



Fall Update –October 2009–

Guatemala Friends Scholarship/Loan Program (Progresia)

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Progresia Community Service Program, by Saskia Schuitemaker

Since February 2009 I have been working as a volunteer with Progresia to help develop the community service program. All students are required to do a Community Service Project with an organization in their own village and in an activity that is related to their career that will benefit their community. This is in line with Progresia's mission statement:

"To provide access to in-country educational and community development opportunities in order to bring choice into the lives of poor Guatemalans and enable them to participate fully in their country's growth and development." During this time my objective has been to work with the staff at Progresia to help build student leadership and community development project management skills.



One of the discussion groups during our conference working on the description of their "ideal community"

The program was introduced at the student conference in April, with presentations on the guidelines and policies and examples of projects done by students in the past. Students were involved in a workshop "Visioning Your Community". This generated much enthusiasm for the program.

Since then, the staff and I have worked as a team, coaching and mentoring students one on one. During our student visits to Coban and Xela I gave

mini workshops and group coaching. For the past month students' proposals and plans have come in to Progresia for approval. The staff has worked really well as a team to provide constructive and thorough feedback to each student on his or her proposal and on to approving each student's final plan. This takes a great deal of skill and sensitivity, because of the different educational levels of our students. I want to say a big thank you to all the support I have received from the staff, in upgrading and correcting my Spanish. I have learned a lot!



Picture of all (or almost all) of our more than 100 participants in our annual conference.

Through contact with our students, I have found that almost all have welcomed the opportunity to "give back" by contributing to their community and are highly motivated to fit in this additional requirement even though they are busy with their studies. They convey their thanks, expressing that they would not be studying if it were not for Progresia. They feel privileged to have the skills and support to be able to do something for their communities.

I have been very inspired and moved by the variety of projects the students are doing. Here is a sample of them:

Health: 1) Prevention of illness through education of young people and children. 2) First aid projects: Some are working with the public health system to install first aid stations, accessible to their isolated communities and are doing first aid training with key people.

Environmental: 1) Rubbish collection and recycling to create useful items or structures, such as river

bank support. 2) Developing a manual for teachers on environmental education

Social: 1) Working with communities where the remains of relatives are being exhumed from mass graves from the years of the violence. 2) Working with youth on legal issues

Economic: 1) Strengthening production of a women's weaving group 2) Small business development with women

Horticultural / Reforestation: 1) Reforestation projects with local authorities. 2) Planting herbs for income. 3) Community vegetable growing.

Citizenship Education: 1) Women's workshops on rights, democracy, participation and gender equity. 2) Training the local development authorities on their legal obligations and on participatory processes for community development.

Education: 1) Literacy classes for adults
Extra classes for children who are not achieving



Saskia (on the left) during a mini workshop with a group of students in Cobán (north of Guatemala); July 2009.

We are at present developing our database so that we can manage all of the information we need relating to the Community Service Program. This will allow us to report on the types of projects our students are undertaking, and what they achieve. We will be giving you a thorough report on the first year of the Community Service Program in our spring edition of 2010. In February, after all the final project reports are presented to us, we will

evaluate the program as a whole and make improvements.

As I will be staying on in Guatemala, I intend to extend my involvement with Progesa so that I can complete the evaluation and put forward recommendations. I am convinced that the Community Service Program gives added value to donors for their contributions. It not only benefits students but their rural village communities where there is much need.

A Mid-year Overview of the Situation in Guatemala, by Loren Lacelle

Upon my return in May, I began to explore the changes that had, or had not, taken place in my absence. This year I came back to a newly elected government and an economy showing the effects of the world-wide recession. The new government is of a left-of-center party for the first time since 1954, although it is more of the center than the left. Nevertheless, it had had a rocky beginning, with very low public approval ratings. The president has greater support in rural areas than in urban. His wife has considerable influence in the government, which is highly unusual, and she has received much criticism. Several scandals arose early on, which, as the summer continued, have tended to fade from public attention. As the economic situation, high crime rate, and severe drought conditions during the rainy season have raised greater concerns.

Another factor was the coup d'état in neighboring Honduras, the first one in Latin America since the one here in 1992. The drama surrounding the unanimous condemnation of the coup by the Organization of American States and the European Union has received constant attention all over Latin America. Honduras is being called the "North Korea of Latin America." I see this reaction as very positive, because, until recently, political instability has been all too common in Latin America.

While all this is going on the wider world, Progesa is chugging along quite smoothly. The students' first semester accomplishments were very encouraging. Obviously the selection process is working very well. As the requirement of community service projects

are being evaluated, we are seeing how the students are able to use their newly acquired skills to effect some small improvements in their communities.

Meet two of our current students

by Miguel Costop



Maria Sales Morales is 19 years old and comes from a village in the far western part of the country near the Mexican border. She is the fourth of ten children in a family that survives on less than \$80 a

month. Because of the family's poverty, education for the children has had to take second place to feeding the family. Nevertheless and with much effort Maria was able to finish elementary school in her village.

Continuing in school was almost impossible, but thanks to the help she received in a cooperative school in another town, she was able to complete middle school. The philosophy of this school is to train community leaders and the students receive an education based on the Mayan concept of community service. This is evident in Maria's case, in that, in spite of the obstacles, she is one of the most determined students we have seen and with outstanding leadership potential. But her story does not end here. Upon finishing middle school, her father asked her to not to continue in school so she could help support the family. Maria thought it was all over, but a group of teachers who visited Progreso last year, told her about us and she applied to us. Of course we accepted her and now she is studying the first year of bilingual education.

In May and June of this year she told us that the situation with her father had worsened and he was asking her to leave school to help support the family. He threatened her by saying if she did not quit studying and start supporting the family he would not do anything for her. Although this made her very sad, she told us that she knew that with our help she was able to say to her father; "I have made my decision and I am staying in school, even if that means by myself alone." Since then, things have

been better between them, at least in that they are no longer fighting. We believe that all she has suffered will help her to be a fine teacher and a leader in her community.

An Experience on Foot, by Meme Romero

Astrid Graciela García is another of our students from Cobán in the northern part of Guatemala and is studying to become a registered nurse in the nursing school there. I was on foot looking for



her address, so it took longer than expected to find it. At her home I found only her younger, teenage sister, since the mother was out finding firewood and Astrid was at the nursing school. The sister was very kind and friendly and gave detailed information about the family. The father had left to live with another woman, so the mother and three daughters were left to fend for themselves. Only Astrid has continued beyond middle school. The mother cooks on weekends in a small café and during the week she washes clothes for various families. Her total income is about \$70 per month. The house has electricity but no plumbing nor running water, so they rely on rainwater and a small well.

It was clear that the family situation got much worse after the father left and has not given much support. Their hope at present is that when Astrid becomes an RN, she will be able to provide more support for her sisters.



Astrid's sister in front of their one room house.

Our 2010 Guatemala Tour

As we do every year, we are happy to announce our next tour, planned for March 6 to 14, 2010. Again this will be in the scenic and historical central highlands and give an opportunity to experience Guatemala in an intimate and personal way that few tours can offer. This is accomplished by taking our groups to meet the homes and/or job places of our current and former students in order to get a much closer view of daily lives of Guatemalans.

Since our tour starts and ends in Antigua Guatemala and it takes place during Lent, it will be possible to see at least one of the famous processions of that season. Our tours are lead by members of the staff of the scholarship program. Our tour is limited to only ten participants which gives us the opportunity to give closer attention to our visitors. For more information, the fastest and most reliable way is to write to our e-mail address: progresas3@gmail.com You can also get more information and a taste of our tours by visiting our website: www.guatemalafriends.org/tours

Change of email address:

For different reasons we were forced to change our email address again at the end of 2008. Even though we included the new address in our last Update we forgot to write a specific note about the change. Any way, our new and only email address is now: progresas3@gmail.com We just hope that this mistake hasn't meant losing important communication with any of you!

A time-saving option for donors.

Several of our donors have made arrangements with their banks to have a smaller amount sent to us monthly. This means that the donors do not have to remember a specific date and also that a larger amount does not impact their balance as much as only once or twice a year. It also eliminates the extra work involved with mailing. By whatever means, we are always delighted with all donations!

A final contribution

We received word that a long-term donor had left Progresas a legacy in her will. We know of several other donors who have done so as well. To us it is both a vote of confidence and an obligation to use the funding wisely.

Another successful former student,

by Miguel Costop

Jacobo Bolvito Ramos is one of our former students from San Miguel Chicaj. He entered the program in 1994 when he was only 19 years old and stayed with us until 2001 when he



Jacobo, wearing a cap

finished all the course work in agronomy at the San Carlos University. During all that time we could see in Jacobo an enormous leadership potential and how it was developed every year. He was very active in student's organizations at the university and we remember very well his participations during our annual students' conferences. In 2004 he finally graduated as an Agronomist and started to work in an organization called the PAF Maya (Plan de Acción Forestal Maya) which promotes the preservation of forests and environmental education from the Mayan point-of-view.

When he was a student, he always thought that participating in the political field would be one of the ways for indigenous people to balance things more in their favor. He has accomplished this, since he became the Vice-minister of Culture and Sports in this government. We are not sure how long he served in that position, but we got a call from him recently telling us that president Colom designated him as the General Coordinator of the Presidential Commission Against Discrimination and Racism. We have strong hopes that he will do a good work in that important position, and which is so needed in this country. He also has started to repay his student loan with us, which gives us a good indication that he doesn't forget our program and the values he got from the Quakers.

Many thanks to our faithful donors who make all this possible.
All contributions are made to:
Redwood Forest Friends Meeting and are mailed to: Guatemala Scholarship Program, PO Box 1831 Santa Rosa, CA