

GSSG news

Volume II, Number 2

April, 2005

Welcome!

Welcome to the fourth issue of *GSSG news*, an occasional publication of the *Guatemalan Student Support Group* (GSSG). If you missed our first three issues, please logon to our website, www.gssg-usa.org, or write us and we will send you printed copies.

The Guatemalan Student Support Group is a non-profit, non-denominational, tax-exempt organization incorporated in the State of North Carolina, and committed “to support poor Guatemalan youth, for the most part descendants of the ancient Maya, in the pursuit of an education to First-World standards in the United States. Job training is not our object. Neither is the immediate relief of poverty. Rather, the organization seeks to give its direct beneficiaries an opportunity to acquire the knowledge of history and world affairs, of politics and jurisprudence, of philosophy and economics, and of science, literature, and the arts to enable them to transform the conditions in which they have historically lived. In short, the organization’s objective is the creation of a cadre of knowledgeable leaders, of thinkers and writers, of professionals and entrepreneurs, in sufficient numbers to effect significant socio-economic development in Guatemala” (from GSSG’s by-laws).

In Guatemala, where 2% of the population owns most of the land, the Maya, the majority, are the poorest of the poor in Latin America, often living outside the monetized economy and plagued by illiteracy, governmental corruption, and inadequate health care. Everyone would agree that education is the way out of such misery but the schools available to the Maya generally have no textbooks, library, or science equipment, no A-V equipment, no gym or lockers, no typewriters, to say nothing of computers, no musical instruments except drums, no athletic equipment, gym, showers, or lockers, no dining hall or nurse’s station, no orchestra, no enrichment programs, like a debate society, glee club, student government, or theatre—nothing but a teacher

and a blackboard. Teachers have no offices, are poorly prepared and poorly paid.

As a result of these conditions, only about half of all indigenous parents bother to send their children to school at all. In any case, tuition, in both public and private schools, costs minimally \$3–6 a month, a significant hardship for people who live on \$350 a year, as many do, and child labor is thought to be more profitable (and perhaps as much as 50% of the labor force consists of children). About half of the youth who do go to school finish sixth grade; half of these finish middle school; half of those finish high school (which is in fact only vocational training), and almost no one goes to college. Students in middle school typically do not know simple arithmetic. The average level of academic achievement for an indigenous woman is one year of grade school. Only seventeen out of a hundred finish sixth grad.

It is obvious that if education is the way out of poverty, then the poor of Guatemala are destined to remain poor.

The objective of GSSG is to put selected, impoverished Guatemalan youth, mostly Mayan, through college in the United States. Prerequisite, of course, is graduating from high school, again, in the United States. And prerequisite to attending high school in the U.S. is English. Accordingly, GSSG’s program consists of three phases: Phase 1, learning English by immersion, while living for several months with American families; Phase 2, four years of high school; and Phase 3, college, in the United States, an unbelievable opportunity for impoverished kids.

The advantages of college are well known. In a recent article (Knight Ridder, March 22, 2005), David E. Drew observed, “learning how to learn, and critical thinking—both staples of the undergraduate experience—[are] more important than learning a particular occupation. College provides access to careers that are not open to non-college grads. . . . A college education enlarges your worldview, introduces students to culturally enriching experiences, and

forces students to review, question and solidify their core values. It essentially prepares a young person for survival and success . . . —for a leadership role.” *GSSG* is training future leaders.

Education in Guatemala and the U. S. by Gerson Arnaldo Co

[Editor’s note: The author’s mother tongue is Poq’omchi. He was one of the two first participants in *GSSG*’s program. He participated in Phase 1 during the winter of 2003-4 and is currently in Phase 2, a junior at Green Hope High School in Cary, NC.]



My name is *Gerson Arnaldo Co*; I was born in a Village called *Pasmolón* in Guatemala. I came from a poor family and attended school in my village from 1st to 6th grade. After I

finished I was sent to Tactic by my father to get more education. Almost all of my father’s generation in the village did not finish 6th grade. My father sent me to Tactic because he wanted me to get a better education than he had.

In most Guatemalan schools there is no incentive for the students to attend classes. We do not have a computer to work with in the school in my town. Many of the village teachers are not specialized in the subjects they teach. For example, my Spanish literature teacher does not know a lot about the subject.

Mayans understand that having an education or a diploma from high school can open many opportunities for jobs. They also understand that it costs a lot to attend school. In America going to school is free, but in Guatemala grades 7 through 12 cost a low of \$6 and a high of \$15 a month in Tactic. Plus we pay \$6 for the bus every month. Sometimes the cost of schooling is more than the income of the family. My father used to make \$100 a month and has to support the family. Also we have to pay for the uniforms, books, notebooks, and some more things that we need at school. The cost of schooling for

my brothers and myself takes almost half of my father's income.

Now I am attending Green Hope High School in Cary, NC. I have more education; I understand my Mayan identity better than I did before. E.g., when I got to the United States people were asking me where I come from and I said, "I am Mayan from Guatemala." And people said, "I am studying about the Maya at school and they are very interesting," and that makes me feel proud of who I am. But when people at school asked me about how much I know about the Maya, my answer would be, "Nothing."

In The United States schools are more sophisticated; they have more equipment to work with in the building, and experiments can be done in the classroom. Teachers are specialized in the subject, as in biology the teacher studied biology in college. As a result of my education in the U.S., I am better prepared to teach my people now. I would not be able to learn that much in Guatemala.

My Year in the U.S.

by Heydi Marleni Quej López

[Editor's note: the author is also Poq'omché. She was the other participant in Phase 1 in 2003-4, and is also currently in Phase 2, a freshman at Chapel Hill High School in Chapel Hill, NC.]

I am so happy that I am learning so many things, and I am happy that I have been making progress in math and English. I can read English well but spelling is hard, but I try. Also I am happy that this Friday I'm going to visit a college. I don't know which one but it is exciting.

I am so thankful that my family are very nice.

And also I am happy that I will be back soon in Guatemala. I know that I have to practice my English more. My idea is to practice with my teacher and read books in English.

Finally, I want to thank each person who is collaborating with GSSG.

Dr. Sandra Trejos

Dr. Sandra Trejos, a native of Costa Rica, is the newest member of the Board of Directors of GSSG.

Dr. Trejos is an Associate Professor of Economics at



Clarion University in Pennsylvania. Her specialty is Economic Development and International Economics. She is the Co-Chair of the International Advisory Council for International Programming and Study Abroad at Clarion University, the Advisor for the Political Economy Club, and in the fall she will be the Director of the International Business Program at Clarion.

Dr. Trejos did her undergraduate studies at the University of Costa Rica and came to United States as a U.S.A.I.D. scholar to complete her Master's Degree in Economics at Oklahoma State University. She received her Ph.D. in Economics in 2000, from Oklahoma State. Upon graduation Dr. Trejos returned to Costa Rica and taught in the Graduate Program at the University of Costa Rica while doing research at the *Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias Economicas*. When her husband received appointments in Indiana and subsequently South Dakota, Dr. Trejos followed him and received corresponding appointments. In the case of Clarion, he followed her.

Since the purpose of GSSG is socio-economic development in Guatemala, Dr. Trejos brings to the board unique qualifications to enhance the effectiveness of GSSG's program.

Economic Development and GSSG

by Sandra Trejos

Regions, countries, nations, communities, villages, and human beings all strive for happiness. Despite the difficulty of measuring happiness, a higher standard of living (with all that the phrase implies) is usually associated with the concept of happiness. In the context of economic development this means achieving sustained economic growth while decreasing and, hopefully eliminating, both poverty and income inequality.

The pursuit of happiness in a society is a strong indication of hope and with hope economies are more likely to function at their potential. The object of economic development is the human being, not the bottom line. Success and happiness go beyond the mere notion of increased income and physical investment. Economic development embracing human development implies diminished infant mortality, comprehensive literacy rates, access to safe water, schooling for all, and higher levels of health and well-being.

The Mayan population in Guatemala has experienced discrimination, poverty and income inequality, given stigmas,

misconceptions, limitations and countless bottlenecks. While there are many factors associated with this situation, both economic and political, GSSG was founded to make a difference by providing educational opportunities for those who are the least fortunate in Guatemala. Investing in the formation of human capital in the Mayan community, improving the Mayan health levels, and empowering their community will provide clear and concrete opportunities to improve their socio-economic situation.

Amartya Sen (a Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics) teaches that what matters is what a human being is or becomes or is capable of doing. It is not the provision of material things that makes a difference, but possessing the capability to use them, that enhances people's lives. What does a child do with a computer when the child does not read? How does a child maximize learning when the child lacks minimum nutrition requirements? How does a child become the community's hope when not given opportunities and freedom? Through the exploration of new systems and realities a person enables herself/himself to realize her/his potential. Exposure to these new realities provides the complementary elements needed to materialize higher productivity and progress. To prosper, human beings need motivation and skills. GSSG contributes to this goal by providing educational opportunities for the Mayan people, in the United States, opportunities not available to them in Guatemala. Graduates of GSSG's program will become the role models of future generations.

Debriefing

About a month after Nataly, Karina, Edgar, and Giovanni returned to Guatemala, their host moms and dads met at a local restaurant to reflect on their experience, to laugh at mistakes, their own and the kids', to share their sense of loss, and to give the executive director an earful. All had a rip-roaring good time. Debriefing will be a regular feature of Phase 1 from now on.

New Format for Phase 1

With two years of experience now behind us, we have concluded that three months is not sufficient to learn English. We have, therefore, extended Phase 1 to six months. Our 2005 group will arrive in early June and return to Guatemala in late November.

[Please turn to Volume III, #1.]

