

GSSG news

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Christmas, 2011

The first issue of this newsletter was dated “February 2004” and the opening paragraph read, “Welcome to the first issue of *GSSG news*, an occasional publication of the *Guatemalan Student Support Group*, a new non-denominational, tax-exempt charity incorporated in the State of North Carolina. Enjoy!” Some interesting things have occurred along the way, like crossing the footbridge at Chitomax or playing chicken in Baja Verapaz.



But my friend, Jorge Paque, and I rode our white horse all over Guatemala in search of El Dorado and found it in the villages and towns where once the ancient Maya sacrificed their enemy to the corn god and ultimately fell prey to the depredations of Pedro de Alvarado and his rag-tag army of Spanish jail birds and adventurers. Our treasure, of course, we found in the huts and hovels where the priceless jewels of our quest were maturing into young adulthood: Heidi, Pablo, Rossy, Walter, and many others. Some of them could not make the grade but today we



have twenty-seven youngsters in various grades and twelve of them are seniors in high school.

OUR TWELVE SENIORS



SANDRA



GRISELDA



HEIDI



NANCY



PABLO



PEDRO



JUDITH



ROSSY



ANA



LILY



MARLY



ABNER

Each of them is now applying for college. As part of the application process, they have to write an essay. Many of them will do so during the Christmas break, but some have already completed the process. The following two pages contain the essays of two of the girls who have already sent in their applications.

Girl X: I grew up in a poor family. We were what might be called *dirt poor*. To me, it meant we survived by the land, by getting our hands dirty. We did not have a car; we got one new outfit at the beginning of the school year; and we had an outside toilet long after our neighbors had indoor plumbing. Poverty has been my constant companion and I have ached all of my life seeing my family never having enough. Poverty bites. Being poor means more than not having money; it means having people question your intelligence, your ambition and your morality. Being poor means you die sooner and your last years are not good.

My mom could not look after us since I was six years old. She had to work by selling tortillas in the streets and cleaning other people's houses to help my step-father pay our bills. My biological father died of leukemia when I was two years old. He was only twenty-two when he died. My mother became a widow on her nineteenth birthday with three children to support. In desperate circumstances she remarried and had five more children. My step-father was a hard worker but we still lived in poverty. Although I have no memory of my biological father, I have always yearned for his love.

I am the oldest daughter and my mom always tried to teach me good values and show me how to be responsible for myself and for my siblings. Since I was seven years old, I would start by getting up at four in the morning from a dirt and illness-stained mattress. We needed to start making tortillas and oatmeal at 4:00 a.m. so my mom would have them ready to sell in the streets at 6:00 a.m. I had to be ready to feed my step-father and siblings so they could go to school. In second grade, I had so many tardies and absences because I was helping my mom that I almost did not pass. During third grade I almost dropped out of school because I had anemia and hepatitis and my parents did not have money to take me to the doctor. I lived with endless pain and weakness for more than a year. During those difficult years, I learned that good things come from bad things. Struggling in life helped me become mentally stronger. I not only became responsible for myself, but for my siblings as well, and now that apprenticeship in responsibility is calling me to help my country out of poverty.

Growing up in a poor household is a secret you try to keep from everyone. I thought that if people knew I was poor, they would look down on me or laugh at me. I remember having only second-hand clothes. I used to be teased because I had to wear my old blouses to school. Wearing someone else's thrown-away clothes really lowers your self-confidence; in the end you think you are just worthless.

On cold nights, my family and I used to stay up all night to watch the fire because one spark on the newspaper covering the wall of our home would set the house on fire. Poverty means insects in your food, in your nose, in your eyes, and crawling over you when you sleep. Poverty is hoping it never rains because our clothes will not dry. Poverty is seeing your children forever with runny noses. Poverty is cooking without food and cleaning without soap.

Poverty causes many Guatemalan women into arranged marriages. That was the case with my mother. In our Guatemalan culture, parents sell their daughters. Most women like my mother, have no choice in the matter.

Since I have been in the United States for four years, the word *education* has taken on more meaning. I am doing my best to overcome poverty and build a better future for myself and for the future generations. The poor can dream, dream of a time when there will be success, a dream of a time when asking for help will not eat away the last bit of pride. Things can change when there is hope.

I have come out of my despair to describe my story. I did not come from another place or another time; others like me are all around. For me, education plays a big part to overcome poverty. That is why I am so thankful and lucky to be part of the Guatemalan Student Support Group (GSSG). GSSG has given me the huge opportunity to study high school in the United States and teach me values which I really treasure for the rest of my life. GSSG provides me hope that lights my way on the path to a brighter future. GSSG benefactors and supporters and especially my wonderful host parents are people I consider as part of my family. They are modern-day angels who have been molding me to become a productive individual by educating me so that I could share my ideas to develop a better country. I deeply believe, if we are educated, then we can break barriers in life. With a college education, I will be able to do things that can bring my country out of poverty. I just hope that there will be more programs like GSSG in the near future to eliminate illiteracy. Being educated is the best weapon to fight against poverty with the help of God.

Girl Y: I was born an indigenous girl in a small town of Guatemala. I grew up in a family with a bad background and I lived everyday with fear. I grew up in a very violent home where my father often beat my mother, until one day she ran away. My sister and I were left behind with my father for four years. During that time he would leave us with my stepmother who would torture us most of the time. There was no one to help us!

One day I got the opportunity to escape from all the torture that I was experiencing. I located my mother and stayed with her, but nothing was the same because she had a new husband. The torture and the fear only got worse because my stepfather began to abuse me sexually, as my father had never done. I was just ten years old. As before, there was no one to help me. My mother would look away, not seeing what was happening.

Guatemala is a small country, where many people live with the fear of being killed or robbed. The government is corrupt, causing the country to suffer. There is inadequate medical and dental care available. The education system is so poor that only the people of the upper class can have the opportunity to get a good education. I went to a large public school, where the teaching was poor. I did not read books. I had no familiarity with painting or literature. During class I learned primarily from text books but the information that was given was not understandable to me, and I did not know what education was really about.

In March of 2008, after school was out, the principal called a few of us to her office. I was so afraid that I had done something wrong. I could never imagine that I was to be one of the students selected to take a test which could lead to the opportunity for a high-school education in the United States. My heart began to pound with excitement. I was certain that my parents would never let me go.

I went home and immediately started to help my mother prepare lunch on the open fire. As I made lunch, I thought about my future. The only future for me in Guatemala would be to get married very young. My thoughts were spinning around in my head. First I knew that I would need to explain to my parents how much the possibility to go to school in the United States meant to me. My mother was sweating and tired, washing clothes by hand. I started to talk to her and explain my desire. When I saw her reaction, I felt that the whole world was going to fall down on me. Her only answer was, "NO! You are not going anywhere." My heart broke into billions of pieces because my mother would not understand, perhaps could not understand. In her eyes, girls do not leave home, leave the country. She could only see the reality of what life was like for her, have babies and take care of a husband.

I could not sleep that night. I thought about the opportunity for change, to do something different in my life, and I promised myself that I would not let this opportunity go. The next day I made the decision to take the test without the permission of my parents. I would have to be strong, trust myself to follow my instinct.

I know that education is a very important gift that has been given to me. Without my wonderful host parents and GSSG, I know that my role in life would just be getting married and having a family. But now I can be instrumental in making changes in my country, by inspiring others, especially women, to see and believe that their life can be changed for the better too.

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Our twelve seniors are now applying for college. We anticipate that all of them will receive some kind of scholarship but we estimate that, on average, an additional \$25,000 apiece will be required. If you would like cover that amount for one student for one year, please contact John Bodoh, the executive director (919-968-9052, 919-259-9059, gssg.usa@gmail.com). If you cannot do \$25,000 but can do \$1000, \$5000 or \$10,000, we will combine your contribution with those of others to pay a senior's expenses. Contributions of any amount will be gratefully received and will help all our students. (We have no salaried employees and pay no rent.) You can send cash, write a check, or pay with your credit/debit card or PayPal. Make checks payable to GSSG. A form and self-addressed envelope are enclosed for your convenience. All contributions are tax deductible.

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IF YOU LIVE IN NORTH CAROLINA, MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR FEBRUARY 17! OUR TEN STUDENTS IN THE TRIANGLE WILL PERFORM A MAYAN FOLKLORE SKIT AT OUR ANNUAL FUND-RAISING BANQUET. DETAILS WILL FOLLOW IN JANUARY.