



Fall Update

October 2007

Guatemala Friends Scholarship/Loan Program (Progresar)

Of Redwood Forest Friends Monthly Meeting and Guatemala Monthly Meeting
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The Elections of September 9th

by Loren Lacelle

I returned from California in time to witness my fifth election campaign in Guatemala. There were 14 parties competing but the focus has been mainly on about five of them. All summer the polls have shown a lack of enthusiasm for almost all of them. The leader of the pack has usually been Alvaro Colom Caballeros, who was runner-up four years ago. In second place toward the end of the summer has been the right-wing candidate of the Patriotic Party Otto Pérez Molina, a former general whose emphasis has been on a “hard hand” in dealing with crime, which is a major concern of the voters. For the first time, a woman and Maya, Rigoberta Menchú, was a presidential candidate. However, she was not even been able to attract many of her own ethnic group to her support. According to the famous writer Ricardo Falla, she is viewed by many of them as just another millionaire, after winning the Nobel peace prize. He also says that since she now lives in Guatemala City, she has not kept in touch with her rural roots.

As the polls predicted, the results were 28.25% for Colom and 25.55% for Pérez and they will face a run-off on November 4th. However, this election determined the final winners for congressional races and city offices, without the need for run-offs. That means that winning candidates very often have low percentages of the total vote. This often causes great tension and even disturbances by the supporters of the losers.

The new Congress will have no majority party. Colom’s party (UNE) will have 48 seats, GANA 37, Pérez’ Patriotic Party 30 out of a total of 157. Menchú’s party will have 4, including the very popular Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro from Guatemala City, who is predicted to run for president next time.

As in previous elections, I was impressed by how lively and noisy elections are here. It reminds me of the photos and lithographs of elections in the U.S. in the nineteenth century, with torch light parades, bands and big crowds in the streets. Here the parades are not at night but virtually every weekend and on many other days there are parades with

bands, music and cheering supporters of various candidates for all offices—even in this small town! Almost every tree, rock, telephone line, and the walls of many houses are covered with flags, placards and symbols of the parties in every color. The newspaper coverage of the campaign fills up to ten pages every day. Television has paid advertising and news coverage much of the time. An election in the U.S. seems very tame indeed compared to this.

The issues have been much the same as in previous elections. Great emphasis is on poverty and crime. But this time I think even more on crime than before. At least 12 candidates or members of their families have been murdered--the largest number being in Rigoberta’s party, even though she was running behind the polls.

The party of the former military dictator, Ríos Montt, lost even more ground, after it was defeated four years ago. However, he retained his seat in Congress and so did his daughter Zury. This is a very unusual case in that her husband is a Republican congressman from Illinois, so they serve as legislators in two different countries.



Otto Pérez Molina and Alvaro Colom

How Progresar Applies the Testimonies of Friends – by Loren Lacelle

We have occasionally been asked how our program reflects the faith and practice of Friends, since it was founded by and has remained a project of first one and then two Friends’ Meetings. It is clear to me that the testimonies are central to everything we do. For those who may not be familiar with them, I can

say that a philosopher would classify them as a system of ethics, or a guide for behavior. The early Friends were inspired by the teachings of Jesus, which they distilled into some basic principles. They have not been static and are constantly revised to fit newer understandings and applications in each generation. In the following paragraphs, I will try to show how some of them are applied in the scholarship program.

When students are accepted into the program they are given a very brief history of the Quakers, which briefly includes some of these concepts. Beginning with the first interviews, there is emphasis on the testimonies that are part of our policies in the management of the program.

The most essential to the working of the program is *integrity*. We strongly stress the need to always be honest in word and deed. This also requires the staff to be the same with them. Mutual trust is the result. This is not as easy as one might expect because of the long history of racial discrimination, military dictatorships and civil war had created an atmosphere of fear and distrust that was not easy to overcome. In the seventeen years I have been here, I have seen fear and distrust fade considerably, as democratic institutions have become stronger. I also see that the frank and sympathetic ways in which the staff deals with the students has created more trust.

The *unity* testimony asks us to strive at all times for unanimous agreement. Both the meeting's committee of oversight and the administrative committee of Progreso's staff begin meetings in silence and conduct business in unity, and it works very smoothly.

The *equality* testimony is basic to the reason why the program was founded. In a country of enormous disparity of wealth and power, the main goal has always been to offer help for the most neglected parts of the population—the poor, the indigenous and women. Our goal is to help equalize opportunities for the advancement of marginalized members of this society.

The *simplicity* testimony is applied by the program by using its resources carefully, so that much can be done with little. This is actually easier to do in an economy where most people must be frugal in order to survive, and so our simplicity is the norm rather than the exception.

Finally, the *community* testimony calls upon us to maintain good relations and mutual care within the program. Since our students come from and live in many parts of the country, this is a big challenge. Our annual conference brings our current students

together and we invite former students as well. After leaving the program, we maintain contact with former students by sending newsletters twice a year, and in recent years we have made many home visits as well. I know of no other scholarship program that creates such a strong and lasting a bond between the administration and the participants. Many graduates feel almost a familial bond with us and they know that their success is our greatest desire.

In these and other ways, the program remains faithful to the fundamentals of Friends' faith and practice.

More stories collected from our visits to former and current students by Meme Romero

Venancia Bonilla de la Rosa

In 1988 Venny, a nickname for Venancia, came to the program. She wanted to become a nurse. She comes from a very poor family in Champerico, a very small port on the pacific coast of the country 200 miles from our office. As happens with many of the students from that time-period, we have lost communication with them, so finding them takes great effort



The only information we have are those given by them at the time they were students but after twenty years many things have changed. Then, the first step is, to visit the families to find their current location, which sometimes that does not even work because the families have also moved. However, this time we were lucky to find the family home where a sister still lives. From the sister we learned that she was living and working in a different area.

On the way back to the office we stopped by her place of work and had a chance to speak to her and found out how much her life had changed. After she left the program she began working in different communities in the eastern part of the country. She then got married, and unfortunately her husband died and she now lives with her 12- and 14-year old children. She now works for the social security hospitals and has a university degree in nursing. She was quite surprised to learn who we were, but she

was very happy to know that the program still exists and was also very thankful because according to her without the support of the program she never could have made it.

Felix Miguel Chic

In the highlands of Guatemala, I believe the department of Totonicapán is the most conflictive and wary of strangers. To me it is always an adventure when I visit these communities, due to the lack of trust and cooperation one can get from the locals. When I arrived to the village it was around 2 p.m. and it was dry and hot. It is interesting because to speak about highlands, it means pine trees, oak, cypress and cold weather. However, due to the topography of the land and the deforestation, the weather can change from cold to hot. To find the way to get to Miguel's home was a challenge and, if it had not been for a young family I ran into in the middle of the woods, it could have taken me ages, and perhaps I would have given up. However, after some time I was able to find their house, which was all the way down a cliff.

At the beginning it was a little awkward, because children are usually afraid of strangers and they ran away from me when they saw me. After awhile the father came out and then the conversation became friendlier. In the visit I found out that the father is a baker and sells his products around the communities. The family is one of the biggest I have seen, twelve children and quite a few dogs.

I can't imagine how difficult it must be to have to feed and pay for education of all the children with an income of \$100 per month. On the other hand, they seem to be happy because I believe it is the only life they have known.



Parents and nine siblings of Felix in front of their house

Cándida Rosa Ayala

As part of the visits to former students, in July we visited the San Antonio Suchitepéquez in the Pacific coast.

This time we visited Cándida Rosa, who was in the program in 1992. After a little confusion with the address we found out through a local that she



was no longer living at that place. Fortunately, he knew where her new location was. It took us about fifteen minutes in the pouring rain to find her place.

Cándida is a Q'eqchi' lady and comes from northern department of Alta Verapaz. She studied technician in public health, at the beginning she worked for awhile in her community with a national institution for the blind. Then she moved 300 miles away from her home town down to the Pacific Coast where she joined the Christian Children's Fund. At the beginning she worked in the technical education unit and became a director eight years ago.

At the moment they are supporting quite a few projects: one in children's health and education, and a second one in women's micro-credit loans and health, where she gets support from PROAM, a national program for generic medicine. She also told us that they have a project providing food to poor families through the Catholic organization called MALTA. As a director of the projects she has a crew of eighteen people and works together with parents association in the area.

In general I would say that meeting Rosa was a great experience. She is a very cheerful lady who completed only the first semester in social work. However, her experience and her personality have made her a success.

Nonprofit Status for Progresia in Guatemala by Loren Lacelle

For the past year, the Guatemala Friends Meeting and the staff of Progresia have been in the process of legalization of the program here. The most important advantage of this is the ability to inherit and own property here. It now appears that we will have that status by the end of this year. It has been a long and complicated undertaking, but we are convinced that it will be well worth the effort.

Computers for Guatemala

by Miguel Angel Costop

Several months ago Don Livingston, one of our faithful donors, started a project called “Computers for Guatemala” in which he has asked many people in the U.S. to donate used computers to be sent to Guatemala. Here they are destined for a group of nuns who have schools in a poor, rural area and also for some of our students whom we have been unable to help when they have asked for computers. The reason we have had to refuse is that the cost of a new computer is about equal to the annual cost of our less expensive students.

This process has not been easy for Don, but after lots of effort on his part and with the help of other organizations including us, a container shipment will probably come soon to Guatemala. Perhaps as you read this it is already here. Then the task is to do all the paperwork with the customs office, including an exemption from customs duties.

Our office already has a pre-selected list of students to receive a computer, if they arrive safely. At the head of the list are ones with least economic resources, good grades and least access to computers. We are still not sure what to do about delivery to the ones from the most remote areas, but we will resolve that later. One thing at a time!

Although this project has meant lots of work, we are sure it will be of great benefit to our students if it comes to a reality. It is a clear example of how we can join with other initiatives that seek to benefit Guatemalan education. To know more about this project visit the site:

www.computersforguatemala.com

Our heartfelt thanks to Don for his incredible efforts!

Two interesting cases among our students.

by Miguel Costop



Sonia Marily Mátzar Morales is a 20 years old girl from a village in San Lucas Tolimán, a town around Lake Atitlán in the department of Sololá. She comes from a typical Mayan rural family with five children, 2 of whom are already married. Sonia is the first child of her family to study as far as

secondary. With our help she studied at a catholic boarding school for indigenous girls. That school has connections with another scholarship program which

offers scholarships in the US to get an AA degree in various majors. Much to our satisfaction, we recently learned that Sonia was chosen to get one of these scholarships and she will study at a university in Iowa. She is the second girl from our program that was selected for this scholarship program. In 2004 Rubidia Matías from Ixcán in Quiché, was also selected and she studied International Commerce up there. Now she is back and working in her home town in several projects. At present, Sonia is already in Iowa studying an intensive English course. We send our congratulations and best wishes to her.

Vilma Angela Chalí Colaj

Vilma is 18 years old and comes from Pachay Las Lomas, a village in San Martín Jilotepeque, in the department of Chimaltenango. She is studying law, in the first year at the Mariano Galvez University. Her parents can



barely read and write but have tried to provide education for their 5 children. Even though, the two older children couldn't go beyond junior high school, the other three have completed the secondary level. And currently Vilma and a sister, who is studying medicine in Cuba, have started their university degrees. Vilma wants to become a lawyer to help her people, especially women, to know and defend their rights. In this sense, Vilma has been inspired by her mother. This woman has been a founder of a couple of women's organizations in her village. She has helped women to get organized as weavers and sell their products at better places and prices, and also with projects of raising chickens and pigs. Now that Vilma has finished secondary school and got a diploma as a primary teacher she is involved with the organization where her mother participates and is helping them to achieve their goals. With such an influence we don't doubt Vilma will be a good leader for her community and get important changes for all of them.

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 95402

