



Fall Update

October 2006

Guatemala Friends Scholarship/Loan Program (Progresar)

Of Redwood Forest Friends Monthly Meeting and Guatemala Monthly Meeting

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Some Changes in the New Year—by Loren Lacelle

It has now been ten years since a committee of volunteers took on the task of continuing the work of Tom and Trudie Hunt. The committee gradually hired Guatemalans on a part-time basis—two of whom were students in our program. This arrangement has evolved to the place where now two of them are full-time employees and the other almost full-time. At the beginning of this year, the oversight committee of Guatemala Friends Monthly Meeting named Miguel Angel Costop as the new director of the program and first Guatemalan with that responsibility. Because it is a small office staff, each area of responsibility must have at least two who knows each job and the director must know every job well. Because we have more people to handle all aspects of the program, we are able to accomplish things that the Hunts could have only dreamt about.



Miguel Costop, Meme Romero and Jaime Torres at the office door

The primitive little computer that I brought here in 1990 has now in its place three computers of capabilities I never dreamt of either. Our student enrolment has more than doubled and our efficiency quadrupled—if, in fact, that can be quantified.

As part of these changes, Miguel Angel and Manuel Romero are now taking on more of the communication with our donors, including these newsletters. Since both are quite fluent in English and the fact that computer programs these days can catch most grammatical and spelling errors, it will also be good practice for improving their English skills.

In general, the main responsibilities of each of them are as follows: Miguel is responsible for seeing that everything is done in a timely manner and, if necessary, step in to do anything needed. Jaime Torres is responsible

mostly for the finances but also helps with students' needs.. Manuel is in charge of former students and the current

students at Xela in the west. However, any of them may at times travel together for home visits of current and former students and help with check deliveries and interviews with students in the office for students in the east, and in Cobán for students in the north.

The oversight committee of Guatemala Friends Monthly Meeting—consisting of myself, Martha Dugan and Kitty Brown—continues to provide oversight regarding Quaker faith and practice and to assist the staff as needed.

More Results from Visits to Former Students --by Meme Romero and Loren Lacelle

Since the last newsletter, visits to former students have continued to yield interesting results. One of the general observations that has been made is that, when seeing the homes, living conditions and life-styles of our former students in their communities, it seems that they have a more hygienic and orderly appearance than that of their neighbors. Just this week the press reported a study made by USAid on the effects of education on Guatemalan families. That also came to the same conclusion and some other results as well. Besides the obvious fact that family income is higher, it also named “better health, changes in family structure, less criminal behavior, promotion of democratic values, and more social cohesion.” This is especially important, since Guatemala ranks second to last in the Americas—only ahead of Haiti—in educational indicators, such as the amount expended on education, literacy, percentage of graduates at all levels, etc. Our visits to our graduates confirm this find. Here are two examples.

Perfecto Xajil was in our program from 1992 through 1996. He came from a small town in Chimaltenango. One of eight fatherless children in a rural family, his educational opportunities were limited. Fortunately, he was able to receive a secondary education at a Catholic seminary, which gave him good preparation for a university career. He was recommended to us by a priest.

After completing his law degree, he was not able to return to his own Kaqchikel community, but he was hired as a justice of the peace in a community in the far west. Later he was transferred to another court in the Department of Sololá—closer to his original home and where his mother tongue, Kaqchikel, is spoken. Because of these changes, we had lost contact with him. Now we find him very active in his very important job. It is the main source justice in rural Guatemala--areas in which legal conflicts often result in either corrupt practices and/or violence. He is working with local schools to promote the “Judge for a Day” program in which students can see how

the legal system can work. He also works with organizations for the prevention of lynching, which all too often has been the rural way to seek justice!

Pascual Benito Tahay Gómez has also been relocated recently. Here is a case that we have always regarded as one of our saddest failures. Now we may have to reconsider that. Tom, Trudy and Loren debated his situation endlessly. Even though he started medical school with our help in 1989, he failed four courses in the first year, repeated them in the second year, and then failed the second year. This pattern continued until 1997, when we had to tell him that we could not continue to help him. In reviewing our voluminous file on him, we can see the struggle we had. There is a note from Trudy that says "Read this and weep." Then a note from Loren that says "I almost did!"

In later committee meetings, when formulating general policies, his case was brought forward as an example of what can happen with medical students. His case was one of our greatest frustrations. We knew he was trying hard under extreme circumstances, but just how patient can we be? We then came up with new policies to try to avoid 'throwing good money after bad,' and they are working better.

The new information we have about him is that, even though he has still not graduated, he has continued on his own to take one course at a time over many years and still plans to graduate someday. Such perseverance! Moreover, in his rural community, one of the poorest in the western areas, he has a small clinic under the supervision of a Catholic community health center and the local pharmacies fill his prescriptions! In other places this might be considered scandalous or even criminal, but in rural Guatemala he is fulfilling an important need. Perhaps there is a happy ending to this story after all.

Our March Tours



The short tour plus Martha Dugan on the lawn in front of the office, which is most often used as our students' "waiting room."

It has been a challenge for us to manage two very large tour groups this month. The shorter tour had 27 participants and visited Antigua and adjacent areas of the central highlands. The longer tour with 26 members is still

here, visiting this area and the western highlands as well. Because most participants were attending the annual conference of FWCC – Section of the Americas on the eastern side of Guatemala, we felt we should not maintain our policy of small tour groups. With the first group we gradually learned how to handle such a large number and we believe our efficiency has improved with the second one. It has been our pleasure to make so many new friends.



The long tour in the former convent "Las Capuchinas" in Antigua

Hurricane Stan Aftermath

In many personal letters and emails to some of our donors, I have reported on the terrible destruction the storm caused here. Almost half of the country was hard hit –from Antigua westward to the Mexican border. This is exactly where we have most of our students and we were very concerned for their welfare. The town where the office is located was cut off for several days in both directions. It took several weeks for us to learn that none was hurt or suffered serious damages, although it had been very difficult for many of them.

There was a rapid response from the government and much foreign and individual aid to many of the victims. The reconstruction has concentrated on the infrastructure, especially in the favored tourist areas, to rebuild bridges and highways. There has been much less effort in reconstruction of schools, medical centers and such. The economy was badly affected because both tourism and coffee, two major industries, were hard hit. Tourism has recovered rapidly, but the damage to coffee farms will take much longer to recover. Thousands of people in the west are still living in temporary housing camps after having lost their homes.

The most encouraging aspect of this tragedy was the honest and rapid response of the government to the emergency. That has not usually been the case here. There was also a very generous outpouring of help from individuals not affected. That was also good to see.

**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**