

When a Mayan Village Calls

Mary Lois Sennewald

The buildings gleamed in the narrow valley: tiled roofs, whitewashed walls enlivened with murals from the Popol Vu, the K'iche' Mayan origin story. Flowers bloomed in the courtyard. But the complex was deserted. My German partner, Christian, and I gaped in astonishment. What was this? A retreat center? Abandoned hotel? But why such elegance on the outskirts of this mountain Guatemalan village of Xix, where mud often rendered roads impassable, homes were constructed of upright planks and floors were packed dirt?

It was December 2008. With other volunteers from Europe and North America, I was working as a human rights observer, accompanying witnesses in genocide cases filed in Guatemala and Spain against the military dictator Efraim Rios Montt, accused "intellectual author" of the massacres and atrocities throughout Guatemala in 1982-83. I was assigned to the remote Ixil region, perhaps the hardest hit in the years of the violence and still dangerous. For security, we worked in pairs 24/7, walking into settlements far from roads, eating in smoke-filled kitchens and often sleeping in the same bed or set of planks on cement blocks. Witnesses, who had received death threats, hoped that the presence of international observers would protect them from the still too-common kidnapping, torture and murder. Indigenous Mayans, standing up for their lands, were particularly targeted. Those who climbed to mountaintops for traditional ceremonies were labeled devil-worshippers or *brujos* and sometimes attacked.

"Ah," said the elder Don Tiburcio, sharing steaming tamales with us, "that is the school we started, *Centro de Formacion Nuevos Mayas*. But the students have returned to their villages for vacation."

On our return the following month we were led through classrooms, dormitories, offices. In the dining room were hung embroidered flags, depicting the glyphs of *nawales* (energies) from the Mayan calendar. Young women brilliant in their traditional weavings and young men in jeans bowed to director, founder and visionary, Jose Itzep Ixcotoyac. Focus here is on vocational studies as well as academics, so we saw the carpentry, sewing, bakery shops as well as hothouses for tomatoes and peppers.

"Our goal is to prepare the students to confront the modern world while giving them a deeper understanding of their Mayan culture." Jose said. "We educate them to support themselves, their families, their communities."

But I saw no books, no internet, no newspapers, television nor efficient computers, all necessary tools for confronting the modern world. These students were doubly challenged, needing to learn Spanish as well as their maternal Ixil and K'iche' Mayan languages. But from

the first I was hooked by the beauty of the campus (construction funded by international organizations), the shy excitement of the students, the emphasis upon their Mayan culture and cosmology, the insistence on the importance of educating girls, and Jose's far-ranging vision.

In March, on my last circuit through the region, I stopped by the school to take photos. Jose was waiting. "We have money problems" he said. "Our families are all very poor. They bring corn and beans as tuition, but mid-year, when their food runs out, the students drop out. I need a partner to raise funds for us until we can support the school ourselves. Will you...?"

So I returned to St. Louis with a letter in formal, flowery Spanish, generously stamped and sealed, authorizing me as the representative in North America of the Civil Association APRODEFI (ASOCIACION PRO DESAROLLO DE LAS FAMILIAS IXILES), the organization which founded and maintains the school. One month later, several friends and I incorporated New Mayas Society as a not-for-profit corporation and embarked on the project to keep students in classes and classroom doors open.

Our first Guatemalan/North American effort was a joint ceremony intending success in our partnership. In Xix a local Mayan spiritual guide led a traditional fire ceremony, invoking the energies of the calendar, while students spoke of their dreams and fed the blaze with their painted representations of their heartfelt desires. At the same hour in North America, friends prayed, did ceremony, dedicated meditations or the energy of a Tai Chi class. Then we all got down to work, hunting donations for scholarships and operating expenses.

That September I returned for two months. With Jose I reviewed budgets, translated proposals and publicity, poured over his plans for the APRODEFI purchase of a *finca*, 445 acres of land to be dedicated to farming, pastureland, coffee production and timber. This *finca* would bring employment to the community, crops to the landless, food to the school. But, said Jose, the primary purpose was to generate enough money to allow the community itself to fund the school. I liked that pull-up-by-the bootstraps attitude. (That purchase is now complete.)

Best of all I got to know the students, check up on their progress, listen to their hopes. Since that first visit, I go back once or twice a year when possible, for a week or a month or two. Time spent with the students and staff—now family—is always the highlight.

Always, challenges abound. Drought two months each year dries up the water supply, so students walk several miles to bathe in rivers and lug buckets of water back to school. We still need Spanish textbooks. Our two flash-drive internet modems are insufficient and unreliable. No one in the village can repair computers. Important staff members have resigned to take better-paying jobs in other villages. I can't always express myself precisely in Spanish nor understand Jose's nuances. Sometimes, I fear we each miss each other's meaning.

Still, staff members often find creative solutions. This past year eight of the teachers, on their meager salaries, traveled to Nebaj or Quiche hours away each weekend to work towards a university diploma, thus relieving us of the need to underwrite additional teacher training.

Amazing things are growing from the community *finca*, including new local businesses and income, new foods for the school and families, new agronomy studies for the students. Money is starting to flow back to the school. The start is small, but dream of future self-sufficiency is taking substance.

Until that dream is realized, we will continue to ask for donations, sell weavings, jewelry and other handmade goods, host fundraising dinners, search foundation lists, and write proposals. Raising \$40,000 annually would allow the school to expand to its full potential of housing ninety boarding students.

But this story is really about the gifts the students receive and give. As one graduate with a primary school teaching certificate wrote in a thank-you letter to her “godmother” who had supported her for three years: “I go back to my village as one of only three professionals there. The other two are men so I am the only woman. In one way or another I will find a way to be of service.”

I invite any reader to partner with this work, to donate money or even to sponsor a student for \$400-\$600 (depending upon the level of scholarship). More information about the school is available at www.newmayas.com . I am happy to talk to anyone about the project and the many ways to help.

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