



Que Sepan!



(That you all know, find out!)

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Newsletter of the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA)

SEPA Delegation to Guatemala

In January 2006 SEPA sponsored a delegation of ten Oberlin students to Guatemala. The group was led by John Gates. Anne Getzin (Oberlin class of 2005) served as the interpreter. The student delegation was composed of one senior, Martha Friedman, two juniors, Scott Melamed and David Unger, four sophomores, Kathryn Dirks, Maura Dwyer, Laura Gilman, and Carolyn Usanis, three freshmen, Laurel Fuson, Lauren Salazar, and Ian Santino. All of the students could speak some Spanish and three students were fluent. During the five days that our group studied Spanish in the city of Xela the three students who were fluent studied Quiche, a Mayan language. Quiche is one of twenty-two indigenous languages used in Guatemala. The delegation arrived in Guatemala on January 4 and departed on 30 for a stay of 27 days.

We visited Guatemala City, the capital of Guatemala, Panajachel, Chichicastenango, Coban, Monterrico, Antigua, and Xela, the second largest city in Guatemala. Although we had many rich and varied experiences throughout Guatemala I am going to confine this report to our experiences in the returned refugee communities of Santa Elena Veinte de Octubre and Copal AA La Esperanza.

Santa Elena is a Mayan community of forty families and about 250 individuals. They belong almost exclusively to the Q'eqchi' language and cultural group. The community is located in the northwestern part of Guatemala. A major river, the Chixoy, flows by the community. The day we arrived in Santa Elena a huge Mayan celebration and dance were scheduled to take place that night. The celebration had to do with a community house blessing. This blessing was to mark the completion of twenty improved houses that were constructed of cinder block, cement floors, tin roofs, doors, windows, and

a porch. Several Mayan priests had been asked to come from another community and perform the ceremony. After the ceremony there was to be a dance accompanied by a marimba band. Before heading off to the ceremony our group had set up our sleeping quarters in the old casa patronal. We divided up into twos and threes to eat supper with different families. When we arrived at the ceremony after supper almost everyone in Santa Elena was gathered at the house of Don Rosendo Ché, where the blessing was to take place. The ceremony lasted about four hours. Refreshments of corn atole (a sweetened drink made from corn and flavored with cinnamon) and sweet rolls were served throughout the ceremony. The Mayan Priests kept a fire going throughout the service burning copious amounts of incense and candles. Around 10:30 three of us decided to return to the casa patronal and turn in for the night. When we returned we discovered that someone had entered the casa patronal while we were at the ceremony and had gone through our backpacks. Immediately I returned to the ceremony and gathered the rest of our group together and told them what had happened and that it would be necessary for everyone to return and do an inventory of their belongings. I also told the President of the village council, Santiago Choc, what had happened. After doing a quick inventory in the dark with flashlights we found that the group was missing four cameras, a cell phone, a phone card, a passport, about forty dollars and three hundred quetzals (one quetzal equals about 13 cents). At this point we were all pretty shaken by what had happened and our earlier feelings of elation about being a part of the huge celebration was replaced with feelings of anxiety and betrayal. Santiago came to talk to us. He expressed his profound disappointment about what had happened. He told us that when it got daylight we should check our things again to make sure that we knew what was missing and then write everything down and give him the list of missing items. He said that he would go into the nearest town, Cantabal, to see if anyone from Santa Elena had been had been spending an extraordinary amount of money or had been trying to sell any of the

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missing cameras or cell phone. The next morning we wrote down all of the missing items. A large delegation came to the casa patronal to express their sympathy for what had happened. While Santiago was in Cantabal doing his investigation he also consulted with a "naturalist." He related the story of the burglary to the "naturalist" and asked for advice. It was the opinion of the "naturalist" that the burglary was done by young people from Santa Elena and that the missing items were still in the community. When Santiago returned from the town of Cantabal he held a meeting of all of the families and urged them to talk with their children to see if they knew anything about the theft. He related to the community what the "naturalist" had told him about who might be responsible for the theft and where the missing items might be found. Soon after this meeting with the parents some of the missing items began to appear. The passport was found lying in a path. Twenty dollars was found stuck in the forks of a tree branch. Then the cameras and cell phone were found. At this point two teenage boys, one fifteen and one nineteen, were identified as being responsible for the theft. A community meeting was called and the two boys were brought to the meeting. All of the missing items were laid out on a table. Twenty dollars and 300 quetzals were still missing. Santiago emphasized that now was the time to return everything. One of the boys left with an escort to return to his house and came back several minutes later with all of the quetzals that were missing. Santiago asked the community to speak as to how the two boys should be punished. Everyone in the community was extremely disappointed with the behavior of the boys. Some people were very angry with the boys and wanted the community to take them straight to jail. Other people were concerned that if the boys went to jail they would be housed with hardened criminals and this possibility might destroy any chance of changing the direction of their lives. The point was made that because of their youth there was still a possibility of saving the boys from a life of crime. This discussion lasted almost three hours. Finally it was agreed that the boys would not go to jail but would serve twenty days of hard labor in the community doing work the community needed done. The punishment was directed and supervised by the village council (COCODE).

We were impressed with how this very serious situation was handled by the community and for the return of almost all of the things that were taken. In the end the only item that was not accounted for

was twenty U.S. dollars. Since SEPA has been working with Santa Elena there have been five delegations of Oberlin students visit the community and this is the first time anything like this has ever happened. Since 1997 SEPA has worked in solidarity with Santa Elena on a number of successful projects. SEPA has provided funds for scholarships, land titles, repairing and replacing corn mills, purchasing right of way for a road, and providing human rights monitors to name some of the more important projects. Santa Elena has provided food and shelter for five delegations and a number of smaller groups and individuals. Having access to the hospitality of Santa Elena gives SEPA sponsored delegations an opportunity to learn about the difficult life of subsistence farmers in rural Guatemala, the extent to which the Guatemalan Government is helping these farmers who were promised substantial help in the peace accords of 1996, and finally to learn how U.S. Foreign Policies are helping or hindering the ability of these farmers to build a sustainable life. Thus while the actions of two people made for some very anxious feelings for both the Oberlin Delegation and the community of Santa Elena the outcome was positive. The two boys who committed the theft have an opportunity to make amends for their wrongdoing without experiencing the dangers of incarceration with hardened criminals and the Oberlin Delegation got the chance to witness a method of establishing moral behavior that involved a community discussion over the degree of right and wrong, and a consensus about what punishment should be administered and then that punishment being administered by the community.

One way that Santa Elena benefits from its association with SEPA is through the scholarship program that assists all students who want to continue their education beyond 6th grade. Since the program was initiated five years ago two students have graduated from high school and two more will graduate in October of 2006. This year SEPA provided fifteen scholarships to eight middle school students and seven high school students. Ten of the students are male and five are female. Eleven of the students attend seven different boarding schools, the closest being two hours away from Santa Elena and the farthest being two days distance.

In December of this year after planting corn and beans Santa Elena received an unusual amount of rain that flooded these two crops. Corn and beans are the two basic crops that provide food and cash for the community. This year they may have lost as much as 32 acres of corn and 3 acres of beans. They have asked for financial help to recover some of this loss.

The community is also very interested in repairing or replacing two water pumps which if were operating would

make it possible for running water to be pumped to their houses and this would eliminate having to carry water from the arroyos (creeks). The first step is to determine if the pumps are repairable. If water to the houses becomes a reality it would eliminate a huge amount of work for the women who carry all of the water.

On March 7, 06 I learned in a telephone call to Santa Elena that Teresa Cú Chub, the wife of Ernesto Choc Paau and the mother of Angel, Santiago, Victoriano, and Dionisio passed away on February 4, 06. Her death was due to stomach cancer. Doña Tera was very respected in Santa Elena for her intelligence, her organization, and her leadership. She will be missed by all. We send our most heartfelt sympathy to her family.

On our last night in Santa Elena the community planned a farewell party for our delegation that included a dance and refreshments of atole and sweet rolls. The next morning we traveled to Copal AA La Esperanza, the second refugee community that we planned to visit.

Copal AA, La Esperanza also located on the Chixoy River, is about twice as big a community as Santa Elena with 90 families and 560 individuals. Three indigenous languages (Mam, Q'eqchi', and Kanjobal) are spoken in Copal AA. Spanish is used more here than in Santa Elena. Perhaps it is because of the necessity to find a common language for the purposes of communication that has encouraged so many people in this community to become fluent in Spanish. When doing community business Spanish is the language that is used in Copal AA whereas in Santa Elena Q'eqchi' is used in conducting community business. Cooperating in one area, such as finding a common language to use, may have had beneficial effects in other areas of community life such as the ability to organize groups and projects to function in a very effective way. Certainly one of the strengths of this community is their ability to organize successfully. During our stay in Copal AA we had meetings with the Community Development Committee (COCODE), the school board, and the health committee.

The Community Development Committee denounced bitterly the weak efforts of the government to implement the provisions of the peace accords of 1996 with regard to all refugee communities in particular and toward all indigenous people in general. The committee cited three examples in Copal AA. For five years the government had promised to build an all-weather road into the community but have failed to do so. The government had promised to build a primary school but after five years it doesn't have windows, doors, or dividers between rooms. The teachers in the community are not being paid by the government. The committee went on to say that if it

were not for financial and spiritual help from the international community their progress in Copal AA would be extremely limited. They are very appreciative of the help they have received from the Jewish Sanctuary group in San Francisco, the Church of the Brethren, SEPA and many other international groups. The Health Committee is composed entirely of women. They provide for all of the health needs of Copal AA as well as those of the surrounding communities. They have all received training and they combine traditional Mayan medicine with western medicine. They receive no pay for their work. Presently there are only six women who operate the health clinic. Originally there were eleven women health promoters.

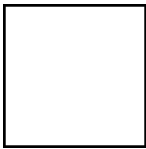
Whether or not the community can continue to operate with such a limited staff is a major concern in the community. On the first day of the new school year our group was given the opportunity to plan all of the activities for that day. This event turned out to be a very exciting experience for both groups of students. Our plan included a number of ice breakers, an English lesson in introducing yourself, a time for discussion where the students could ask one another questions about their respective countries, and an activity period where the students could choose among soccer, basketball, chess, checkers, or continued discussion.

When we left Copal AA it was 4:00 o'clock in the morning and it was pouring down rain. We had contracted with a pickup truck to meet us at a place called El Rancho, which is a 45 minute walk up a hill from the community. This is where the all weather road begins. Several people from Copal AA volunteered to help our group with their backpacks. After a three hour ride we arrived in the city of Coban excited about the possibility of a hot shower and a trip to a laundry mat.

In closing I want to say that the Oberlin Delegation was an exceptional group of people, who throughout the trip worked very hard at building group spirit and concern for the physical and spiritual welfare of each member of the delegation. I also want to say how much I valued the work and presence of Anne Getzin. At different times on the trip Anne played the role of older sister, friend, experienced delegation leader, authority figure and college advisor.

Sincerely,

John Gates



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