

# ATENAS TODAY



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**ATENAS TODAY** is a free English language newsletter for the residents and potential residents of Atenas, Costa Rica. It contains informative articles and creative compositions submitted by our readers, and is distributed via email approximately once a month to over 200 email addresses. To get on the distribution list or to submit material, please send an email to Fred Macdonald at [fredmac222@yahoo.com](mailto:fredmac222@yahoo.com).

Compositions from back issues are archived by category on the Atenas Chamber of Tourism and Commerce website, [www.atenascatuca.com](http://www.atenascatuca.com). Click on the English version and then [Atenas Today](#) on the business page.

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## **Report on Chili Cook-Off**

*By Marietta Arce*

I am still feeling upbeat as a result of yesterday's "Chili Cook-Off" held at Kay's Gringo Postres in Güisaro. Those of you who were there know it was very well attended. The contenders contributed their best effort (and secret ingredients, no doubt) to make sure they were not the ones who took home the 'boobie' prize (which turned out to be a **can** of Hormel's chili con carne).

I was guided by the melodious sounds of laughter from a block away. I wondered how many people I would know and was very surprised to see that I knew only a handful. This was a very diverse crowd, something I suppose happens when expats settle in foreign lands. People who might not have had common interests 'back home', now spend many hours together as a result of the one thing they do have in common: living in Costa Rica!

Rick (everybody knows Rick) was the auctioneer for the beautifully crafted items and for the deliciously baked goods that had been

donated by generous residents for the event. I wished I had brought more money, there were several lovely things to bid on. He entertained us with a hilarious Chili contest story while we waited for the results of ours.

I held my breath not wanting to think of the fate of my entry but ever hopeful. At last Kay read the winners' names. If I am not mistaken, all three prizes went to people from Texas. I was not surprised! I agreed wholeheartedly with the choice for first place, it is the third straight win for the contestant. She promised not to compete again next year!

This was the third edition of the event. The money raised is turned over joyfully to the Hogar de Vida, which has recently been vandalized and needs money to build a proper fence to protect its most valuable treasure: the orphans who call it home. I felt very happy to have been a part of something so worthwhile.

As I was preparing to leave, I offered my congratulations to the winner and asked her for a few pointers so that I can have better luck next time. She practically gave me her recipe, which is something that I know not everyone does. She shared both common and 'secret' ingredients with me. As I was driving home, I realized that I didn't win and I didn't lose the contest but I came away with a prize anyway: the knowledge that there are many generous people out there who are willing to share with others just because they are asked to. I am sure you are one!

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## Mystery Building



Does anyone know what is going in this new building?

For better or worse our town is changing.

## Latitude



*by Diane Holman*

Everything blooms in the sun.

My body stretches and unfolds, lavishly welcoming  
the pleasure of warmth.

My heart catches at the sight of paper-thin petals  
fluttering like lace in a subtle breeze.

I am rich with health and responsive to every nuance of the day:

the new-green leaves of the jocote tree,

the call of distant birds,

the slight panting of Hera's breath

as she lies sleeping beside me.

I bloom as the flowers bloom,

succulent and luxurious in this driest of times.

Summer seeks me as a lover,

and I open to allow it.

## 2009 Atenas Climate Fair



Every April the Atenas Chamber of Commerce and Tourism (CATUCA) sponsors a fair to celebrate our town. The theme this year is “Pro=Carbon Neutral” in support of Costa Rica’s goal to be carbon neutral by the year 2021. Here is the schedule of events:

Don’t miss the final concert by "**Malpais**", one of the most sought-after groups in Costa Rica.

### **Friday April 24 in the Central Park**

- 12:00 p.m. Tree planting ceremony to mark the official start of the Fair.
- 2:30 p.m. Belly Dancing
- 3:00 p.m. "La Cuchara Ateniense" local cuisine contest being judged privately.
- 4:00 p.m. Food offers from above contest available to the public. Tickets cost 2,000 colones per person with opportunity to taste 4 different things. This will be held at the Church Hall (next to the Catholic Church)
- 5:30 p.m. Local musician plays old and new themes. José Luís Rodríguez

### **Saturday April 25 in the Central Park**

- 10:00 a.m. Grupo Tierra de Paz, Marisol Vargas Directora
- 11:00 a.m. Hip Hop Taller de Hip Hop Grupo "La Zona" Danza Urbana
- 1:00 p.m. Cimarrona "Los Chonetes" Jorge Espinoza C., Director (music band)
- 2:00 p.m. "Las Cuenteras de la Media Tarde" (storytellers)
- 6:00 p.m. Ox carts begin arriving at Finca Los Ranchos for their traditional camping  
Concierto Grupo Marimba Orquesta

### **Sunday April 26 simultaneous activities in the morning Los Ranchos/Central Park**

- 9:00 a.m. Enyugada, música con marimba – lugar: Los Ranchos
- 9:00 a.m. Talleres de Teatro Som/Comité Cultural: Atenas Clima y Cultura
- 10:30 a.m. Parade prior to ox carts  
Marionetas Gigantes "Teatro SOM" – la historia de arbolar  
Cimarrona "Los Chonetes"
- 11:00 a.m. Ox cart Parade Dedicated to Brothers: Álvaro y Luís Paulino Arguedas Lobo
- 1:30 p.m. Atenas County Band, Geovanny Fallas, Director
- 2:30 p.m. Chat "Theatre for Life" Rodolfo Oreamuno, Director Teatro SOM
- 3:30 p.m. Cha Cha Cha Club, Danza del Teatro Popular Mélico Salazar
- 5:00 p.m. "Malpais" in concert - last activity, free to the public



## Memories of Bert

by Fred Macdonald



A few weeks ago we lost a very special member of our ex-pat community in Atenas, Bert Altmann. In honor of his memory I am writing this tribute about his life and the kind of man he was. The information comes from my own friendship with him and from a conversation I had with his wife Vera, and his step daughter, Lara.

Bert was born in 1936 in Paraguay to Jewish parents who had moved there from Austria after the First World War. His father was an adventurous man who chose to explore a new life in the new world. When Bert was 16 the family began a new adventure and moved to Hollywood, California. Bert and his younger sister, Dottie, arrived knowing very little English and were thrust into the high-living teenage culture of Hollywood. I remember Bert telling me how strange it was. Fortunately for him, he was handsome and athletic (my assessment, not his), and for a teenage boy that is the ticket to being successful in the United States.

Having grown up in South America, Bert was an avid soccer player. Apparently he was very good, because he was recruited

for the US soccer team, only to be turned down because he was not yet a citizen (he became one in 1961). He graduated from Los Angeles City College and joined the US Army. For the next three years he was stationed in Germany, where he was a star on the soccer team of his army division.

A knee injury in Germany required surgery ended his soccer playing. After being discharged from the army he went back to California and began a fifteen year career in bank management. He married a woman who had a six year old daughter, Cathy, and together they had a son, Brad. Life went on until 1974, when at age 38 Bert had his first heart attack. It was the first of many serious heart problems.

The genetic defect in Bert's heart could not be cured. After another attack in 1980, he had quadruple bypass surgery, and at one point his chest was left open for fourteen hours as the doctors worked on him. The stress of his management job was aggravating his condition, leading him to consider a radical change in life style. One day a client told him that he was quitting his high pressure job and starting a wall paper installation company. Bert, who always liked to work with his hands, joined him. Over the next ten years they built their business into a successful and highly profitable enterprise. Bert was very proud of this achievement. It enabled him to retire in his 50's.

But the heart problems persisted. Finally in 1999 the doctors told him they could do nothing more. His only chance of survival was to get a heart transplant. Bert's response was: "OK, let's do it." He put his name on the waiting list for a heart, expecting to wait months or years. The very next night at 2 am he received a call. "Come to the hospital immediately. We have your heart."

It was pure luck. A 38 year old woman had died. Her heart was a small one, too small for most people on the waiting list, and other characteristics made it unsuitable for the others. For Bert, however, it was a perfect fit. The transplant was successful, and for the next almost ten years, Bert was able to lead a normal life. For whatever reason, however, heart transplants are only good for ten years, plus or minus, and last month Bert's time was up.

As might be expected, getting a new heart and a predicted ten year life span was a real life changer. Bert was determined to enjoy every minute, and he wanted to find a new partner to share his life. How to find her? Well, why not try the modern method of using *Match.com* on the internet?

Meanwhile there was an attractive Brazilian woman named Vera, who was living an uneventful life as a single mom in the same area of Southern California. She was mainly interested in working on her English, not in hooking up with a man, particularly another South American. Her daughter Lara, however, was convinced that her mom needed a male companion. In fact, Lara was also looking to meet someone. Together they put their profiles on *Match.com*, with Lara, who was proficient in English, doing all the writing.

Lara was determined. She presented Vera as the happy, fun-loving Brazilian woman that she is, plus she embellished things a little, like saying that Vera loved to cook, when in fact she had never learned to cook (after they were married Vera became an excellent cook and fulfilled the promise made in her profile).

Bert knew what he wanted in women and said so in his *Match.com* profile. Being from South America he knew and loved Latin women in general and those from Brazil in particular. He was always fascinated by Brazil. One of his last requests

was that his ashes be taken to Brazil and scattered on a soccer field.

Unlike most profiles on *Match.com*, Bert described his personality and his feelings, and not just his resume. Lara spotted the profile and liked him immediately. In his picture he looked open and genuine. It was hard to tell his age from the photo, and in his write up he had decided to average his real age with the age of his new heart, which resulted in cutting his age from 66 to 53.

"Write to him, mom," she said.

"No," said Vera. "I don't want to date a South American and speak Spanish. I want to talk English with a North American."

"If you don't write to this guy I am not going to help you with your English writing anymore," said Lara.

"Oh, all right," said Vera.

Lara wrote to Bert and arranged the date.

When Bert arrived to pick up Vera, Lara met him on the porch, before her mother saw him. She told him that she had been the one writing all the emails because her mother's written English was poor, and he just laughed. He was an understanding, non-judgmental person, and was not about to let little deception spoil his date.

They went for a long walk together that first afternoon, and Bert came clean on all his shortcomings: he had a bad heart, he liked to gamble, and he didn't have much money. Oh, and by the way, his divorce was not yet final.

Vera liked him, but had real reservations. Gambling, even if it was supposedly only low stakes friendly poker, was a turn off. And she really wanted to be forced to talk English. Although he had asked her to go out with him again the next day, she was hesitating. But Lara knew quality when she saw it.

“Mom, I want you to give it 30 days. Go with him that long, and if it doesn’t work I will help you find someone else.”

The second date was all it took. Vera and Bert were in love after that and were supremely happy together for the next seven years. Bert could not believe that a woman could be so good natured all the time. Vera could not believe that a man could be so kind and generous and so much fun. Lara had a wonderful second father and tried hard not to take too much credit.

What kind of man was Bert?

He liked people and never had a bad thing to say about anybody. He made friends easily, and when you were his friend you were his friend for life. There was Net Nedar, an Iranian he met at Hollywood High School, and Jim Foy, an Army buddy from Germany. And everyone whom he met in Atenas over the past three years loved him.

He had a wonderful sense of humor. Many of us received frequent email jokes and stories. When I told him once that I really liked what he was sending me, he said he could send me more, but some of them were a little raunchy and he didn’t want to offend. I said send them on.

He accepted his health problems and his fate without complaint. In fact he liked to joke about the fact that he had a woman’s heart. “Why do I like buying shoes so much? Why can’t I park a car in a small space? Why am I able to start an argument over nothing? Why do I like to pee sitting down?” You get the picture.

He joked about women but appreciated their physical beauty and was open about it in a humorous, non offensive way. It was something we shared.

He was totally genuine. There were no hidden agendas or behind the back actions. His integrity was unquestioned.

He liked to help people. Gardeners, construction workers, and school teachers all benefited from the English classes he conducted free of charge at his home. In this issue of Atenas Today, there is a brief article that he passed on to help people use the internet safely.

He was almost child-like in his love of animals. Homeless dogs could not be resisted, and what other adult man do you know who has brought home a bunny rabbit as a pet.

Even though his new heart was small and not his own, it served him well. In the end the doctors marveled that after all his other organs had failed and he was pronounced dead, his heart kept beating for another half hour.

I will pass on one last story. On the wall in Bert and Vera’s house there is an old clock. Bert could never get it to work. At the very moment that he died, this clock started keeping time, and it has been ever since.

Good bye, Bert. We miss you.

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## **HTTP versus HTTPS**

*submitted by Bert Altmann*

Do you know the difference between **HTTP** and **HTTPS**? It's all about keeping you secure. HTTP stand for Hypertext Transport Protocol, which is just a fancy way of saying it's a computer language for information to be passed back and forth between web servers and clients.

The important thing is that the letter **S** stands for "Secure".

If you visit a website or webpage, look at the address in the web browser. It will likely being with `http://`, and that means the website is talking to your browser using the regular "unsecured" language. In other word, it is possible for someone to "eavesdrop" on your computer's online conversation. If you fill out a form on that website, someone might see the information you're submitting.

The missing **S** should signal you to **STOP**. Don't enter your credit card number.

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## **TORTUGAS**

*by Julie and Paul Wagner*

Our organization to try to save the Leatherback Sea Turtle from extinction is in dire need of help. We are recruiting work teams to spend three days and two nights at our turtle station on the Caribbean. This is the season when record numbers of turtles are nesting. Our teams will be leaving Atenas on April 23, May 6, May 11, and May 20. Please see us at our booth in the park at the Climate Fair, or email us at [wagspuravida@yahoo.com](mailto:wagspuravida@yahoo.com).

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## Our Columnists

### Tolerance and America



by *Marietta Arce*

A few years ago, before we opted for ‘homeschool’ as the best choice for our family, our children attended the American International School in Cariari. As an involved parent, it didn’t take long before I became immersed in the Parent-Teacher Association of the school. I enjoyed the social part of the group; meeting and greeting new families; and contributing ideas toward improving what I thought were the fundamental issues concerning the school and the education.

It was a good time for me. I developed many nice friendships and I learned to apply many of my business skills in an environment which still fulfills me deeply. The unmistakable sound of young minds learning about their world and challenging every rule created by headmasters was everywhere. I remember one particular senior class as being very unruly yet charmingly disarming. I felt all these kids really needed was to feel that someone was on

their side as they negotiated their way into college and beyond. Alas, they were short changed as often happens when cultures clash for lack of mutual understanding and acceptance.

One particular morning, I was in charge of “picture” day. This meant getting the children scheduled and lined up neatly and quietly in the hallway while the photographer worked his magic with props and other delightful antics to make even the shiest child smile for the camera. Since there were many students, I could not handle the job alone and asked a fellow mother to help me out. She graciously accepted and we began our adventure armed with hairbrushes and mirrors.

My morning went quickly and I was very proud of the fact that I could greet each child by name and know exactly where he or she belonged in the school. By knowing the child, I felt more connected to the school and even more so to my own children who were part of the growing line outside the ‘studio’. There was (and is) no greater joy than to be able to share activities with my children. They grow up so quickly and time spent does not return.

I was surprised and saddened by my ‘assistant’ that morning though. She repeatedly pointed out to me that so and so must be “American”, look at his pants! And would you look at that hair? Only an “American” mother would let her out of the house. Having grown up around constant

criticism, I am very sensitive to it and it is a habit I have not been able to cultivate regardless of how old I become!

At first, I let it go. As the morning continued, though, I found myself becoming impatient until I finally asked her to tell me exactly what was wrong with the pants, I hadn't noticed. She was shocked and answered simply: they haven't been ironed! ...and the hair, I asked, what's wrong with it? "My goodness," she practically screamed, "the part isn't straight!"

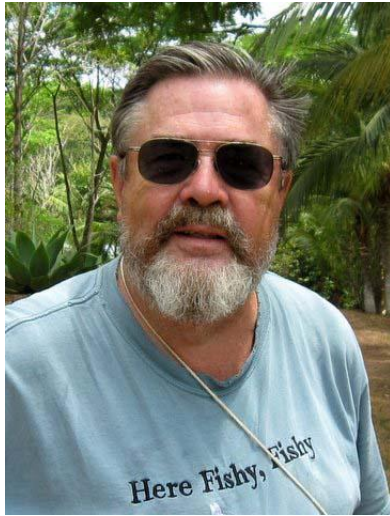
Needless to say, tact and diplomacy won out and I didn't burst out laughing, although every nerve in my body urged me to! Imagine wasting precious time and energy on such things. Inwardly, I tried to remember what my own "American" kids would look like when they came in the room.

I chuckled when my son came in. Because I am wrinkle phobic, I fold clothes quickly after they are out of the dryer and try to do so in a way that will maintain the 'ironed' look, but no actual iron had ever touched his shorts! And when my hairbrush phobic daughter strolled in, I quickly got rid of that unsightly knot before any comments came my way and embarrassed my thoughtless helper! As you might have guessed, both her daughters were impeccably groomed, starched and clean! However, in the group picture, all the kids looked fabulous, ironed or not!

Over the last few years, I have relived that day many times. I have occasionally run into my 'helper' while I am out on errands and have been surprised to know that although her children are no longer at AIS they are now attending an even more "American" institution, the Country Day School in Escazu. I am hopeful that she has realized that the rich, complex and unique culture of the United States and its commitment to democracy and tolerance is responsible for the singular personal style that identifies the "American" everywhere. Perhaps seeing her daughters assimilate and thrive in that environment has made her aware of the negative impact her intolerance was creating, for them and for her. I hope so.

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## Liturgia L a r g a



by G. Martin Lively

We thought it might be interesting to go to the Easter Saturday Vigil Mass at 6pm instead of our usual 7am early morning Mass at St. Rafael Catholic Church in Atenas, usually called Centro to distinguish it from the outlying chapels where the same ,parish priests also say Mass.

Little did we know the event we were in for!

Two gentlemen flanked each doorway holding boxes of candles. I'm still not sure if they were selling or giving them away. We passed on candles and entered, taking our usual seats on the broad main cross aisle because the two large doors provide the best breeze. Even at 6pm it was still warm and many women had brought fans to cool themselves, other's used the Sunday Bulletin in the same manner.

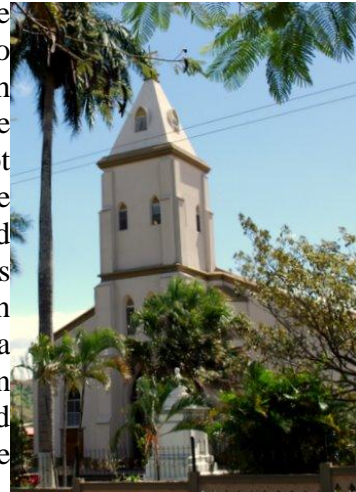
The pastor, Pbro. Jose Luis was celebrant. He has a beautiful voice and loves to sing/chant parts of the Mass. Garbed in simple white alb, and only "on stage" to announce the agenda for the evening, he

outlined the candle procession that was to ensue and that the entire Mass would be

sung and that he knew the parishioners were going to sing out loudly the resurrection of the Lord. (AND they really did, unlike us they knew what they were in for and were there for the long haul and to rock the rafters.)

As the Pastor retreated to the sacristy to don stole and chasuble, the cantor led a couple of warm up songs. If you have never heard three hundred joyful faithful give thanks in song you should mark your calendar for Easter Vigil next year. It was beautiful and the few lines I knew here and there sprung forth from me in volume and fine form not experienced since St. James grammar school when the nuns made sure that we were giving our all.

Fr. Jose Luis appeared on the altar again and instead of beginning the Mass as usual he walked over to the large vigil candle which when lit signifies the presence of the Holy Eucharist. It was not lit. He took the candle from the holder and with 4 acolytes and 12 men dressed as the Apostles walked from the altar and down the nave to the narthex. About a third of the congregation fell in behind and assembled around him at the entry way of the church. Booming out the meaning of Easter and the symbolic significance of the light and the fire and the communal participation he lit the big candle and led the "apostles" and group back to the front of the altar where the costumed men lit their candles from the huge vigil candle and made their way down the nave lighting the small candles of the participants. A woman from our left stood and walked toward us



and held out three candles for us. PURA VIDA. So our candles were lit and we held our flames as the entire church glowed and flickered when the electric lights were shut off. BOOM came the cantor and BOOM came the Pastor and the 300 or so answered, and it was awesome.

Lights came on, candles were extinguished, and if a regular Mass then ensued it would have been a completely delightful experience. But we weren't ready for a THREE HOUR event. The 6pm Mass proper began finally at 7:15! It ended at a

little before 9pm! The pastor pulled out all the stops and included every special recitation of the Saints, a renewal of baptismal vows, fully sung responsorials, and other "extras" that turned the usual hour's devotion into three.

So next year we have to decide if we are going to a US style one hour Mass or...

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Haedel's new German restaurant at the site of the old internet café.

## Missives from an Old(er) Feminist



*by Diane Holman*

### *First, An Exorcism (My Own)*

My truths are hard-fought for and lie coiled within me—  
pills of bitter medicine, some would say.

Do not come to me for news of One-ness or bring me exceptions to a rule.

Above all do not come to me for talk of transcendence.

We are as immanent as dirt.

And it is wrong to think religion is benign with respect to women.

And it is wrong to build weapons of mass destruction.

And it is wrong for a few to stockpile money, with no regard for the many.

No one needs a walkabout to learn this.

No one needs to enter a monastery to meditate on this.

What is needed is an analysis of situations in terms of power.

Power is real. To live as if this were not so is to live in a delusion.

Power is as real as we are.

That is my first specific truth.

*Second, One (of Many) Assertions I Quarrel With*

"Everything happens for a reason."

Well, no. In a world of happenstance and contingency and luck and coincidence, many, many things happen for no reason.

This is *not* to say that everything that happens cannot be useful. We can grow from experiences that, fortunately or unfortunately, **happen**. We can develop resilience and depth from accidents, setbacks, unwonted turns of events, illnesses, losses, startling, unsought for successes and bewildering, out-of-the blue failures.

In the dictionary, the first definition of "happen" is this: "to occur by chance". Or, as the bumper sticker has it: Shit happens.

