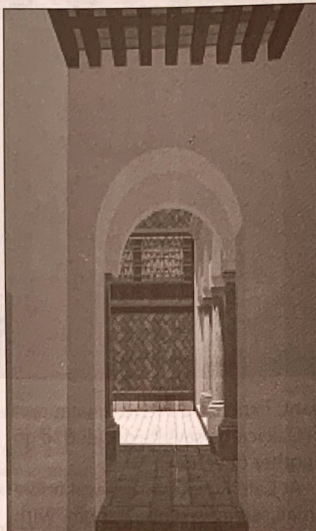
By DAVID BIRDWELL

A long-abandoned colonial-style structure in downtown Oaxaca has found new life. The Spaniard who first lived here in the late 18th century never could have imagined that his home would be revived more than 200 years later as a testament to the craft that allowed him to build his fortune.

Angel Antelo became a wealthy merchant by exporting grana cochinita, the cactus-plaguing insect that indigenous peoples have used since pre-Columbian times to dye rugs and garments. His former residence, at Av. Miguel Hidalgo 917, on the grounds of a nearly 500-year-old convent, fittingly is being reborn as El Museo Textil de Oaxaca.

Workers are laboring furiously to finish a multimillion-peso restoration project in time for a scheduled April 19 opening. A casual observer has difficulty seeing how they'll pull this off on time, but Ana Paula Fuentes, director of what will become Oaxaca's newest museum, says she is confident that the doors will open on time.

Fuentes says the idea for the museum was hatched four years ago by the museum's three major benefactors – famed painter Francisco Toledo, textile researcher Alejandro de Avila and Maria Isabel Granen Porrua, director of Library



Francisco de Burgoa. The trio expected to house their dream in a building donated by the Oaxaca state government. When that fell through two years ago, the Alfredo Harp Helu Foundation stepped in, purchasing the former Antelo property and funding its restoration, overseen by architects Sebastian Van Doesburg and Juan Jose Santibaez.

Toledo, de Avila and Granen envision El Museo Textil de Oaxaca as a place that will educate, preserve and promote the art of textile manufacturing. All exhibits will be temporary. Visitors not only will be able to sample Oaxaca state's treat-

ures. They also can expect to see garments from elsewhere in Mexico and around the world.

For now, three collections totaling 4,000 pieces will provide the foundation for the facility. Granen has donated her collection, much of it covering the 1950-1980 period and purchased from Crispin Morales, a former vendor in Oaxaca's central market. Toledo's contribution came from his purchase of a collection owned by Madeline Humm de Mollet, a Puebla woman who amassed works from Mixtec, Zapotec and other ethnic groups, covering 1960 to 2000. De Avila, the museum's curator, rounds it out with a 1930-1970 collection inherited from Ernesto Cervantes, the former owner of Casa Cervantes in Oaxaca.

Fuentes says the museum will be open every day except Tuesday and will be free of charge.

The first floor of the two-story facility will house three rooms of exhibits, plus a fourth room where visitors will be able to see the basic structures of looms. Larger, more complete looms will be available at the nearby Casa Centro de las Artes.

The second floor will be dominated by a library filled with documents and other research materials, as well as videos. Fuentes says there are plans for conferences and lectures, and workshops and trips to outlying villages will be offered.

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