

April 6, 2010



Margarita Necul, a Lafkenche Mapuche who lives in the south of Chile, had always dreamt of learning to weave in the traditional ways like her 99-year-old grandmother. She is finding it hard to resume work because of ongoing fears triggered by the over 300 aftershocks since February 27.

The water recedes, the rubble is cleared, the work begins NESsT Levantando Chile Fund identifies ways to help

Story & Photos by Kate Raphael

On Thursday, March 25th, Margarita Necul set out for the monthly meeting at the Relmu Witral headquarters in Tirúa not knowing what she would find. Relmu Witral, a women's weaving cooperative (the name means Rainbow Loom), owns a building on the flat area near where the Tirúa river meets the sea. It had been one month since the 8.8 magnitude earthquake, and the tsunami set off by the quake had completely wiped out 40 homes and businesses in downtown

Tirúa and flooded dozens more. Like almost all indigenous Mapuche in the area, Margarita

**Levantando
Chile** 
www.levantandochile.org

lives on small farm in the hills above Tirúa and had not yet been into town to see the building she refers to as her second home.

Since 2003, the Relmu Witral building has served as both a meeting hall and a store for its 150 members. Its floor-to-ceiling shelves display hundreds of the woven products made by the women who belong to the cooperative, attracting tourists from around the world who purchase quality traditional Mapuche products that adhere to the standards of fair trade, and providing members with essential, regular income. The March meeting would also be the first

Levantando Chile



www.levantandochile.org

time since the earthquake and tsunami that Margarita would see members of the group and find out if all members, and the building, had survived.

The water did reach Relmu Witrál. The wave hit with such force that, when Father Pablo Castro, a Jesuit priest who advises the group, arrived at the building shortly after 5:00 a.m. that morning, he found a small fish plastered on the front door, five feet above the ground. It was drying out, now that the water had receded. Pieces of a house that had been standing across the street were stacked up against the front of the building, including an intact roof peak with rafters still attached. Father Castro made a path to the front door and pried it open. The floor was covered with sand, trash and dead fish. But the front wall, the door, and windows had held the wave out. Water and debris had seeped in through the floorboards, rising two inches and stopping just below the lowest

display shelf that held dozens of large, handmade, woven rugs.

NESsT staff Alejandra Díaz attended Relmu Witrál's March meeting to assess exactly how NESsT's [Levantando Chile Fund](http://www.levantandochile.org) can best support the group in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami. Although their houses are still standing, many women are experiencing high levels of stress and trauma. Many sustained extensive losses of personal items during the earthquake, including dishes, furniture and appliances, items almost impossible to replace with limited income. The women's financial stress is compounded by the sudden loss of employment for many of their husbands. The fishing and paper industries have all but shut down, severing a family's ability to generate income. Many families grow a small plot of fast-growing eucalyptus trees to harvest and sell to paper mills when they need cash. All of the paper mills in the

region have shut down, except for one in Valdivia, five hours south. This puts additional pressure on the women of Relmu Witrál to generate family income, yet they are finding it difficult to work due to ongoing feelings of panic; many members did not attend the monthly meeting because they feel that the Relmu Witrál building is too close to the ocean and the more than 300 aftershocks sustain fears of another tsunami.

The women requested psychological support to deal with the trauma and ongoing fears interfering with their ability to weave. NESsT hopes to raise enough funds through the [Levantando Chile Fund](http://www.levantandochile.org) to pay for a trained psychologist to travel to the Mapuche communities surrounding Tirúa to provide emotional support to help the women start weaving again.

The earthquake and tsunami also obliterated the purchasing

Connecting on the ground

NESsT staff member Alejandra Díaz met with over 60 members of Relmu Witrál to learn what they need to start weaving again.

[Relmu Witrál](http://www.levantandochile.org) is an indigenous association of 150 Lafkenche Mapuche that works to market the handmade textile products of its members.



Levantando Chile



www.levantandochile.org

priorities and buying power of residents in the regions of Bío Bío and Maule. The two regions contain over 17% of Chile's total population of almost 17 million, almost 3 million people that, before February 27, provided a market for Relmu Witrál's products. The earthquake and tsunami also severely reduced tourism, a major source of customers for stores like Relmu Witrál that sell traditional Chilean crafts. The [Levantando Chile Fund](#) will work closely with the directors of Relmu Witrál to find new markets for its products outside of its region, both in other parts of Chile and around the world. This will include finding new points of sale in Santiago, strengthening relationships within the fair trade network through the World Fair Trade Organization, and helping representatives from Relmu Witrál travel to artisan fairs in other countries to display and sell their products. This will sustain the income stream while also fulfilling Relmu Witrál's vision: the group would like more people to know about them and their weaving, and to



appreciate and value their products. They want people around the world to understand that the women of Relmu Witrál make their products in the traditional ways of the Mapuche Lafkenche people, and that their products have value. By helping Relmu Witrál find new markets, the [Levantando Chile Fund](#) will help restart the income stream as quickly as possible while also helping the group meet its vision of being seen and known.

Four weeks later, the floor of Relmu Witrál is severely warped and precarious, but the building and the group of women are intact. Sixty women showed up for the monthly meeting. All expressed deep emotion, ongoing fears, and relief and gratitude that all members, and their second home, had survived. As one member said, "The building is still standing. This gives us strength to keep standing, too."



"The building is still standing. This gives us strength to keep standing, too."

-Member of Relmu Witrál

At left: The Board of Directors of Relmu Witrál.