

## **Chapter 25 – Monica McGloin, Private School Administrator, Expatriate, Morelia, Michoacán**

As I may have said before, there are expatriates and there are expatriates. Some integrate completely into the culture, some try but never seem to assimilate and others isolate and find their relationships and friendships within the foreign community. Monica is in the first category.

We met at her nicely middle-class subdivision in the hills above Morelia. Her subdivision was pretty newly constructed and had a guard at the entrance. Guards at the entrances to middle-class subdivisions in Mexico are nothing new and are just part of what is expected in such subdivisions. I point this out, because some Americans and Canadians will make a big deal of such arrangements, claiming that there are the result of how unsafe Mexico is and how everyone is walking in fear of being kidnapped.

Nothing is farther from the truth but not everyone who writes or talks about Mexico knows the culture and the traditions, so they often misinterpret things. This is especially true with TV coverage.

Burglary can happen anywhere. I've been burglarized a number of times in the USA. I've been mugged and so on. A guard shack is a deterrent to common criminals. It's a good idea.

When talking to Monica, I got the impression that she was born with a Mexican soul. She is no different than her family just because she has a weird last name.

Monica moved to Mexico in the summer of 1971 from San Francisco. She has lived mainly in Morelia since that time. She is a bright, cheerful woman, full of energy and insights into Mexican society from the advantage of having lived in both the USA and Mexico.

*What brought you here to Morelia?*

My husband. I had met him in 1966 here in Morelia and several years later, we continued our friendship/relationship. He was living in Mexicali (Baja California) and I was teaching in San Francisco. We were married in September of 1971. Our first home was in Mexicali, although his home was Morelia.

*In the time you've been living here, can you describe overall what you've seen change in Mexican society in the past 30 years?*

For one thing, Morelia has grown tremendously. It was probably about 100,000 twenty five years ago when we finally moved back and today is certainly over a million people. In one sense, it has become Americanized. Now we have suburbs which we didn't have then. Morelia was concentrated in the downtown section and everything that is now a

suburb was a cornfield. We've met people from all over Mexico and they like living here, even though it is rather expensive. Given the fact that Morelia doesn't have a lot of industry to create jobs, houses and things are more expensive.

*How would you define middle-class?*

I don't know about a top range, but in order to be some range of middle-class here, you would have to be earning a minimum of twenty thousand pesos a month. For a family of four, I would say that twenty thousand pesos would be pretty basic. There are people who make that certainly. But there are many, many more people who don't make that. Teachers for example don't make that, just a regular classroom teacher. Our teachers make around eight thousand pesos a month. They work from eight to two-thirty. They don't work Saturdays or late afternoons. I asked one of our teachers who teaches in the public school system as well in the afternoons. She said that teachers there make somewhat less than teachers at our school. Most teachers also have jobs outside the classroom, too.

*From the standpoint of education, have there been many changes?*

I have always been involved in education, and we have seen the change from public schools, which I don't think has changed a great deal. I have not been in the public school. Private schools have changed a lot. They were basically traditional Catholic schools, but now, as of about twenty-three years ago, we have bilingual education here in Morelia, which is a very interesting concept. It came from Mexico City and Guadalajara perhaps, who were accustomed to having their children in bilingual schools.

This has changed the city enormously. Learning another language and having your children bilingual opens up doors that previously simply weren't even considered. It has changed the city quite a lot. We have quite a few bilingual schools. Some are quite good, some not so much. This is the private sector. The public school system is now integrating a bit of English in some of its schools, but it is still very minimal; on an elementary level. In secondary school English is required, I think three hours a week. In our school, we have half a day in English and half a day in Spanish. By the time a child leaves secondary school, a student is quite well versed in English, and not just speaking, but reading and writing as well.

Most middle-class feel that this is absolutely necessary for the future of their children.

*In the States, we have bilingual education, but it is not considered such a success. You feel it is working in Mexico?*

Pretty much. We think so. Definitely. We see that our children are graduates. They have more ambition for studying outside Mexico – the United States, though Canada is more popular now, and England and other countries as well.

We had a twenty-year reunion and many graduates have come back and told us of the fabulous things they have done outside Mexico and many have come back to Mexico to work in this country. They've gotten masters and doctorates outside Mexico and this is facilitated very definitely by their English. Sometimes we can't even imagine what doors speaking English opens.

*Would you say the majority of those who get advanced degrees outside the country come back?*

I know one student who did his engineering degree in Morelia and right now is finishing his doctorate degree at MIT. He does not plan to come back to Mexico. I think some would prefer to stay out, but I think that the pull of the home base would be strong for them. The problem is that there aren't jobs for them. My own daughter worked for Mattel Toys in Mexico City. She was offered a very good position from them at their offices in Canada. I think it would be difficult for her to come back to Mexico, because of the possibilities she sees for her life.

*Do you mean more possibilities than just economic?*

Yes, yes, in many different ways. It is a more open society. Morelia is still a conservative, closed society; rather elitist. There are still the social classes that are all over Mexico. We have new universities that opened up; they bring in new ideas. But still the core of Morelia is quite conservative.

*Many Mexicans have told me that there is a glass ceiling, regardless of whether you are a man or woman. Do you feel that is true?*

It is very hard to make a good living here in Morelia. The salaries are low, so there is not really a ceiling. People are pretty much pigeonholed. It takes a lot of money to start your own business. For example there are many private schools here in Morelia.

*Education is the future of Mexico is a common phrase, but do you believe that education is widely available?*

Education is available. But what really matters is the motivation of the student and the family. I teach in a private school and that is only available for the middle class or above. I have seen family size decrease drastically since I first came here. Today there are generally two or three children to a family. There are a growing number of children entering school as an only child today. People are not having as many children because they cannot afford to.

*Is this a conscious decision?*

In most cases.

*So it's not something that was promoted by the government?*

The government did promote the idea a little bit, but I don't think the government has that much influence on us. I know lots of people who would love to have more children because it's part of the Mexican tradition. And it's so much fun to have so many cousins and so on. We all spend vacations together and Christmas together. My grandma piles all twenty-two of us in her house. But it's just not practical any more.

*You've chosen to live in Mexico over living in the United States. Obviously your husband was a big part of that decision, but apart from that, what is it you like so well about living here?*

It wasn't just my husband. It was my family. I have two sons, both grown, both professionals. One lives outside the country. The other works out of Morelia and his family lives on the street behind us.

I feel very well adapted and very happy here. We went back to the States to visit my family every year. My children liked to visit, but they were always happy to get back home. They were bilingual. There were no bilingual schools back then, but they learned from me talking to them. At the time they would be embarrassed and ask me please not to speak English to them in front of their friends, but now they are grateful. It has served them very well.

What did I like? The warmth of the people and the centeredness in the family. That is something I have always admired and loved about the Mexican people. That's not to say that it doesn't exist in American society, but the way I was received and accepted by people non-judgmentally.

*Do you feel that this non-judgmental attitude is as strong as it used to be?*

No. Maybe people have gotten a little more skeptical and more sophisticated. They are more educated and maybe they look at things with a different eye than when I first arrived here in 1965. I lived with Mexican families and they opened their homes and arms to me. These programs still exist, but I think that the families now look at it with a little bit of, "Maybe this kid is going to cause trouble, maybe he won't adapt to our schedule, curfews et cetera." I don't think they did then.

I just met a group of teachers who came here from the USA. They had interesting questions. I found they had a sort of innocence about the Mexican culture.

*That brings up the question that many Americans bring up whenever I talk about traveling or living in Mexico.*

One of the things we like about living here is that it is a community. We've done things as a neighborhood. Everybody's aware that we watch out for our own children, but we watch out for everyone else's children too. We feel our children are safe in this neighborhood. I hope I am not being too innocent about this. There have been a few

attempts at robberies and things, but I generally feel safe. I don't like to go out at night alone. We do go out at night. My reservation is not so much about safety – I don't see well at night.

I don't think that Morelia is an overly-safe city. Like any city, there have been instances of crime. We have the influence of *narcotraficante* executions, et cetera. But it all seems to be centered on people who are involved in that sort of activity. We average people don't feel that it affects us, but our friends from the States see all this in the news and don't come to visit. Even the American ambassador said sometimes said Michoacán is not safe for travel. This really hurts. We don't feel it, we really don't.

I don't think that we as normal citizens fear for our lives or our homes or our well-being, but we know from reading the newspapers that it happens, it exists – this element of insecurity. And I know that the foreigners feel it, but it's not the same as it was twenty or thirty years ago.

*I feel safer just about anywhere in Mexico than many places in the United States? Am I being naïve?*

No, I would feel the same if I returned to San Francisco. But when I go to Canada I don't feel that. I feel more safe in Canada, even more so than here in Morelia. My daughter does too. That's why my daughter is so glad to be out of Mexico City.

*I hear a lot of Mexicans say that Canada is welcoming them.*

I think that Canada has cracked down to a certain extent on immigration. But Canada opened its doors. It's a huge country that needs to be populated. I think that practically speaking Canada has opened its doors to professional people. I'm thinking of the friends my daughter has made and they are all professionals. Now that's not true about the Mexicans who come across the border to California. I was impressed in Toronto where I spend three weeks last summer, that it is the most cosmopolitan, international city (perhaps even more so than San Francisco) and the Mexicans there were better accepted and without the stereotypes that you see in the United States. Canada does seem to welcome foreigners and in a sense integrate them into the society. That's not what I feel happens in the United States, to a great extent.

*One Mexican man I know said that he felt ten percent of him was in the USA and he felt he was insulated from American society.*

It seems so. I don't know many foreigners. All my daughter and son-in-law's friends are Latins and they are all professionals. They seem to be doing pretty well. They have found professional jobs there. They seem to be very happy. This is in spite of the horrible weather. I mean to spend six months in the dark and the snow would be terrible for me. And these are kids from all over the world, Latin America, Saudi Arabia and so on.

*Could you talk a little about the things that you **don't** like about Mexico?*

[She hesitated, laughed, and then plunged in]. Yes. I don't care for the class system much. I don't like the poverty very much. I find that even with people I care about and work with, there are certain strata of society they don't care about or have anything to do with. They don't consider themselves on the same level as the poor people. We were at a party a while ago and some people were talking about another city in Michoacán. Someone said, "Well the **right kind** of people in that city ...." It wasn't important what they were saying, it was the class distinction. They were referring to the people they would associate with. It was just a small comment, but it was typical of a lot of people's attitudes. It's not the same attitude that I, as an American, grew up with. I don't say that attitudes like that don't exist in the United States, but that they are not as prevalent.

Another thing is the economic situation. We have always been so dependent on the United States. Whatever happens in the United States is felt very strongly here. I would say that those are the two things that have been difficult for me to accept.

*What can you say about the economic struggles that some people are experiencing in this economy?*

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: This interview was done before the full force of the "current" economic crises was felt.]

My husband and I are both hard workers. We have always worked. And we have always gotten along. We were able to educate our children, I think, well.

[She became animated when talking about the following, very emotional and sincere] But it's not easy for many families. We see people who work so hard, so, so hard and really, really struggle. It's not easy for the families. I think one of the stereotypes of the Mexicans that people in the United States have is that they are lazy people. I find the opposite to be true. The Mexicans are very hard-working people. But sometimes the reward at the end of the road doesn't come. It's just not there. They just keep working hard until they die. [She laughed, which I have come to believe is the Mexican way of softening harsh statements]. They don't feel very rewarded, which is different than in the States. The American Dream just doesn't exist here.

*That is something that is hard for outsiders to understand. For instance if someone wants to go north to work, they have to save up a lot of money to hire a coyote [a guide for illegal immigrants to get them over the border and often beyond it]. Why don't they could use the same money to start a little business?*

Yeah. And the little business could be closed in six months. We see it all the time. We've seen many people save their money to start a little business, say a restaurant or auto parts or whatever they think is a good idea. They don't last because there is too much competition and there is not enough variation in what they offer. Or people don't realize that they need other services. They close down in six months or a year. And then what? I've often asked what they do. The money they invested is gone. I'm not talking about

just poor people. This happens all the time in the middle-class. We've known quite a few families or couples that have started businesses and they just couldn't make it.

*Did they give you any feedback on why the businesses failed?*

There was just too much competition. If it was a store, it was a repetition of the same auto parts store that exists everywhere. If it was a restaurant, how many restaurants do we already have in Morelia? Even for example, doctors and lawyers and engineers. The universities produce thousands of doctors, thousands of lawyers and thousands of engineers. They study these things instead of looking for other areas of study in areas that are really needed in the state. Then they could create these types of careers Maybe they could be on a technical level. I think that maybe we need a lot of technicians that we don't have in the state. But middle-class people want their children to have advanced degrees like *licenciatura* or *doctora* or *ingeniero* or something like that. There are too many of them around! There are just not enough jobs or openings for them.

We have medical doctors driving taxicabs! Either they don't have enough money to study a specialty and go to Mexico City or maybe out of the country or they don't want to go out into the *campo* [countryside]. I understand that. Life in the *campo* is hard so they would rather stay in the city [Morelia] and have a comfortable *consultorio*. When my children were little, we used to have to wait an hour to see a pediatrician. Now you can shoot a cannonball through a doctor's office.

*What can you say about the medical care in México in your own personal experience?*

Many people use the *Seguro Social* or the *ISSTE* which are the two public medical systems in Mexico. You may have to wait a long time, but you have fine doctors in these institutions. A lot of people speak badly about public medicine, but my own experience to the contrary. I use the *Seguro Social* a lot. I've had rather serious health problems and my husband the same thing. We have nothing but good things to say about them. We are very grateful to them. I've had surgeries on many different occasions, I've had a very serious illness and they took care of me. And I am in great shape now.

*Did you enter on an emergency basis? Could that be why your experience was good?*

No. I went through the whole system and how you have to do things. I think that the *Seguro Social*, at least in my experience, is very good when it is something serious. You don't expect to get good attention when you go in for the flu or a cold or something like that. But when it comes to surgeries or high-tech medicine it is great. I was even sent to Guadalajara for specialized tests at a *Seguro Social* hospital there. The same doctors you see there have their own private *consultorios*, so you could also see them privately if you wanted to pay for it out of your own pocket... You pay for using the *Seguro Social* from your salary.

*Can you explain a bit about the Infonavit housing?*

You could call them more like condos than houses, although they are not like condos as Americans understand them. They have shared walls and are like apartments. You pay into a fund for an Infonavit house from your salary. There are many different levels of this. I have not used the money I have in the Infonavit fund, though I am considering it. If you don't use it you lose it. Your amount goes down after a certain number of years, so I should have done it years ago. I think I am going to buy something.

This program gives people an opportunity to have a house, probably not a house in the sense of what you or I would think, but it is better than what they would have without it. What you contribute to it every month is matched by your employer. It is there and should be used.

*Can you explain how salary and deductions work in Mexico?*

A lot is taken out, about 20-25% of what you make.

*Do you feel like you get something for what you pay?*

Not from our taxes. But as far as health care and the Infonavit, yes. Yes, you do. Of course a lot of people don't feel they would want to use the *Seguro Social*. Some people have said, "Well it is because you are an American." I don't think so. I think it might have to do with the fact that we went back and thank the doctors and thank the administrators. Years ago I had a foot surgery that was complicated, I had a bone transplant and we went back and thanked everyone. Maybe that is why we were treated so well the next time. [Laughs]. I don't know. That's my perception, I'm not sure.

*I hear more criticism than not of the IMSS hospitals.*

Yes, so do I.

*Others have said it depends on where you live.*

Maybe so.

*In conclusion, what would you like to say to my readers about any misconceptions Americans have about Mexicans?*

One, it is not true that every Mexican wants to come to the United States. Yes, there is a portion of the population that does. It is very difficult, I think, for Mexicans to get up and leave their families, because the family is the core of the society. Whether this is understood by Americans or not, I don't know. There may be farm workers and other workers that have given up an awful lot to go north and work and leave their families. That has created a whole different set of problems for society in Michoacán. We have whole towns that are practically empty of men because the men have all gone north to work. This has produced other types of social repercussions. But certainly, it is not because they are in love with the idea of going to the United States. It is because of

economic necessity – of dire necessity. But anybody from the middle-class, pretty much, people from middle-class who are doing okay (and I'm not saying great, but are doing okay, even just okay enough to put food on the table), would rather stay here. I really think so. And for many good reasons they would prefer to stay here. The poorer ones who go north just don't have choices.

*Thank you so much for your time.*

Thank you.

END