

## **A familiar T-shirt in a not-so-familiar place**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

San José, Costa Rica—It was, in the words of the immortal Yogi Berra, “like *deja vu* all over again.”

I was wading my way through downtown San José’s crowded streets when a woman of obviously modest means loomed in front of me.

What caught my attention was her T-shirt; its huge letters proclaimed to all the world that she is a listener to WAMZ.

I did a double take and checked her shirt again, trying not to look too obvious nor too forward for that matter. Sure enough, WAMZ, no doubt about it.

It was one of those moments common to those who live overseas. Sometimes I read a billboard or a newspaper headline at a glance then can’t remember whether it was in Spanish or English. On this occasion, I smiled and for just a moment thought that I was walking along Fourth Avenue in downtown Louisville.

But, quickly jostled by somebody brushing by, I realized that I wasn’t in my old Kentucky home, but on the streets of Costa Rica’s capital city.

I turned and caught up with the woman. “Excuse me, but...your T-shirt. Do you know anything about it?”

She didn’t. What WAMZ meant was completely lost on her. Furthermore, she had no connections with Louisville, had never been there and to her knowledge didn’t know anybody from there. She had obtained the shirt from a store that sells *Ropa Americana*—American clothing.

These outlets, found all over Latin America, sell damaged goods or seconds produced for the American market but with some flaw or problem that would prevent them being sold in the United States. So, they are dumped in the developing world and people buy them without really being sure what their messages carry.

This wasn’t our first clothing contact with Louisville, where we lived for over twenty-five years before moving to Latin America in 1990.

Almost a decade ago my wife and I were high on a mountainside above Quito, Ecuador, awaiting the arrival of a man who would direct us through the winding streets of one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods to a meeting that we were scheduled to attend. To our surprise, a young man passed our car wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan “Colonial Inn, Clarksville, Indiana.”

He, too, had undoubtedly never heard of the motel nor Clarksville, but had obviously bought it at a *Ropa Americana* store or had been given it by a charitable organization.

The disposition of clothing overseas can lead to embarrassing moments, or reflect the efficacy of charitable efforts to clothe people around the world.

It's common to see people wandering the streets of Latin American cities with shirts that send the most awful, often obscene messages imaginable. It's hard to imagine that English-speaking Americans would wear shirts adorned with an arrow pointing to the person next to them with words that are patently offensive or overtly suggestive.

Yet, Latins and others who do not speak English wear them with an oblivious smile, not realizing how offensive they are. One Louisvillian who served as a missionary in Argentina reported having to suggest to a church member that she could no longer wear a particular shirt to church because of its message.

Yet, clothing sent overseas by people of goodwill can often prove to be a treasured prize to the person who receives it.

In her book *Around the World in 99 Beds*, Dottie Miller, the wife of a former theology professor at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, reported spotting a blouse that she had donated to Church World Service on a woman at a seminary in southern India. She knew it was her donation because she had made it and the likelihood of an identical blouse being designed by someone else was almost impossible.

I have had some delightful experiences brought on by clothing with a Louisville connection.

One evening, following a festival in a Quito park, I ran across a man sporting a *Tumbleweed* restaurant cap. In conversation, I discovered that he had two sons living in Louisville and had been there many times. In fact, he was scheduled to return to Louisville for surgery in Jewish Hospital shortly after our brief encounter.

And, just recently, at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic sponsored by the American Colony Committee in San José, a young woman came up to me and asked if my baseball cap was from the St. Louis Cardinals. "Nope," I replied, "It's from the old Louisville Redbirds team."

"Wow, I thought it might have some connection," she said. It turns out she is a Louisvillian working for a year with the Jack Daniels distributor in Costa Rica.

It was nice that my cap helped me to meet someone from back home.

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