

# iQue Sepan!

(That you all know, find out!)

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Newsletter of the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA)



## “Winter Term” in Guatemala: The January Delegation

By John Gates

Oberlin College provides students an opportunity to participate in “Winter Term” which allows students to take part in independent research during the



Oberlin College sophomore Becky Cassler spends time with Maria Maquin Xol, a child in Santa Elena.

month of January. Since 1997 SEPA has taken students to Guatemala six times. The goals are to introduce to the students the history of the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), the effects of the war on the country and especially on the Mayan population, the role the United States played in the war, some of the major provisions of the peace treaty that ended the civil war, and how the peace treaty is being implemented. In addition, the students are given the opportunity to study Spanish five hours a day with a tutor for five days or if the student is fluent in Spanish s/he can study Quiche, a major Mayan language that is used in Guatemala. Finally, with a visit to two Mayan communities of

Please see “*Winter Term*” on page 2

## Friends and Family Letter from our Accompanier Dylan Ramshaw

*SEPA sponsors the work of Dylan who acts as an accompanier in Guatemala for individuals and groups who are threatened.*

Guatemalan Update, March 4, 2007

Dear friends and family,

‘The Past’. In 1980, Carmen lost both her husband and brother to the violence in Guatemala. During the regime of Romeo Lucas Garcia they both were assassinated because of their participation in pro-democratic social movements. Carmen herself also participated enthusiastically in these movements by composing and performing protest music.

Carmen along with many other artists were persecuted and many were assassinated. Carmen fled to Costa Rica where she remained for 23 years organizing and mobilizing support for other Guatemalans left behind. Carmen returned to Guatemala in 2003 to be with her daughter.

This month, Carmen’s son-in-law, a Coordinator in the Program for Rights of Indigenous Peoples at CALDH (the legal center representing the witnesses in the genocide case), was kidnapped at gunpoint while arriving at his home. He was forced into the back of his pickup where he was interrogated and released soon after. Carmen now remains with her daughter’s family to provide support while they live with armed security and fear for their lives.

‘The Present’. In 1999 Alba witnessed the murder of her sister. For the next 6 years she moved to several locations within Guatemala, but was relentlessly pursued by the perpetrators of her sister’s murder. With few options she was forced to return to be with her family knowing that this could put them in danger. Last year her nightmares

Please see “*Letter*” on page 3

*“Winter Term”* from page 1

returned refugees the students can experience briefly life as a Mayan camposino or camposina.

In preparation for this year’s “Winter Term” seventeen students were interviewed. The goal was to select students who wanted to learn about people of a different social class, ethnic origin, or who had spiritual beliefs other than their own. Twelve students were selected. Among those chosen were two seniors, five juniors, and five sophomores. Their majors were Environmental Studies, Neuroscience, Biochemistry, Geology, Law and Society, Politics, Hispanic Studies, Third World Studies, and East Asian Studies.

As part of the project we met with five non governmental organizations that were working with human rights in Guatemala and one individual. These included: a student group from the University of San Carlos; a youth theater group; an exhumation group that attempted to locate and identify the bodies of people who were murdered during the war and then to contact living relatives so that a proper burial could be performed; a group that is seeking to recover communal lands that have been taken away by the government or private individuals; the Network In Solidarity With The People of Guatemala (NISGUA); and a person who is from one of the communities that was forced to flee to Mexico.

The student group told about their community

being attacked by the army: seventeen community members were killed, buildings, crops, and animals were destroyed. Everyone fled to the mountains. One student told about being with a group that decided to seek refuge in Mexico. The group members knew the army was looking for them so they could not light a fire or make any unnecessary noise. After several weeks they crossed into Mexico and once they felt safe they broke their self imposed silence by screaming en mass as loud as they could. Another student from the same community was in a group that was captured by the army. They were imprisoned at an army base for several months. Many people were severely tortured during this incarceration. Eventually they were permitted to return to their community, but remained under close surveillance by the army and the Civil Patrol. The exhumation group described the painstaking work of exhuming bodies in clandestine mass graves, identifying the bodies and then locating existing family members so the victims could receive a proper burial. NISGUA talked about the work of providing international accompaniment to human rights organizations and labor unions as a way of deterring intimidation, torture, and assassinations. CONIC, a grassroots organization, described how they were working to recover lost communal lands that had been stolen. The youth theater group talked about the importance of teaching children and young adults whose lives have been scarred by violence, both systemic and random, strategies for discovering and expressing personal feelings.

Finally we talked with a young man who was from a community attacked by the army, its residents forced to flee to Mexico and live there as refugees for 12 years. Upon his return he was determined to finish high school and continue on to the university. With the help of scholarships from a church in the United States he realized his goal. Now he has returned to the same area from which his family fled during the period known as the “scorched earth” campaign to work to build a democratic society that is based on the rule of law.

**SEPA Bed and Breakfast**

Please be a host if you live in Oberlin or a B&B guest while visiting Oberlin. We especially are in need of hosts over the Memorial Day weekend as there will be many visitors in town for graduation. All monies support Guatemalan indigenous communities. Contact Judy Kruger at [sepabandb@yahoo.com](mailto:sepabandb@yahoo.com) or 440-775-2330.

Include SEPA B&B in the subject of emails.

## Delivery of School Supplies

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School supplies that had been collected for the children of Guatemala were delivered to two primary schools. Supplies included children's books, chalk, colored pencils, drawing paper, scissors, and other basic items that are in short supply.

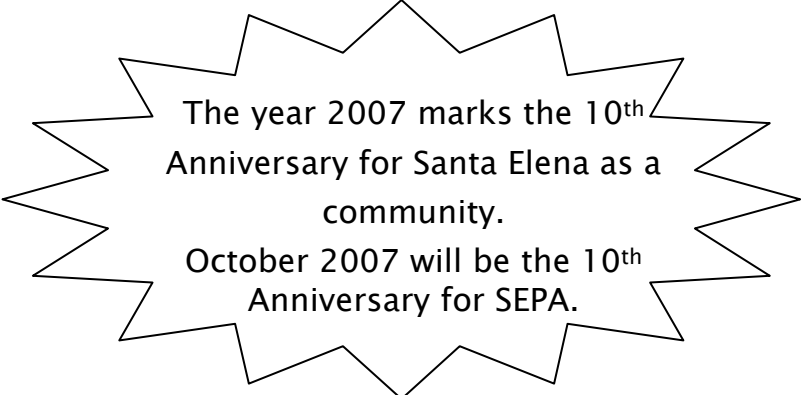
The supplies for Santa Elena were delivered by Oberlin College students who were part of the January Delegation. Afterwards, the students spent two days in the community teaching the Mayan students in grades kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade a variety of songs and games along with a basic introduction to the English language. Acquiring some knowledge of English is important to these students because at the end of their third year of "Basico", which is the equivalent of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the U.S., the students have to pass a proficiency test in English before they can enroll in high school. Failure to pass could mean their education ends at 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The second primary school to receive supplies was a school in the town of Panajachel, which is located on the shores of Lake Atitlan, a region that was recently devastated by mud slides. Receiving the supplies was Ismael Barrillas a resident of Panajachel and a person who is often involved in fund-raising efforts to help the school system provide a more effective educational program in a system where government support is woefully inadequate.

The school supplies were collected at Elyria Catholic high School as part of a drive sponsored by the EC Foreign Language Club. Over \$500 worth of supplies were collected and delivered.

### Summer Delegation

SEPA will be sponsoring a summer delegation to Guatemala in either July or August of 2007 that will consist of community members. If you are interested in going on the delegation please contact John Gates (jfgates@oberlin.net)



The year 2007 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for Santa Elena as a community.  
October 2007 will be the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for SEPA.

### *Letter from page 1*

became reality when she and a younger sister were standing on the street and a man approached and asked for the whereabouts of Alba. The younger sister replied saying "she isn't home". The man shot and killed the sister and fled without saying a word. She now remains in Guatemala City with the help of Fundación Sobrevivientes which offers support to women that have been victims of violence and operates the only shelter for women in the country. Since 2001, thousands of young women and girls have been killed. The number of women murdered has risen from 383 in 2003, to 665 in 2005. The first available statistics for 2006 list the number at 589.

Alba has recently applied for political refugee status after two men attempted to kidnap her in the capital. The lack of will shown by the Attorney General to prosecute crimes against women and the failure to protect witnesses of these crimes, has led Alba's legal representation to claim that she deserves political refuge because of her gender.

Alba's lawyer describes the current violence in the country "as reminiscent of the past". The day before I met Alba, her brother-in-law, a prominent union leader, was assassinated. He was helping to financially support her children along with those of her two murdered sisters.

Please take action by contacting your local political representation. Insist they condemn the impunity enjoyed by the authors of thousands of murders in Guatemala, both past and present. Again, thanks to everyone for their continued support.

## Report on Accompaniment

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*Editor's Note: SEPA helps sponsor the work of Dylan Ramshaw as an accompanier in Guatemala (see Dylan's letter on page 1). The following is a brief summary of his full report which is available from [bafuchsman@oberlin.net](mailto:bafuchsman@oberlin.net).*

Dylan and his team respond to short term requests for accompaniment by organizations and individuals. According to Dylan, over the last few years threats and direct attacks have increased against Guatemalan labor unions, indigenous groups, exhumation teams, and other organizations working for justice and human rights. Accompaniers travel to visit cases on a weekly or bi-weekly basis in order to document human rights abuses, relieve tension and hopefully diminish the likelihood of future confrontations.

Recently they have been assisting the following organizations and families: ECAP, Santa Ana Huista, JA Palacios y familia, Asociacion Sobrevivientes, Finca Nueva Florencia, K'amalb'e, and COCIP.

Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Accion Psicosocial (ECAP) is a non-profit organization that develops projects of psychosocial support. The projects attempt to recuperate individuals, social groups and communities from the physiological, social, and cultural damage incurred from the political violence in Guatemala. ECAP health promoters and offices in Rabinal have been threatened and accompaniment has been requested, particularly when ECAP workers travel to Rabinal for meetings with witnesses and case supporters.

For a time, the Committee in Defense of the Natural Resources of Santa Ana Huista, Huehuetenango requested accompaniment while it held workshops in the community to present information regarding mining activity. They plan to submit a petition for a referendum.

Sobrevivientes is an organization which provides support to female victims of violence. Currently six lawyers are handling over 50 cases each.

The organizational accompaniment team has been visiting the family of Armando Palacios. Palacios is a union leader who fled Guatemala under threat.

There have been no incidents while family members have been accompanied.

Accompanier presence at the Finca Nueva Florencia has been consistent since July. Every two weeks accompaniers visit the group and stay for two nights. Their presence has been effective as there is no longer such intense intimidation or nightly gun shots outside of the peoples' homes.

K'amalb'e is an organization that carries out exhumations of those killed in the civil war and inhumations of bodies exhumed from clandestine graves. Accompaniers have been present at these exhumations and inhumations and intimidations have not occurred while they have been present.

Accompaniment of Coordinadora de Organizaciones Indigenas Campensina de Peten (COCIP) during public events has continued. There have been serious threats against the president of the organization but both personal and organizational security has improved.

Dylan in his report in part wrote: "The end of December marked the 10 year anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accords between La Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca and the State of Guatemala. Since the signing very little has changed...". SEPA hopes that accompaniment can help increase the safety of individuals and organizations in Guatemala as they pursue peace and justice.

### Oberlin Farm Market

SEPA will again be selling goods at the Oberlin Farm Market beginning on Saturday May 5<sup>th</sup> and continuing every Saturday throughout the summer. Hand made quilts, baked goods, plants, and fair trade coffee will be available.

Join us on May 5<sup>th</sup> for coffee and the Big Parade!

## Guatemalan Dinners Sponsored by SEPA

SEPA and students sponsored a Guatemalan fundraising dinner and dessert auction on February 25, 2007 that featured reports from the January Delegation. Black beans, rice, tortillas, guacamole, platanos, and yucca were served. Together the dinner and auction raised \$574 that will be used to support indigenous Mayan communities in Guatemala.

After the dinner the students from the January Delegation presented their reflections on what they learned, and how this new information might influence their thinking and actions both locally and globally. Their reflections focused on teaching English in Santa Elena to a group of students eager and quick to learn, exchanging ideas with the middle school students in Copal AA about their respective cultures, learning about the local concerns of Santa Elena and Copal AA, the lack of any government assistance in building an all weather road into their communities, the projected hydroelectric dam planned to be built up river from Copal AA, and the relative political isolation of the

two communities. Several of the students voiced a concern that they were not leaving behind something of a more concrete nature. However, the people of Santa Elena and Copal AA place an extremely high value on international groups that show solidarity by demonstrating an interest in the welfare and progress of Mayan society. What is important for the students and for SEPA to realize is that this year's "Winter Term" experience was a stepping stone in our work to build a more equitable distribution of scarce resources and those things that we may have failed to do this year we can remember to do next year.

SEPA also sponsored a typical Guatemalan dinner in December 2006 at La Casa Hispanica on the Oberlin College campus. After dinner John Gates showed slides of Guatemala and those who had visited talked about the educational system of Guatemala and other related topics.

### Recent SEPA-sponsored Projects

In August, in response to "solicitudes" (requests from Guatemalan communities), SEPA provided funds for Copal AA to purchase a telescope for use in their science classes. Money for several typewriters for their middle school was also provided because the government has decided that all students must know how to type in order to graduate.

In January SEPA provided scholarships for eight students in Santa Elena to continue their education beyond 6<sup>th</sup> grade and SEPA will continue to pay the salary of one of the two teachers in Santa Elena that have responsibility for 60 students in grades k-6<sup>th</sup>.

SEPA also provided funding to Accion Cultural Guatemalteca (ACG) to help support their youth school scholarship program. ACG is a Guatemalan organization that promotes indigenous Mayan culture.



SEPA volunteers sold goods at the Oberlin United Nations dinner in October and the World Market in December.

## SEPA - THE SANTA ELENA PROJECT OF ACCOMPANIMENT

**I would like to help continue SEPA's good work by contributing: \$ \_\_\_\_\_**  
Donations are always appreciated. There is no amount too large or too small.

If you make a contribution, please return this coupon with your contribution to help with our record keeping. For your contribution to be tax-deductible, make checks out to the Peace Community Church of Oberlin (our fiscal agent). Be sure to put SEPA on the lower left of the check. Send contributions to SEPA's treasurer William Fuchsman, 192 Forest St., Oberlin, OH 44074.

