



Que Sepan!



(That you all know, find out!)

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Newsletter of the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA)

Santa Elena: A Community in Transition

In January of 2005 the community began an improved housing project. Twenty-two cinder block houses with cement floors and tin roofs were to be built. In October all of these houses were finished except for the windows and doors. Certainly these improved houses will make keeping house, storing goods, and providing protection from insects immeasurably easier to achieve than in the hastily constructed houses they have been living in since 1997. Several of the families are also installing solar panels to power electric lights. Four families now have cell phones. The batteries that are used to operate the cell phones are kept charged by solar panels. In 2004 Gabriel Lopez graduated from high school. In 2005 Rogelio Choc Maquin graduated from high school and in 2006 Cristina Yat Quix and Virginia Yat Sambrano will graduate from high school. Sixteen students have requested scholarship funding that will allow them to continue their education. For the second year SEPA will fund the salary of Victoriano Choc Cu which will allow him to be the first and second grade teacher in Santa Elena. When the Oberlin Delegation visited in June of 2005 one of the improvements we found was a new corn mill and motor operating in a brand new building. The most attractive aspect of this new mill was the exhaust pipe which carried the fumes of the diesel motor outside of the building. Although this mill broke down in October the women who run the mill made arrangements to have it transported to Coban where it will be repaired, returned to the community and reinstalled.

Three former accompaniers visited Santa Elena in 2005. Lynne Purvis visited in January as she was

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Santa Elena Guatemala

By Katherine Loose

This summer I traveled to Guatemala as part of a human rights delegation. This trip was like nothing I have experienced in my life and I enjoyed it all, even the pouring rains every day and the cockroaches, spiders, and scorpions that scurried along the ground. It was tough but now I know I can sleep on the cement floor surrounded by mosquito netting or on a wooden board with no pillow.

There were nine of us on the delegation. Six from Oberlin: John Gates, Barbara Fuchsman, Mike Loose, Jan Thornton, Meredith Sarringhaus and myself, and two from LaGrange: Jen Ring and Denise Scotch. Alice Gates joined us from Oregon.

We flew into the capitol Guatemala City and from there it was about a six hour van ride on curvy roads to the dirt road that led to the village of Santa Elena. It was the rainy season so the dirt road was muddy and could not be traveled by a van. Once the van stopped we carried our baggage on the two hour walk to the village. We had been warned that this would happen so we all brought backpacks. It was the heat of the day and we trudged through mud and over hills until we started to see small houses with thatched roofs. As we came upon the main path we could see a welcome banner hanging across the road that the school children had made in honor of our visit.

In Santa Elena our delegation stayed in the old plantation house. It was the only building in the village with cement floors and a tin roof (the rest had dirt floors and roofs made of thatch). The sides were

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serving as an interpreter and guide for the Oberlin College Winter Term Delegation. Alice Gates visited in June with the Oberlin Town Delegation and Rob Motely visited in July. Community members are always excited when former companions return for a visit. Alice commented that the material progress of the community and the health and dress of the children seemed much improved to her in comparison to what it was in 1997 or 2000.

Along with the material progress which I have listed above I do want to mention a serious concern of the community which is the "Central American Free Trade Agreement." The general feeling in the community is that "free trade" is a scheme developed by the Guatemalan oligarchy and multi-national business interest which will negate any material progress the community has made, erode any political empowerment which they are beginning to realize, and ultimately they will lose the land to which they have acquired titles. In June the "The Community Committee of Development" (cocode) wrote a statement which described their concerns about "free trade" and the negative effect the agreement would have on their community. The statement also expresses their doubts about whether or not multi-national businesses will be concerned about protecting the natural environment of Guatemala. The conclusion to their document clearly shows a growing understanding of political power. I will finish this report with a quote from their statement. "Finally we urge the government to consult with the people about accepting the terms of the of this treaty because, as they know the government is chosen and elected by the people." So be it!

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open and rain would sometimes blow in during the storms that occurred each day. There was no running water so we drank bottled water and bathed in the river. The students had kindly dug a latrine for us and put a palm screen around it. Because there was no electricity we went to bed early and got up early.

Once you can get past the differences and difficulties their lives are much like ours. The young children would come around the house where we stayed to watch us. We were a spectacle to them just like they were to us. We would introduce ourselves in Spanish, and they would use Spanish to tell us their names in re-

turn. The little girls were a little bit shy than the boys and you might have to ask them more than once to hear their name. Spanish is their second language as well as ours. Their first is one of the many native Mayan languages.

Once we all got a little more comfortable around each other they started to run about and play. The children loved to play and could make a game out of anything. They loved to play soccer and if they did not have a ball they would pick an unripe orange off a tree and use that. Most of the girls would sit around and watch the boys play while whispering among themselves. I could easily tell that the older girls had the authority and none of the younger ones would play unless they did. Some were closer friends than others and would never want to go anywhere unless their best friend went with them, very similar to the friendships children have here.

Like kids here, they loved to draw pictures. Some of us had extra pages in our journals and some pens and pencils and invited them to draw. One of the young girls had crayons in her pocket. It was clear they were special to her. She shared them with others in her family and counted them to make sure she got them all back. They drew their families, their schools, and the animals and flowers around them. The pictures became prized possessions when they were bestowed as gifts to the visitors. We brought soap bubbles which they had never seen and they were fascinated. They loved to jump and catch the bubbles and some got brave enough to try and blow the bubbles themselves.

While in Santa Elena we split into groups of 2-3 and ate at a different villager's house for every meal. A member of the family would come to get us when they were ready and we would follow them to their house. This was a wonderful way to meet the people and see a little bit more of the village and how different families lived. Though nobody had much some families had more than others, be it a bed or an actual chair rather than just a wooden plank bench.

For my first meal in Santa Elena I was led to the house of Don Lucas by his three daughters Josefina, Carmalinda, and Laura. They lived fairly close to where we were staying and the three girls frequented our house quite often. By the end of the trip we had gotten to know each other quite well and every time they saw me they would exclaim, "Katarina Katarina" and run out to meet me. They would each want to take hold of my hand and walk with me.

For our meal we were led into their kitchen that consisted of four walls made out of branches, a dirt floor,

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and a thatched roof made of palm leaves. The first thing you do before sitting down to eat is wash your hands from a pitcher of water that the host pours for you. They have no sinks so it is just absorbed into the ground. Then wiping your hands on your pants or trying to let them air dry you sit down on the backless wooden bench by the table. We watched as Don Lucas' wife flipped the tortillas over the open fire. It was smoldering hot in the kitchen and the smoke made my eyes water.

There were two tiny kittens that provided entertainment for us while we waited for our food. They were fearless and walked underneath our feet. You could have stepped on them if you were not careful. I later discovered that animals in the kitchen were not uncommon and you could find dogs, ducks, and chickens in addition to cats.

After a short while the food was set down in front of us; a basket of warm tortillas which you had at every meal, and a bowl of beans. They do not use silverware but did have one spoon that they gave us to share. After three weeks of eating beans and tortillas I do have to admit I got a little bit sick of them but the people were so kind you ate whatever was put in front of you. The family continues to cook or they sit and watch you eat but they never eat with you. Once we finished we stood up and prepared to leave thanking our hostess, saying "bantiosh", which means thank you in the Mayan language of Q'eqchi.

On our last night in Santa Elena the town threw us a goodbye dance. The students brought in a car battery to power a couple lights and a boom box; however the main attraction was the two Marimbas. A Marimba is a big wooden instrument a little similar to a xylophone, and is played by two or three men. It made a wonderful whimsical sound that varied with each different piece of wood hit with the cloth mallet. People danced, from the small children bopping up and down to the grandmothers' flowing movements with much practiced grace. The music and dancing lasted for hours under the protection of the roof while rain thundered outside. After a while it started to wind down as the children and women started to walk home, however the men lingered around a while longer talking and having a good time.

Although the trip was fun and exciting we had a little bit of work to do while we were in Guatemala. The group SEPA, which stands for Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment, sponsored the trip and works with the people of the village. Over the years,

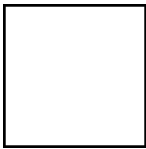
the work has taken many forms, depending on what was most important to the people of Santa Elena. In the past SEPA has helped them get deeds to their land, and helped them purchase a Molino (corn grinder) to more easily grind the corn that each family uses to make more than 50 tortillas a day.

Education is very important to the people of Santa Elena and SEPA has helped them educate their children. The village has a school but only up until 6th grade. After that the children who want to continue their education must find their own way. In the last few years SEPA has helped fund the salary and supplies for a teacher for the primary school and scholarships for students to attend school past the sixth grade. We met with the students for whom SEPA provides scholarships. Our group talked with the students and like any process there are problems. It really touched me how hard the students worked to be able to attend school. Like many other things we take our education for granted. They really have to work to get an education and they have such a strong desire and dedication to learn. Many of the students want to give back to their community by becoming lawyers, mechanics, and even teachers.

This is only a small part of what we did in the three weeks we were there. After visiting Santa Elena we traveled to other places in Guatemala and had many meetings to attend, from a meeting with the U.S. embassy to a meeting with an orphanage. However

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some of the most important were those concerning the school children.

The members of SEPA continue to raise money to help with the projects that the people of Santa Elena decide are most important. I am sure that one of these projects will continue to be the education of their children. At the Oberlin farmers' market on Saturdays, SEPA sells quilts made by Judy Riggle, breads, and other goods. SEPA also sells textiles hand-made by the women of Guatemala. SEPA buys them at a fair price and the proceeds go to help support the people of Santa Elena.

The members of SEPA hope to send human rights delegations to Guatemala and Santa Elena once or twice a year. If you get a chance, join them. If you want to contribute to or find out more about SEPA contact John Gates (jfgates@oberlin.net, 774-5484) or Barbara Fuchsman (bafuchsman@oberlin.net, 774-1804).



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