Whenever Mike Jenkins has visitors in San José Villanueva—the Salvadoran village he now calls home—he takes them to see what he calls the “Great Wall of China.” Laced with barbed and electrified wire, the wall surrounds La Hacienda, one of a few gated communities catering to the wealthy minority. Inside La Hacienda, armed guards patrol the grounds, and homes cost between $200,000 and $500,000.

Outside, people live in shanties made of cardboard, bamboo, mud, and trash bags.

“On the one hand, you have people with swimming pools, satellite TVs, gardeners, and water 24 hours a day,” says Jenkins (COM’71). “And just on the other side of the wall, people have no water, and many don’t have electricity. It’s a pretty stark microcosm of the social problems facing El Salvador, right here in our village.”

Jenkins is trying to tackle those problems through Epilogos Charities (www.epilogos.org), the nonprofit he manages with his wife, Susie. For the past eight years, the couple has brought together villagers, local agencies, donors, and more than 1,500 volunteers from around the world to improve the health care, housing, education, and water quality of this community of roughly 13,500.

A Peace Corps reunion in 1999 drew Mike and Susie back to SJV, where they renewed their wedding vows and their friendships with many villagers they’d known in the 1960s. They were heartened to see the community’s progress since then, but also struck by the problems that remained. In July 2002—one month after retiring—they moved back to SJV to run Epilogos.

Founded by Peace Corps friend Denny Williams, the nonprofit enables retired Peace Corps volunteers to do community development work again. Yet Epilogos has attracted volunteers of all ages—from 14 to 80—from all over the world. This year, the Jenkinses expect more than 400.

Their efforts have made a difference. Epilogos has coordinated donations of medicine and equipment, established a dental clinic, and provided periodic rural health clinics run by volunteer medical professionals. Villagers and volunteers have built 143 houses—108 in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity—and wired solar panels in homes and community centers. Several schools now have computer labs, hundreds of poor students receive scholarships to pay for shoes, backpacks, and school supplies, and uneducated Salvadorans can take literacy classes. The nonprofit has also equipped more than 300 homes with household water purification filters and collaborated with two Engineers Without Borders student chapters to develop a water supply system in an area without electricity and to build seven public wash stations.

Jenkins emphasizes that every project is a shared venture among Salvadorans, volunteers, donors, and local agencies, working side-by-side. Villagers must provide 30 percent of project funds, a daunting task given that the typical wage is $3 per day. “We’ve had people come here on horseback with whole saddlebags just full of nickels, quarters, and dimes and say, ‘This is our share,’” he says, noting that those who can’t afford to pay can contribute goods or manual labor.

Jenkins, who turns 70 in October, says he is driven in part by a belief that “those of us who have should try to do something about the injustice in the world.” He and Susie plan to continue to help out in SJV, he says, “as long as our health permits.”

And while Jenkins prefers to downplay his role in Epilogos, he acknowledges that strides have been made in the village. “We have been somewhat successful in bridging the gap between the two communities by enlisting the help of members of the wealthy community in many of our projects,” he says. “To many of them, it has been an eye-opening, hands-on experience with their neighbors who have so little.”

Elizabeth Simons Durant