

KGAP newsletter

SUMMER GREETINGS!

by *Connie Vanderhyden, KGAP Coordinator*

¡Saludos a todos! I hope you are enjoying the beginnings of summer wherever you are!

We were pleased to take two trips to Guatemala this past winter/spring and I am happy to share with you the reflections of many others who were able to visit Chaculá with me.

In January we had a small group of friends who know the village well. Martha Pierce, Michael Swartz, Jonathan Moller and Viviana Parra and I joined the community in the 23rd annual celebration of their return to Guatemala.

In March, I joined the group from Youth Initiative High School in Viroqua, WI, for the last week of their 3 week Guatemala adventure. We spent the entire week in Chaculá where the students lived with host families and enjoyed a variety of experiences with the youth and teachers in the village. This newsletter includes articles from the trip leaders, Shawn Lavoie and Natalie McIntire, along with 3 student articles from Sarah Corbin, Daniel Kouba, and Liam Buche-Pattison. Other students in the group were Finley McGeorge, Ahme Varnes-Epstein, Lydia Noble, and Savi Krumenauer. In addition we were joined by Jennifer McGeorge and Susan Nesbit from Viroqua, Andi Alexander from New York, and Luisa Rivera from Atlanta, GA.



Connie Vanderhyden greeted by children from Chaculá, photo by Andi Alexander

As always we were welcomed with open arms in Chaculá, confirming the importance of our long-standing friendship and collaboration with the village. As is mentioned in several of the articles, we didn't want to leave! KGAP continues to support many high school students every year and also helps subsidize the middle and high schools in the village. Every year the Chaculá Education Association, comprised of teachers and parents, decides how to divide up the annual KGAP fund. It is a very democratic, transparent process that seeks to serve the community in the best way possible. You will also read in this newsletter about a grant KGAP received to assist in Health Education in the region.

We are so grateful to be involved in the progress of the village, responding to requested needs and accompanying them when we can. **THIS IS ALL POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF YOUR GENUINE INTEREST AND GENEROUS SUPPORT!!**

Thanks to all and I hope you enjoy reading this issue of the KGAP newsletter!

Sincerely,
Connie Vanderhyden

Please send tax-deductible
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What Does It Mean to Help?

by Natalie McIntire

What does it mean to help? That is a question that continues to come to me weeks after returning from Guatemala. I was blessed with the opportunity to chaperone a high school trip to Guatemala. Our group was two adults and seven juniors and seniors from the Youth Initiative High School in Viroqua, Wisconsin. We spent three weeks improving our Spanish, immersing ourselves in a different culture and way of life, and trying to grasp the history of this small country-- and our own country's role in that history. We came away from the trip with more questions than answers, but with our hearts opened to the stories and struggles of the people we met, many of whom we now consider our friends.

Two aspects of our trip were most meaningful to me in terms of expanding my understanding of Guatemalan life and history. First, we had two close-up and personal experiences with poverty in Guatemala. We spent our first week at a language school in the mountains learning Spanish. One way the school seeks to help the local community is to place their students with host families, where they eat their meals three times a day. The school pays these families to provide this service. And during our last week, we each lived and ate with a local family in the community of Chaculá. Not only was this a good way to practice our Spanish, but we each got to know two families and their way of life more intimately. We ate what they typically eat: hand made tortillas and beans, often with eggs, sometimes with a few vegetables, but rarely any fruit. It was good food, but certainly different from our usual. In Chaculá, some of us experienced less-than-comfortable sleeping conditions, bathing with buckets of water (sometimes cold), and using an outhouse rather than a flush toilet. Many families have dirt floors in some or all of their rooms and most cook over a wood fire, some without any chimney for the smoke. We observed women working endlessly to cook and clean, wash laundry by hand, and take care of many children. It was clearly a hard life, without the conveniences and amenities that we are used to in the United States. And yet, none of us wanted to leave at the end of our trip because we were welcomed completely by these families, who so generously gave us the best of what they had.

It was clear to all of us that we lead a life of privilege in the US, and during our second week in Guatemala we were shocked to experience the tremendous income disparity there. In Guatemala, over

75% of the population lives below the poverty line, including over 90% of the indigenous population. When we were volunteering for a mission in San Lucas, we were put up in a "hotel" that was nicer than any of the hotels I have personally paid to stay at in the United States. We all had a strong feeling that it just wasn't right that we should stay in such a nice place, after experiencing the indigenous homes we had just been eating in the week before. How is it that people can be allowed to live with so little, when others live with such extravagance? That difference was obvious in Guatemala, but of course serious income disparity also exists in the US.

The other aspect of this trip that impacted me significantly was the personal stories we heard. One elder who spoke to us was a young man when one of his neighbors accused him of being involved with the guerillas, though this was not true. He then told us the horrific story of how he was tortured for many days, to the point that he wished the soldiers would kill him instead of continuing the torture. He finished by telling us that he couldn't give the military any names of others just so that he would be freed, because he really did not know anyone who was a guerilla. He would rather have died than offer up another's name untruthfully. He told us that when we die, the only thing we really have is the life we have lived. We have to live that life being a good person, and doing for others, so that when we die, we can be satisfied with our life.

We also heard the stories of female teachers in Chaculá whose families had sacrificed so that they could get an education and have a better life. They talked about the hard lives of their mothers especially, and the work that women continue to do in Guatemala to provide as much as they can for their families. Families often do not have a consistent income throughout the year and they have little money beyond what they need to just pay for food and shelter, so there is close to nothing left to pay for school for their children. In Guatemala, there often are not schools free of charge after elementary school, and even free public schools usually require families to pay for uniforms and notebooks. Going to high school is not a

"What does it mean to Help?" continued on page 3



Maria and her grandson, in Yalambojoch, photo by Andi Alexandera village near Chaculá

Guatemala

by Liam Buche-Pattison, YIHS student

"What does it mean to Help?" continued on from page 2

possibility for many families, and going to the university can often require a family to have someone living in the US working and sending money back to pay the extra cost of higher education.

We also heard the story of a man who began working for the guerillas as a messenger when he was only 11 years old. The army didn't pay much attention to children, so the guerillas could easily use them to transport messages and small items. His cousin, who was

I experienced a lot of culture shock in the transition to Guatemala. For example, we got nine people into two small taxis to go from the airport to our hotel. That, in itself, was different than transportation is in America. On the way, I saw a pickup truck and there were police officers in the bed of the truck wearing ski masks and brandishing assault rifles. It was a realization that "I am in a foreign culture right now."



View of Chaculá, photo by Shawn Lavoie

a guerilla, was captured by the army and tortured. Through tears, he told us that in order to stop the horrible torture she gave up the names of family and neighbors in her community, so the whole town where this man and his family lived had to flee to Mexico to save themselves. Then, when he was 13 and a half, he decided to join the guerillas officially. He talked about the education he got there, learning to read and write, learning history, and gaining many skills as his job involved managing the logistics of moving food, weapons and the people of the guerilla movement throughout the forest. For him, not only was he doing something he felt would help his people and his country, but he considered his experience with the guerillas like going to the university. What he learned helped him get a better job than he would have without that education.

I felt so honored to hear these stories directly from the individuals who experienced them. And telling these stories was hard for all of these people. So it is important that I remember the stories and the people, and that I work to share these stories and my experiences in Guatemala with others.

Today, I want to both help the Guatemalan people and visit again those who so openly shared their homes, their culture, and their stories with us.

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This trip has made me realize how privileged I am. At home, I can walk to the water faucet and not have to think about the quality of what will come out of it. I won't have to think at all. I can go to the sink and drink it. While in Guatemala I had to constantly wonder about the quality of the water. I needed to question it whenever I needed a drink or to brush my teeth. I even needed to wonder when we were playing a 'bobbing for apples' kind of game if it was "agua purificada." Maybe it was not purified and then it was possibly filled with germs, bacteria and parasites that could make me really sick. This has made me appreciate that I am living a relatively comfortable life. I am not super well off, in the American context. But when seen through eyes that

have seen Guatemala, the story is different. I have a lot of wealth that I don't appreciate. We have a private water well! We have a car to get to school and it runs on unleaded gas! I can actually go to school! I don't have to drop out of school and travel illegally and dangerously to a foreign country to work to support my family! I have the privilege to go to a foreign country on an educational trip. I am attending a private school where I have opportunities to awaken to realities like this. Now I appreciate all these realities a lot better.

On the Guatemala trip I was able to make connections and communicate with people even with my broken Spanish. This has given me a reason to really apply myself to bettering my Spanish language skills. When there are real people with profound stories to hear and understand, it puts the development of language skills in a new light. It isn't just about passing the next language class quiz. It brings the language to life in a totally new way. It lends a greater purpose to the task that of really listening and communicating with people. The stories that I heard are so powerful and make the problems we face in the United States seem so small and insignificant. It was a life altering experience.

To anyone reading this paper right now, my writing will not do the trip justice. To condense three full weeks in a foreign country, full of laughter, tears, beautiful views, and wonderful people to a paper, is impossible. If there is one thing that I want you to get out of reading this, it is to take advantage of the privilege of a U.S. Passport. Please take the opportunity to go see all that is in the world, because if it is anything like my experience, it will be wonderful and eye opening.

Guatemala

Daniel Kouba, YIHS Senior

For my Senior Project at YIHS I independently wrote, directed, and produced my very first short film called "Something Evident". This film was focused on the subtle yet real acts of discrimination and micro-aggressions towards immigrants from south of the U.S. border. The whole film shows an immigrant working in a place that is foreign to him. He's always alone and the whole film has a lonely undertone to support the feeling that immigrants who leave their families go through. As he continues to work and the film builds a sort of schedule, elements of racism seep into the storytelling through small acts from people he runs into during the day. Over time, these acts become more common and intense. By the end of the film after he goes through a very intense day full of these experiences it shows the main character, Chucho Soto, laying on his back in a field full of snow as the drone circles up, creating an even deeper sense of loneliness, coldness and an overall sense of it being up to interpretation at the closing shot of the film.

After working with Chucho, who is from Mexico, for some weeks and talking with him about this project, I found it to be very revealing to be in Guatemala in March and to see what I was actually making a film about in person. Hearing the stories of people from Guatemala and what they actually go through really made me feel humble about my project that I'd been creating about people that I hadn't even met. Particularly the stories of one friend from La Escuela de la Montaña and his experience being captured by the Guatemalan government during the height of the guerrilla resistance. Another story involved a man from Chaculá whose family was split up by a captured family member and how he started fighting with the guerrillas around the age of 12 years old. These stories really put into perspective the actual struggle that the people of Guatemala went and are going through. It also made me want to learn more about the history of other Central and South American countries.

The other thing that really made me realize what this project was about was hearing the stories of how people live and what their families have sacrificed for survival.

Living in the homes of these families really made me think hard about what I was actually making a film about, and whether it was for me, or if it was intended to spread the word of some of the struggles that these people go through.

I think that in the future I want to continue sharing stories through film making not only because I love doing it, but because I can't just sit by and watch as people as strong and resilient as the people of Guatemala and other Central and South American countries are treated poorly for no reason other than ignorance or misinformation.



Natalio Vicente and Daniel Kouba, photo by Shawn Lavoie



The Guard, photo by Andi Alexander

Las Mujeres de Guatemala

by Sarah Corbin

Ibol, 5 years old.

Feeding the chickens with scraps of tamale as her mother scuffs her feet on the dirt floor, forming the perfectly shaped tortillas with her tired hands. A bowl of corn on her head, a baby on her back, three children in tow and the weight of 9,000 cuerdas of café.

Las Mujeres de Guatemala. The Women of Guatemala.

In Guatemala, we walked a lot. I mean, we walked everywhere. From waterfalls, to futbol fields, to vibrant, multicolored cemeteries and everywhere we walked we could smell the growing familiarity of corn and oil. Everywhere we walked we had a standing ovation from the sound of tortillas being formed. These tiny sculpted pancakes, round and delicious were the best I have ever tasted.

As I was eating my regular lunch of beans and eggs with my 4 ft. tall host abuela, "pat pat pat," the tortillas were being made. She whipped out at least 100 a day, I bet, and that particular afternoon, the entire kitchen was filled with smoke and at least 75 degrees, but she stood there, 4 ft. tall, patting those tortillas into little pancakes. She pulled me out of my usual seat on the dirt floor and playfully taught me how to make the sound with my hands. As I patted away she started telling me this story. She told me that she had never been to school but her mother taught her how to make tortillas, her mother's mother taught her and so on and so forth. Naturally, I was listening intently to her story. What I understood from her was that this had been such a rite of passage for her. I couldn't help but think about what it means to be a woman in Guatemala.

Being a Guatemalan woman means providing for family, putting food on the table, no matter how much smoke she inhales, no matter how much she has to sacrifice. The women of Guatemala sacrifice in this incredibly beautiful, touching way. They sacrifice their comfort, their health but never their honor or dignity.

Chaculá, un pueblo with a village of women willing to sacrifice everything for their daughters and granddaughters so that they can be educated, to teach them that they are the strength of the household, to mold them as perfectly as they did the tortillas.

The reality is almost everyone is fighting against them. Everyone is afraid of women gaining power. And they should be. The resilience of all the women that were told they weren't good enough for their entire lives was inspiring. The women who single handedly built the walls of fortitude.

"Somos sobrevivientes, somos luchadoras--We are survivors, we are fighters."



YIHS students with the women teachers of Chaculá, photo by Andi Alexander

“Nos Seguimos Viendo”

by Shawn Michael Lavoie

We will continue seeing each other, the direct translation of “nos seguimos viendo,” fumbles off the English-speaking tongue. Behind the awkwardness, the warmth and the hopefulness of the expression remains. In Chaculá this March I heard the phrase many times. I myself said it several times. In my previous four visits my slowly-developing grasp of the language hadn't yet picked it up. But this visit, as my connection to the people and place has deepened, the phrase came to symbolize accompaniment and the importance of seeing and being seen in community.

As with most things I've learned in Chaculá, I heard this phrase first from Connie. Walking to eat dinner with families of the Basico Institute teachers, Connie would frequently stop, greet, and chat with old friends who stuck their heads out windows or came running across the road. The American half of my mind would always be worrying about arriving late for dinner. But I've learned that these roadside run-ins are worth the time. Sometimes these short conversations consist mainly of pleasantries. Sometimes people share major life tragedies. From watching Connie I've seen that whatever the subject matter, however light or heavy, the most important aspect of these interactions is that they're on-going.

Nos seguimos viendo—this conversation and this friendship continues, as it's continued to this point, as it will continue into the future.

Finally by the fifth visit to Chaculá this expression has now become true for me. Right after arriving in the microbus with our group of seven students, settling them with their host families, and unpacking my things in the guest house, I took a walk around the block. I passed a teenaged girl with a big smile. She said hi, then asked if I remembered her. I did, from the last student trip two years ago. She remembered that we had led classes at the school in art, music, and dance. “¡Polka!” she recalled. Then she sang for me the song we taught them—“Queremos paz y no la guerra/ hay muchas armas en la tierra/ queremos paz queremos paz...” I joined in on the last line.

Then there is Wilmer. My first trip to Chaculá in 2009 Wilmer attended high school in Nentón and had developed a passion for painting. We took photos of his paintings and used them for the KGAP calendar fundraiser. This time Wilmer teaches at the high school, Colegio Chaculense Connie Vanderhyden, and the day we met with the high schoolers they were all proudly holding their own paintings: paintings they'd completed with their teacher, Wilmer.



That's the thing about seeing: seeing must keep up with life, which is always changing, unfurling, returning. Seeing can't fix reality, like a snapshot, but can capture change, like a time-lapse. Seeing someone in any one moment is the opportunity to see them in their wholeness, their past and their future. In the same way, KGAP's work in Chaculá can never be reduced to one program, one event, even one leader. Accompaniment spans generations and evolves with the needs and challenges of new generation.

Nos seguimos viendo is a promise to continue seeing, continue caring, continue allowing for the possibility of change.

“Nos Seguimos Viendo”,
Continued on page 7

Theater workshop at Colegio Connie Vanderhyden, photo by Andi Alexander

*“Nos Seguimos Viendo”,
Continued from page 6*

What changed for me this visit to Chaculá was a feeling of belonging. For me belonging comes when I can genuinely offer something of myself and that gift can be received. This trip gave me two opportunities to offer theater workshops, one for about 70 Basico students and one for about 15 high schoolers. I led two sessions of games and theater exercises that stretched the students, from YIHS and Chaculá, to express themselves without words, to communicate wordlessly through movement. Each time I introduced an activity, awkwardness reigned, at first. Then, after a few giggles and a few brave souls taking the lead, the group started to move together, to create together, to articulate emotions, hopes, fears with their bodies. I felt at home seeing these groups interacting, challenging each other, and giving each other license to move and be differently. Stretching the creative capacity of a group is a passion of mine and it was a great privilege to be able to do it in Chaculá. I hope I can continue to build and deepen my relationship with the wonderful, dedicated teachers at the schools: to see and be seen.

Nos seguimos viendo, of course, implies a departure. It's an expression that recognizes that you might not see people for a while, that there are ellipses in relationships, but also that there's hope in re-connecting. The group of us from YIHS had to leave on a sad Friday morning and we have been longing over the last few weeks to return and be a part of the community again. It's hard to leave a place you feel that you belong to. So we have to continue to see Chaculá from a distance. We have to do the imaginative, hopeful work of long-distance friendship.

¡Que nos sigamos viendo! May we always continue seeing each other!



making music together, in Chaculá photo by Shawn Lavoie



Ahme and friend, photo by Shawn Lavoie

KGAP receives grant from Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Wisconsin

We are very grateful to have received another grant from the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCV) of Wisconsin during their annual give-away process in April. Please see the project description that follows, sent to us by the Health Clinic Organization of Chaculá (APROSUVI). RPCV granted KGAP \$1,000 to which we will add an additional \$1,000 to cover all the expenditures requested in this proposal.

The KGAP-RPCV project proposal will provide continuing health education in 8 communities in the Nenton municipality (population 11,778), supporting the work of 18 health promoters and 32 midwives. The project will focus on first aid and prevention of disease, placing the health promoters and midwives at the center and involving the communities directly in solving local health problems. We intend to broaden the focus beyond common disease prevention to cover other areas where there is a lack of knowledge amongst community members. These areas are: family planning, sex education for young women of fertile age, prenatal care, and detection of cervical and uterine cancer and sexually transmitted diseases. In this way we will support reproductive rights of individuals and families in these Chuj communities in the municipality of Nenton.

Lack of education in these areas means that many women from the communities do not access health services even though they suffer from ailments particular to women. An additional problem is that many men don't give their wives the opportunity to seek out health services.

This project will be carried out with cultural sensitivity and full respect for community leaders. As health promoters and midwives, we will provide culturally appropriate education in the local native language.

We thank the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Wisconsin for their consistent collaboration with KGAP over the years!

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THANK YOU!

Lydia Noble and Susan Nesbot doing their morning yoga at Chaculá, photo by Andi Alexander

KICKAPOO/GUATEMALA ACCOMPANIMENT PROJECT (KGAP)

KGAP is a project of the Kickapoo Cultural Exchange, Gays Mills, WI, a 501c3 nonprofit organization registered in the state of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Contributions are tax deductible. In addition, KGAP is affiliated with the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) a national non-profit organization that supports many projects and efforts in Guatemala. **Find out more about KGAP at the website, www.kgap.org**

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