KGAP newsletter

Summer Greetings from KGAP Coordinator

by Connie Vanderhyden, KGAP Coordinator

I hope you all are doing well, enjoying this lovely time of year with friends and family. Thank you for taking time to read this KGAP newsletter, including updates, photos, and reflections from our Guatemala journey a few months ago.

Trip to Guatemala

In late February–early March, I had the privilege of co-leading the biennial 3-week Youth Initiative High School student trip with YIHS teacher, Shawn Lavoie. This was the 13th YIHS Guatemala journey since I began to organize and lead students in 2001. Shawn has been co-leading or leading these trips since 2009. Together we have developed a strong program and schedule for our journeys and enjoy the benefits of visiting the same 3 places on almost every trip – San Lucas Toliman Mission on Lake Atitlán, La Escuela de la Montaña language school near Quetzaltenango, and Nueva Esperanza-Chaculá, Nentón, Huehuetenango! This year we had the pleasure of accompanying the following YIHS juniors and seniors: Pelle Arnold, Grace Anderson, Nanuka Shirmer, Greta Lenarz, Frances Levin, Cassidy Ramsey, and Kyle Sleep. Grace Anderson's parents, Lisa and Fred, also joined us for a good portion of our journey.

The trip to Guatemala includes preparation prior to our travels - language study, readings and discussions on history/politics/economics/culture. This continues throughout the journey with many opportunities to hear the Guatemalan perspective. At the San Lucas Tolimán Mission, we participate in service work in a community and region that has benefitted from international solidarity for 60 years. At the Mountain School, students study Spanish with excellent teachers who have chosen to teach in a rural location, offering a unique experience for the students. Their tuition goes toward scholarships for local children and payment to the señoras who provide their daily meals. KGAP offers the students the perspective of a 32-year community-to-community relationship that began when Guatemalan refugees requested international accompaniment on the return to Guatemala and thereafter in their communities. In Chaculá students live with families and participate in school and community activities with the middle school students. In all three locations, we witness and experience what solidarity looks like in collaboration with these amazing communities. Shawn has written a lovely newsletter article, capturing an important aspect of our journey. I would like to add that traveling with this group of young people was very inspiring and so much fun! They were completely present and engaged every day and they met every single activity and opportunity with enthusiasm and positivity. In all three locations we have very well-established relationships

High School Scholarship Students

Traditional Dance by Chacula 1st Graders

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and the students expanded and deepened our connections significantly. I believe that everywhere we went, our Guatemalan friends and acquaintances felt accompanied by this group of very interested, thoughtful, sincere, and joyful young adults. They shared their music, dance, good humor and curiosity all along the way. The energy was contagious and it was a total pleasure to be immersed in Guatemala with such amazing compañeros! I hope you enjoy the photographs and reflections from our journey this year.

Land Update

As always, Chaculá welcomed us with open hearts and arms! The atmosphere was calm and peaceful and the weather was beautiful. Leaders from the community continue to dialog with the neighboring community about the land and water dispute, assisted by the federal agency charged with mediating in these circumstances. The latest report regarding the negotiations is that there is still a stalemate between the two sides. Each community has submitted a proposal, and a compromise has not been reached. Even though Chaculá has legal title to this land and has offered to give up a considerable number of acres, the other community wants to occupy a much larger area, claiming historical ownership. They have continued to cut down trees, make roads, and build some buildings in the disputed area. It is very frustrating, but the Chaculenses are dedicated to a peaceful resolution and are continuing to push for a solution. It is inspiring to witness their patience in this process and their steadfast vision for future generations. In the meantime, a different water source has been developed, and everyone is grateful to have a consistent flow of water daily or every other day. KGAP is waiting to hear if the community needs help in the funding for this water project.

Connie at home with Maxima and Miriam

Education Fund

Jubinal Carrillo Funes, director of the Básico Institute in Chaculá, has written us a letter detailing how the community has chosen to distribute the 2026 KGAP Education Fund and expressing gratitude for our continuing support! During our visit to the community, we spent a lot of time with the Básico students and teachers, at the school and on excursions. Our students bonded closely with their host sisters and families, as well as many of the other students who participated with us. We also visited elementary school classes and enjoyed their enthusiasm and energy as well. All the school buildings and playground area are in good condition, and it was a pleasure to share time with everyone there.

There were two "charlas" (talks) planned for us during our time in Chaculá. Two community leaders spoke to the group about the history of Chaculá, from refugee camps, the return to Guatemala, and building the community up to the present. It was important for the group to hear about this history and the significance of international accompaniment throughout the years. KGAP was acknowledged for our relationship with the community since the very beginning. The second "charla" was a panel of women teachers who focused on women's issues in their lives, the region and the country. This presentation was very interesting, tender, and illuminating. The women expressed gratitude for our interest in their concerns and experiences. Several mentioned that it was good therapy for them to speak to such attentive and interested listeners!

Gratitude

Visiting Chaculá brings me great joy, especially when introducing new friends to the community. The sense of mutual respect and solidarity is always present. We were told about several community members who have returned from the U.S., voluntarily or through deportation and people are worried about other friends and family who are still far away. However, people also expressed concern for our well-being, given the present political situation in the U.S. As happened after 9/11/ 2001, our friends in Chaculá assure us that we will always have a place with them, should things become too difficult and/or dangerous at home.

We are humbled and honored to be able to nurture this long-term community-to-community relationship. Your support and interest in KGAP sustain this collaboration. Thank you so much for your generosity!

Connection to NISGUA

KGAP continues to be a sponsoring community with the NISGUA/Guatemala Accompaniment Project. We pay yearly dues that contribute to the necessary funding to place accompaniers In Guatemala with individuals and organizations working for environmental and human rights. This year we are sending some additional funding to help cover the monthly stipends for accompanier Kala Cielo Garrido. We look forward to hearing from Kala over the next months and will share some of her letters in the next newsletter.

In solidarity, Connie

Letter from Jubinal Carillo Funes

Dear Friends in Solidarity from KGAP and YIHS,

I am Jubinal Carrillo Fúnes, representing the educational community of Nueva Esperanza, Chaculá, and on behalf of my fellow teachers, parents, and students of our community's elementary school, we are writing to you to share the following:

Our community feels very fortunate and privileged because for the past 29 years we have been the beneficiaries of donations received from the Non-Governmental Organization Kickapoo-Guatemala Accompaniment Project (KGAP) and Youth Initiative High School (YIHS), with the aim of continuing the educational and intellectual development of our community. This year, 2026, we received KGAP donations of $51,100, donation that have helped us support students continuing their studies at the high school level outside our community, elementary and middle school students in the community, and one university student.

We also want to thank Martín, husband of our dear friend Gerina Pearson, whom we always remember for her supportive solidarity. Many of the seeds she planted in Chaculá have now borne fruit, as we currently have many professionals who are former scholarship recipients of the project she and Connie started here in Chaculá. Thank you, Martín, for continuing the fight of your beloved wife Gerina; we always carry her in our hearts.

We know that you all work tirelessly and dynamically to show solidarity with us, addressing various needs in our community, with a priority on education. We are infinitely grateful for the donated support. These donations are very important and necessary for us, as it allows many young people to continue their studies and fulfill their dreams of graduating in the fields they choose for their professional lives.

Therefore, we are very grateful to you for your tremendous support and hope to continue counting on your solidarity. Thank you to Connie and Juanito and to everyone involved in making this social initiative possible. Thank you for your visits to our community with the students who came to see us; we hope you can come to Chaculá again next year.

Sincerely: Jubinal Carrillo Funes, on behalf of my fellow teachers.

2026 KGAP Education Funding
Total: $51,100 (U.S.)

- Painting classrooms & restrooms at the Elementary school
- School supplies for 80 students at the Elementary school
- Scholarships for 19 High School students
- Scholarship for 1 University student
- Tuition for 80 students at the Elementary School
- Computer science tuition for 80 students at the Elementary School
- Administrative expenses of the Mixed Basic Education Institute
- Maintenance and technician fees for the Institute's computer lab
- Desktop computer for the Institute's computer lab
- Printer for teachers' use and the Institute's administrative needs
- School backpacks for all children & teachers at theElementary School
- Scholarships for 8 students with priority needs studying at the Institute

Additional funds requested in May, 2026, due to a large increase in the number of students attending the Básico Institute.

- Three computers
- Tuition for 14 students at the Elementary School
- Computer Science tuition for 14 students at the Elementary School
- Formica whiteboard
- 8 desks
- Full Scholarships for 2 female students at the Instituto Básico

above, students receiving KGAP supplies
below, Third Year Básico students

Guatemala Reflection *by Cassidy Ramsey, YIHS student*

My brother, Kele, always said that the Guatemala trip was his favorite trip that he got to go on in high school and that it expanded his perception of the world and of himself. He was so right. Each day presented new opportunities to learn about the history of Guatemala and its people and this showed me that these people never give up. Like two men who wanted to have a soccer field in Chacula, they had a vision and they pursued it until now there's a very nice turf soccer field and stadium. Others may want to add another floor to their house so they can open a tienda (store) on the first floor and have their home on the second. The people I met there showed me that if someone has a dream and they work towards it, they can achieve it. This showed me that anything's possible if you put your mind to it even if it seems that the world is pushing against you. I'm so grateful for Shawn and Connie for making this trip happen and having us help and learn in ways that matter, and for every one of my peers on the trip making it fun and meaningful. I will always have fond memories and good stories about this trip.

Elementary student with new backpack

Cassidy Ramsey, Pelle Arnold, Kyle Sleep

Adios, Chaculá

Grace Anderson, Nanuka Schirmer, & Greta Lenarz

Chaculá *by Kyle Sleep, YIHS student*

We only spent four and a half days in Chacula, but by the end we were a hugging, crying, bittersweet mess. Our time there was one I am sure never to forget. We were welcomed into the homes of people we had never met, cooked for, and cared for. We played soccer every evening with our host siblings and other básico students we had befriended. We danced together, sang together, rode on motorbikes and in pickup beds together, ate together, and laughed together.

A huge takeaway for me from this trip is that you don't need to be able to speak well, you don't need to understand all of the words being thrown at you in rapid fire Spanish to harbor meaningful relationships. I guess that seems pretty obvious, but it was never something I had really considered until this trip. We were shown so much generosity during our time in Chacula, from Prófe Jubenal, to the teachers, to our host families and sisters.

Thank you for all of the meals, the soccer games, and the good times.

Letter from Catarina Domingo

Teacher at the Instituto Básico de Nueva Esperanza in Chaculá, April 21, 2026

Hello, I'm Catarina—though most people know me as Cata. I'm a teacher at the Instituto Básico de Nueva Esperanza in Chaculá. This is my first year working at the school, and I'm a former student here. This is a brief summary of the visit by Connie and Juanito's (Shawn's) students, with whom we had the pleasure of spending time on March 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, 2026.

The visit to our community of Chaculá is an honor, as it provides an opportunity to share our culture, customs, traditions, and way of life. It also allows our students to interact and participate in various activities, fostering a valuable exchange of experiences.

It was interesting to hear the students' perspectives on various topics and to observe and appreciate the nature that surrounds us—which invites us to care for and protect it. It was gratifying to see friendships form despite the short time we spent together and to realize that, despite the distance between our countries, we have much in common: the struggle for a better society and a better world.

This type of experience strengthens cultural exchange, broadens participants' perspectives, and fosters respect for diversity. Likewise, stepping outside one's comfort zone contributes to personal growth and the development of adaptability and social skills.

We appreciate your visit and the time we shared, as well as your willingness to carry out this type of activity. We hope to have you with us again in the future and to continue strengthening these spaces for exchange and mutual learning.

After the Futbol Game!

Reflections on Chaculá *by Grace Anderson, YIHS student*

Driving to Chacula was like driving through the desert. We went from crisp Huehuetenango through boiling little pueblos until we finally reached a middle ground - dusty earth surrounded by green mountains under a deep blue sky. We were all really nervous.

This was the third leg of our trip, and we had all gotten used to living with each other. I was imagining not waking up to my friends, not eating breakfast with them. I was imagining feeling really lonely.

However, this was not the case. Every morning and evening our cohort congregated in Jubenal's house and talked about our days, our intentions, our meals and our feelings. Our days were filled with sun and low-commitment communication. We were going to the soccer field? Well, hope to see you there. Didn't know who was coming or when. More often than not though, we were at one cancha or another. We became fast friends with the other teenagers in Chacula and spent evenings drinking Coke and dancing together. It felt impactful I think to all of us the way that community was thoroughly and meaningfully built even through a pretty intimidating language barrier.

After a tearful goodbye, we all tried to sleep in the car on the way back to the city. There have been few moments in my life where I've felt so loved- by Shawn, Connie, Nanuka, Greta, Pelle, Frances, Kyle, Cassidy and my parents, but also Danilo, Andrés, Rhony, Dariana, Samantha, Suthely, Marilyn, Britney and many other students and teachers who held us while we were there. All of us think and reminisce about Guatemala at any given moment. It was truly life-changing in the best way.

Guatemala Again

For the moon
And the air
And the unfamiliar stars

For the geckos
And the palm trees
And the bright eyes
Of the little girl watching me
From over her father's shoulder

For the sigh of relief
I unknowingly released
As soon as I set foot on your soil,

Thank you.
It's good to be back.

Making Friends

If I am not mistaken,
I am beginning
To make some friends.
The roosters say good morning
Just as they did yesterday,
And the black birds
In the fruit tree next-door
Seem to include me
In their conversation
As they swoop and circle.
The morning dew
Gives a brief hello
As it departs
For greener pastures ,
And the tired old palms
In the driveway
Wave to me,
Another sleepy morning goer
In this strange place.

Only know,
With the roosters
And the Black birds,
The dew
In the Palms,
It isn't quite so strange
Anymore.

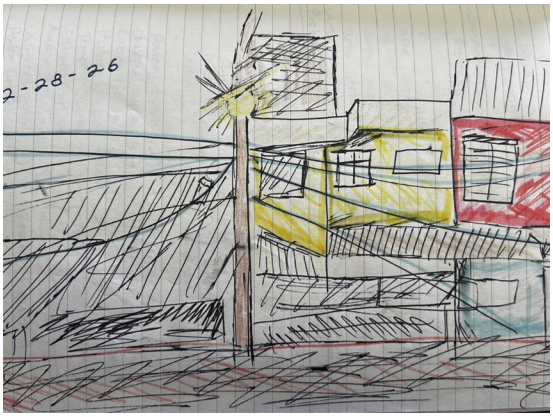
Untitled

The sky revealing itself
Behind the soft backs
Of the mountains
Is painted with colors
Of childhood Walls.
I close my eyes
And breathe deeply,
And I can almost believe
That I am home.
But I look around
And remember
That I am a guest here.
This soft earth
Beneath my feet;
This warm sun,
Familiar, yet new;
These birds,
Whose calls fall
To my ears
Like words of some foreign language;
This sky,
Whose stars play tricks,
But reveal themselves
As old friends;
They are all my hosts,
And I pay my small tribute
On this mountain side,
On this cold morning,
When everyone
And everything
Is Beautiful.

Poems by Frances Levin
YIHS student

Drawings *by Greta Lenarz, YIHS student*

Top: San Lucas Tolemán
Middle: La Escuela de la Montanya
Bottom: Kitchen in Chaculá



Frances and Danilo at the Hoyo de Cimarron

Feed the Good *by Shawn Michael Lavoie*

The Youth Initiative student group that Connie and I led this year did a masterful job of feeding the good. They were caring, asked questions, stayed positive, appreciated qualities of those around them, and were vulnerable and honest. All these actions and attitudes made this configuration of travelers more vital and powerful, gentle and loving—and made the time fly joyfully by.

It helped that there were many pre-existing, deep and comforting relationships among the 7 of them (including some cousins), but it didn't stop there. When we joked around with the workers in San Lucas, the good grew. When we shared our experience with the teachers and other students at language school, the good expanded. And when we lived with families in Chaculá and played with the Básico students and sang and danced with the whole community, the good feasted...even multiplied.

And not to say that we didn't have any troubles! We did. There was discomfort, frustration, and the forever specter of the stomach bug. Every night, we took time to name our "thorns" along with our "roses". Each and every one of us suffered something and would share "our bad" with the group—which, miraculously, felt good. And there you go again: feeding the good.

I want to underscore this quality that I saw exemplified in this group of teens because I believe we need more strategic positivity in the world: Not Pollyanna, not it's all good, not blowing sunshine when there are legitimate thunderclouds on the horizon, but actively seeking for goodness. This searcvh reveals solid ground that you can build upon. It's an act of faith that reality is not all broken, though it might seem so. It's a necessary strategy for co-existence and survivance, that you see practiced in Guatemala and in so many indigenous cultures around the globe. Giving thanks, playing together, mourning together, seeking agreement, honoring endings and beginnings—these are how we've made it this far as a species.

I wish for this fine group of young adults that they will take these skills forward in their lives and use them in the most unlikely of circumstances. When you are not really feeling the friendship, you can fake it, feed the good, and very often you become better friends. Even when you wish you were elsewhere with other people, but look, here you are: you can turn the ones you're with into loved ones—by loving them.
As Rumi once wrote, "Loving makes the beloved lovely." This is not just a romantic crooning, it is practical advice for how we can raise each other up in the harshest of circumstances, how we can cultivate goodness by choosing to focus on it, how we build our capacity for dealing with difficulty by remembering to feed the goodness we share.

Thank you all for making this a lovely trip

Feed the good,
because the good gets hungry.
The less than good,
the not so good,
the bad
is forever ravenous:
Hungry for more of our attention,
our worries,
our reactions.
So remember to feed the good,
quiet as it might be,
off in the corner of our perspective,
just sitting and taking in
the warm sun
and the blue-green
of unfamiliar mountains.

Shawn Lavoie and Singers in Chaculá

Many Thanks to our Recent Donors! January through June, 2026

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KICKAPOO/GUATEMALA ACCOMPANIMENT PROJECT (KGAP) **see kgap.org for more information.** KGAP is a project of Youth Initiative High School, a 501c3 nonprofit organization. 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. More information about NISGUA can be found at **nisgua.org**

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