

Sirci and Alberto's story

Sirci Marquez and her husband, Alberto, have made a successful life for themselves through their ceramics workshop just outside Lima, but they have never forgotten the life and the people that they left behind.



It was the threat of the Shining Path extremists which led to their families fleeing their homes and brought them to Lima in the 1980s.

Now the couple make ceramic figures and models which they sell through Allpa, one of Traidcraft's Peruvian suppliers. And as well as providing work for others, they also support schools in Alberto's home town.

Sirci is a native of Santa Ana, a small village 90 minutes by road from the city of La Merced in the jungle fringe area of the Department of Junin. Like many local people, her family earned a living from fruit farming. But in 1985, when Sirci was eight, the political violence and recruitment of young people to Shining Path led the family to move to Lima, with only the few belongings they were able to carry with them.

"We left because of the Shining Path terrorism," Sirci said. "They almost got two of my brothers. We had to be safe."

The family built a small house, using straw mats as flooring, and Sirci's father – who remained on his Santa Ana farm – sent fruit that Sirci's mother sold at the local and wholesale markets. Sirci and her brothers also helped to sell the produce to pay for their studies. When Sirci finished school she began studying at Union University, but did not complete her education and went on to work in textile manufacturing.

Her husband, Alberto Marcapina, is a native of Quinua, Ayacucho. He also came to Lima with his family to flee the violence in their area.

"At that time we had to escape," he said, "because if you were a man it was worse. They wanted to recruit you by force and there was not a place where you could work safely."

Alberto came from a family of potters and during his first years in Lima he worked in his brother, Romulo's, workshop. Then in 1990 he began working on his own and made his home and workshop in Santa Clara, which is where he and Sirci live. The couple met in 1995 and married a year after they met. When their first child, Alberto, was born, Sirci stopped working in textiles and got involved in the workshop.

Alberto taught Sirci the art of ceramics and little by little her skills developed until she took charge of the workshop. They expanded their line of products and developed a new technique for making the popular nativity scenes, which raised production from 50 to 200 a day.

The couple work in partnership: Alberto creates new models and carves the moulds while Sirci deals with clients, administration, buying materials and supervising workers.

"My inspiration is nature," Alberto said. "I like to preserve nature. The relationship between mother and baby is a good thing."

As their business has grown, they have expanded their home and also shared their success with school children in Alberto's home town of Quinua, Ayacucho, providing toys and educational materials. In 2005, they organised a maths contest and gave out bicycles as prizes.

The couple also see their increasing orders with Allpa as an opportunity to provide work for local people, many of them single mothers, as Sirci explained.

"On a permanent basis, eight people are working here but also eight people who are working in their homes. They come here and we train them and then they work at home. Most of them are women with kids. For them it is good to have the work at home. It is a big opportunity.

"Most of them are single mothers and it is very difficult for them to have to leave their kids at home and come to work. It is better for them to work at home."

Sirci, who not only runs the business but looks after her two children, Luciana, 7 months, and Alberto (11), said: "I understand. I work with them and I take the products for them to paint and then I pick them up and pay them for the work. This is when we have orders but when we don't have orders we cannot give them any work.

"I am very happy working with mothers. I bring them work and I feel that they value that. And it benefits them and their families.

"We not only give them work but talk to them about issues," Alberto added. "Prostitution, drug addiction - we talk to them about these issues too. We feel that is very important to talk to them about that. For us we share the sale of a product with our workers. We celebrate their birthdays and Christmas with them because we feel like we are family."

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