

GSSG NEWS

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Welcome to the first issue of our fifth year. Like the last issue, this includes a mixture of good and not-so-good news.

The good news is that two more of our youngsters have arrived in the United States for Phase 1, learning English by immersion while living with American families. The not-so-good news is that five others were again denied their visas. More on that later. Let's begin with the good news.



Ericka

Ericka Cap is sixteen. She lives in a village called Chiallí high up in the mountains of Guatemala and where everybody speaks Poqomchi'. She is a tenth grader in a nearby town called Tactic. Ericka also speaks Spanish.

Ericka has a pleasant, happy disposition. She studies hard in school and gets good grades. Her mother works as a maid and barely makes enough to put food on the table. Ericka has several older siblings and a younger sister who is still at home. The family lives in utter destitution.



Byron

Byron Cap, also sixteen and Ericka's cousin, lives in the same village and is also in tenth grade. He and his younger brother walk two miles to school.

Byron is a serious lad, quiet and unpretentious. He works tirelessly at his studies and is sensitive to feelings, his own & others.

Ericka is living with the family of Debbie and Lee Smith. The day we brought her to them, about noon, Good-hearted Lee asked Jorge to translate and said, "Now, Ericka, I want you to understand that this is your home. Anything you want to eat, you just get it. You don't have to ask, just go to the refrigerator and get it. If you get hungry in the middle of the night, just come to the

kitchen, open the refrigerator, and take whatever you want. This is your home." Later, motherly Debbie took Ericka to her bedroom to try on some clothes.

After school the Smiths' daughter, Heidi, arrived together with cousins, relatives, friends and neighbors—all come to meet Ericka. Soon the kids were playing a variety of games. At some point, Lee asked her if she could ride a bike; she said no. Immediately he produced a bike, set her on it, and proceeded to push her around the yard while he held the bike up. In ten minutes she was riding like a champ.



Not long after that, Ericka and some of the other girls found the swings. Later that day, she wrote it all down in her diary.



For Byron's story, please turn the page.



Grimball Jewelers in Chapel Hill have been extraordinarily supportive of GSSG and its young clients. We will be grateful to you if, when you next have occasion to purchase gifts, you consider their place of business, located in Village Plaza at Elliott Rd. and E. Franklin St.



Byron is living with Julie and Greg Phillips and their two boys, Josué and Matthew. We had actually arrived to a warm reception at the Phillips the day before we dropped off Ericka, but too late to go on to the Smiths. So Ericka, Byron, Jorge, and John all spent the night at the Phillips.



These wonderful folks live in an idyllic setting in rural West Virginia, complete with a mountain creek running through their property, and by morning Byron was already at a table outside, studying.



If you are a regular reader of this newsletter, you will remember Alba and Hamilton, who were featured in the March, 2006, issue of this publication.



Last year Alba lived for six months with Kelli and Rick Conlow and their family in Stillwater, MN, to learn English by immersion. In August she matriculated at Hill-Murray High School in St. Paul as a freshman. She will likely finish the year on the honor roll. Alba continues to live in the loving embrace of the Conlow family.

Hamilton lived for six months with Michelle and Tom Bonds and their family in Raleigh, NC. In August Chuck and Joan Thomas of Zanesville, OH, generously welcomed him into their home and he matriculated at Bp. Rosecrans H. S. as a sophomore. He is on the honor roll. The Thomases have become very attached to Hamilton.

There is more good news. Again, if you have been receiving these newsletters regularly from the beginning, you will remember that in our very first year, we brought two youngsters, Heidi Quej and Arnolando Co, to the United States to learn English by immersion during their annual vacation in Guatemala, three months only, and that the next year they returned for a year of high school, Heidi as a freshman and Arnolando as junior (he is two years older than Heidi).

Last October, Arnolando graduated from high school in Guatemala. In January he returned to North Carolina to begin Phase 3 of our program, college. Since most schools in Guatemala do not meet U.S. standards, he is registered at Wake Tech Community College and is taking remedial coursework in English and math. He will transfer to a senior college in his junior year. Arnold is our first college student and we are fiercely proud of him.



That's all good news. There is also some not-so-good news. You remember, perhaps, from the October, 2006, issue of this newsletter that we had planned to bring fourteen children to the United States in 2006 for Phase 1, learning English by immersion while living with American families. In March we took our first two of the fourteen, Alba and Hamilton, to the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City for visas, which they obtained without difficulty. In June we took nine more, all of whom were turned away empty handed because, said the officer who interviewed them, those who had been in Phase 1 the preceding year (2005) had sat in on classes at local schools and "going to school on a visitor's visa is illegal." (All our kids had always come for Phase 1 on a visitor's visa; in Phases 2 and 3 they get a student visa.)

The State Department (which is charge of visas) has a list of approved activities for each of the visa types and "sitting in on classes" is not one of them, not for a visitor's visa nor any other visa type, apparently because no one has ever done it before. So we contacted the State Department and asked to have it added to the list of approved activities for visitors.

Our request was approved and on February 23 (2007), the State Department issued a "ruling" to that effect. Elated we called to make visa appointments for seven of the nine kids who had been denied visas the preceding June. We wanted all seven to be interviewed the same day, for two reasons: 1) we need all the kids on the same airplane and 2) making trips to Guatemala City is costly. So we first asked if we could make appointments for all seven on the same day, March 7, and were told yes, but we would have to make a separate phone call for each one, something we already knew. So we made the first call, for Ericka, and were told she was number 22. Since the embassy normally processes a couple of hundred a day, we were feeling good about our prospects for getting all seven on the same day. We made the second call and Byron got number 23. But when we made the third call, we were told that there would be no more appointments for the 7th. "Why?" The agent did not know. "The next available date will be the 15th." We begged, we pleaded for at least one more so that we could at least take the three kids destined for West Virginia together.

All to no avail. Could we change Ericka and Byron to the 15th? "No!" So we accepted the inevitable and made appointments for the other five for the 15th.

Arriving at the embassy on the 7th with Ericka and Byron and their parents, we learned at once why we could not get appointments for all seven that day—much of the embassy staff had been pulled from regular duties to prepare for President Bush's visit to Guatemala on March 12 and only one officer was conducting interviews (there are usually five). The officer did not know about the "ruling" but we had documentation; so Ericka and Byron got their visas without trouble.



We cooled our heels for eight days and returned to the embassy with the other five and their parents on the 15th. This time the embassy was fully staffed. Much to our surprise, our five youngsters (pictured on this page) were again turned away, this time for a different reason, "the children do not have sufficient resources of their own to ensure their return to Guatemala." What are sufficient resources? "A job, a bank account, and property."

There are fairly long-term repercussions to all of this. Children in Guatemala start school at age seven, not six (and there is no preschool). So they are already at least a year behind their American counterparts. U.S. law stipulates that to obtain a visa to go to school in the U.S. (our Phase 2), students have to be in at least ninth grade. For that reason we want to bring them for Phase 1 soon after they graduate from eighth grade in Guatemala and then put them in ninth grade here, typically at age fifteen or sixteen. But if



they are denied visas, they naturally return to school in Guatemala and are in tenth grade by the time we try again (and four have been successful on the second try). They are then a year older by the time

they advance to Phase 2. But when they go to register, the schools test them and make them take ninth grade over again. (It is quite right that they should do so; the longer kids stay in school in Guatemala, the further behind they get.) The end result is that when they finally do get into ninth grade here, they are already sixteen or seventeen.



Worse than all that, however, is the anxiety. They know that without GSSG they have no hope; without our help, they face a lifetime of abject poverty. (Ericka's host mom took her to see a dentist the day after arrival; she had thirteen cavities. In Guatemala, you live with the pain or you have the teeth pulled. What sixteen-year old girl wants to have her teeth pulled?) Not least of all, we have to tell the host parents that the child they and their children have been waiting for will not arrive after all.



We are currently lobbying the U.S. government for two modifications of visa regulations which would resolve the issue: 1) that GSSG, rather than the individuals themselves, be held responsible for the financial requirements of the visa application process and 2) that we be permitted to appeal visa denials. The argument we present is that significant benefits accrue to the United States and to U.S. citizens from our program. The first is that it enhances the prospects for U.S. commercial investment in Guatemala by producing individuals with skills in accounting, banking, management, marketing, communication, investment, research, law, and the host of other specialties required by businesses but which are now in very short supply in Guatemala. Second, that our program, by improving conditions in Guatemala, reduces the need for illegal emigration to the United States in search of employment. Third, that participants in our program become friends of people in the United States and thus counter the enmity toward the U.S. so prevalent in the Third World. And fourth, that the presence of our young clients in our communities enhances awareness among U.S. citizens of the effects of globalization.

Report from Guatemala

[Editor's note: The author of this article is Jorge A. Paque, GSSG's associate director for Guatemala.]

This past February, I was invited to be a translator for an NGO called VOSH (Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity [<http://lfaulstich.photosite.com/voshguatemala2007/>]) which had come to Guatemala on a campaign to provide eye exams and glasses free of charge to people in need. The members of the VOSH team came from the State of Washington and only two of them knew Spanish, and none knew Q'eqchi', the Mayan language widely spoken in the area in which I live. They had set up in a municipal gym. There were about twenty professionals in the group and hundreds of people were arriving to take advantage of this opportunity. I could see at once that I would need help. So I called on Pablo Cucul, Giovanni Tux, and Rubén Caal, three of our students who had already learned English, to join me as interpreters. The boys were very happy to comply.

The campaign provided glasses for more than two-hundred people every day for four days. Giovanni, Ruben, Pablo, and I



did all the translating and I was mighty glad for the boys' help, not least of all because their native language is Q'eqchi', which I do not know well. All of us were so happy to be able to help both the VOSH team and the impoverished patients, all of whom really needed us.

A few days later I ran into someone who had gotten glasses one of those days. It just happened that I had not been present when she was at the gym but she told me that the fruit of GSSG's program was evident. She related how our little Pablo had translated very quickly the instruc-



tions the doctor was giving her and she just assumed that Pablo belonged to GSSG. It made me proud of him and, of course, of the others as well.

Ruben was working at two tables near the end of the procedure, where the patients were being matched with their glasses (the organization had brought thousands of glasses with them). The team particularly appreciated his skill in handling technical details, partly on his own and mostly in Q'eqchi', and the female members especially liked his smile. He looked very tired on Saturday but very humbly received the commendation of the doctor-in-chief, who said that without his skill the campaign would not have succeeded.

Giovanni, the most socially savvy of the boys (he has been through Phase 1 and Phase 2 of GSSG's program) was teaching the American ladies how to dance to the music of the marimba band that played at the closing party, where the four of us also got a t-shirt from VOSH.



We had all a very good experience helping the poor that week but the most important for me was seeing our GSSG students serving as volunteers in such magnificent activity.

[Editor's note: The author of this article is Matthaias Bernhard, a German physician.]

I first met John Bodoh in 2000 when I worked in a research project at the University of North Carolina for five months. After returning to Germany (my home country) I finished medical school and started my specialization in paediatrics at the University of Leipzig. In the following years I spent several months as a volunteer with "German Doctors for Developing Countries" in Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Kolkata (India), where we worked in the slums.

John told me about GSSG's program and the often poor quality of medical care in rural areas and so I decided to join him on one of his trips to Guatemala in 2006.

On December 2nd, 2006, John and I flew together from Raleigh, NC, to Guatemala City—my first visit to a Central American country. Jorge Paque, GSSG's associate director in Guatemala, joined us at the airport and we drove to San Lucas Totulimán on Lake Atitlán, where we spend several days at the Catholic mission. A most beautiful scenery welcomed us: volcanoes with perfect conic peaks surrounding the blue lake, women in the colourful traditional garb, happily laughing and waving children—a picture that seemed to reflect paradise, on the first view.

However, I learned quickly about Guatemala. With a population of 13 million people the country faces devastating ethnic and economic problems that are often based on the cruel history of Central America. There exists an upper class living in luxurious villas protected by high fences and guards with machine guns. There also exists a small middle class enjoying comfortable houses, cars, and large shopping malls in the capital. But the majority of the population (perhaps 60–70%) belong to the lower class, and these people are very poor. They cannot afford to send their children (often 7 or 8 in a family) to high school and child labor is common. They also cannot afford a balanced diet or sufficient milk for the young, and malnutrition affects 49 % of the children in the poorest areas. Half of the population does not have access to running water; sanitation is primitive; and hygiene not well understood nor widely observed..

In the next two weeks we visited many houses of these poor people that sometimes could not really be called houses. We found dirt floors and tin roofs, and four, five and more members sleeping together on hard, wooden beds, with thin bedding full of holes. A small board on



the wall that hardly protected against wind, rain, and cold would hold the children's belongings: a plastic backpack, an old doll missing one arm, two or three faded shirts, a pencil or two, and an exercise book. For all of that, the friendly and curious faces of the children and parents would smile at us and welcome me, a stranger.

The mission at San Lucas Tolimán maintains a small hospital where the indigenous Dr. Tun is doing a great job as the only physician, a man with never-ending enthusiasm, patience and empathy. I joined him in the out-patient clinic and treated some patients. As I do not speak Spanish, Jorge translated for me into English. The next day a mission health-care worker took John, Jorge, and me to one of the villages an hour or two away which, like all villages, has no resident health services and it would be weeks, even



months, until another doctor would pass that way. My diagnostic tools were limited: stethoscope, urine stixes, my hands, and my common sense and medical

knowledge. We set up our improvised clinic under the canopy of a little house, as the waiting patients and onlookers watched with interest. Most of the patients were children and women. They were mainly suffering from bronchitis, pneumonia, diarrhoea, skin infections, and muscle cramps due to hard physical labor. We had brought several boxes with medicines from the hospital (e.g. cough syrup, pain killers, and common antibiotics) that I could distribute to the patients. In our Western understanding of medical treatment this was most basic medicine; however, I am sure our small resources helped most patients. There is not really any need for an X-ray and blood tests if you only want to treat (and not diagnose) pneumonia or bronchitis sufficiently.

After two days in Guatemala City, where John took a number of GSSG



students to the American Embassy, we headed north to Cobán. The youngsters GSSG is educating come from this area. It was a great experience for me to meet these young adolescents and to be able to talk in English with them (most other Guatemalan students

do not speak more than a few words of English). Their affection for John and Jorge was sometimes overwhelming. Education has been given another mean-

ing for me. Education is reading, writing, counting, but it is also communicating, bringing together different cultures, opening minds and hearts. Education changes both the student and the teacher.

One of the visits during an interview tour of possible GSSG students near Cobán remains in my mind as a sad memory. We entered one of these houses as described above. It was raining and the room where



John and Jorge started the interview with the boy was very clammy. Divided by a curtain was a second room that measured about 1.5 x 3 meters. A middle-aged man (perhaps a relative) was lying motionless on the bed. We were told that he was dying. The mother of the student continued to tell us that she herself expected to live on only a few more years. She has a congenital heart disease

that was never diagnosed or treated in childhood. A year ago she started to suffer from faints due to beginning heart failure and felt very weak. With medication she experienced only a short improvement. The necessary and life saving heart surgery is not possible due to the lack of money and medical facilities. The student will probably remain the only member of his family in a few years.

The two weeks in Guatemala passed very quickly. So many people I left behind; so many memories, pictures and experiences I brought back home.

I am deeply impressed with the work of GSSG and I would like to thank all participants and sponsors of this project! For myself I am sure to go back.