Mateo Paneitz
It took some time and a few false starts for Mateo Paneitz, 35, to find his calling. But a stint in the Peace Corps sparked a love for Guatemala, and his plan to help the country took shape.

Nothing in Mateo Paneitz’s childhood prepared him for his present job, or the attention it brings him. Paneitz grew up in Lufkin, Texas, a small town two hours north of Houston. Today, he lives in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, where he is the executive director of Long Way Home, a nonprofit that recycles trash into green buildings.

The path to his current position includes a few detours, but in 2002, he joined the Peace Corps and was stationed in San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala, where he worked with the town’s youth. They had no activities outside of school and work, and no future to speak of. There simply is not enough land for all of them to stay and be farmers, so many leave for the U.S. or Guatemala City, where gangs are rampant.

After the Peace Corps, Paneitz returned to the U.S. He knew he wanted to get back to Comalapa to help the youth, so he began filling out the paperwork to establish a nonprofit organization. “I didn’t know anything,” Paneitz said of the process. “I just took it one line at a time.” And the first line was a stumper. “Line one was, ‘What is the name of your organization?’” Paneitz had no idea, so he thumbed through his music CDs until he stumbled across one he liked. “Long Way Home” is the name of a Dwight Yoakam song.

In early 2005, Paneitz headed south. “Kerouac style, I bought a Volkswagen and rode down to Guatemala with two friends,” he said. The group successfully built a soccer field and basketball court and a city park for area youth.

But Paneitz quickly realized that wasn’t enough, so he turned his attention toward the everyday. How could he improve living conditions? He realized he could train locals in green building techniques, provide poor families with better housing and clean up the community, all at the same time.

Long Way Home began with simple building projects—finding ways to capture the rain from the roof, installing solar panels to generate electricity—that make a huge difference in the quality of life here, especially for children.

“The kids don’t have to spend all day collecting firewood and water,” Paneitz said. Now, children can stay in school, where they receive an education and learn a vocation. “That is what breaks the cycle of poverty.”

Long Way Home is now building a vocational school, which will open in 2012. “It will be an appropriate technology center,” Paneitz said, training local youths and adults in green construction methods but also in entrepreneurship.

So how does a small-town boy decide to do something like this? For Paneitz, aside from his experiences in the Peace Corps, it was by reading about others who made a difference, people like Nelson Mandela, Paul Farmer and Mohandas Gandhi. “I read about all these people and feel a tremendous responsibility to them,” he said. Luckily for the people of Comalapa, Paneitz took the next step and turned his inspiration into action.

And he’s not done yet. “I believe that anywhere there is dirt and rubbish, we can replicate this model.”

— Jaman Matthews