

¡Que Sepan!

December 2012 Newsletter
Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment



SAVE THE DATE Guatemalan Dinner

Saturday, February 9, 2013

We will welcome back the January Delegation to Guatemala
More information will follow in January

The following is an excerpt from a recent letter received from SEPA sponsored accompanier Erik Woodward. Every word is worth reading. The letter in its entirety may be found at www.obsepa.org.

Dear Friends and Family:

Hello, buenos dias, and xa la nom from Rabinal, Guatemala! In July I moved to Guatemala to work as a human rights accompanier for the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA), a US based solidarity organization with ties to a variety of indigenous communities and organizations in Guatemala who are organizing to realize their human rights. The past five months have been filled with adventure, and inspiration.

I am currently living in the town of Rabinal, in the department of Baja Verapaz, about 50 miles north east of Guatemala City (but still 5 hours away by bus!). Rabinal is a large pueblo, home to about 20,000 and the overwhelming majority are ethnically Maya Achi. In the markets and on the streets you're more likely to hear Achi, the indigenous language in the region, than you are to hear Spanish. The pueblo itself is situated in a valley and surrounded by mile high mountains, lush forests, and dozens of smaller villages, or as they are called in Spanish aldeas. My French-Canadian partner and I work in 14 of these aldeas, each with its own unique context, community, and history. Common to all however is the brutal violence they have experienced during the years of the Guatemalan armed conflict, many having been massacred in the early 1980s in the government's genocidal anti-insurgency campaign. Of the 14 aldeas we visit, most are within a 30 minute car ride away from Rabinal and therefore we are able to make most of our visits as daytrips. However, 6 of the aldeas are far enough away from the pueblo that we have to stay over night in order to visit all of the people who have asked us for accompaniment. One of

those far away communities is called Plan de Sanchez.

Plan de Sanchez is settled high in the mountains overlooking Rabinal, home to some 40 campesinos and their families. A single lane dirt highway lined by cinder block houses runs through the center of the village, to the east high mountain peaks and to the west a steep slope that leads to the valley of Rabinal. One Catholic Church, an understaffed community health center, a primary school, and three small tiendas (small stores) complete the tour of the aldea.

Plan de Sanchez has a long history of community and political organizing, including struggles for agrarian reform in the 1940s and again in the 1960s as a part of the greater movement of liberation theology in Latin America. Under the reign of dictator Lucas Garcia in the 1970s and later under Rios Montt in the 1980s, Plan de Sanchez's affiliation with political and social organizing came to be perceived by the government as anti-government guerrilla organizing. Without oversimplifying what is an incredibly complex history, it is fair to say that this perception contributed to the military presence in Plan de Sanchez in the 1980s, and ultimately to the 1982 massacre of the village when 268 men, women, and children were tortured, raped, and murdered. In March of 2012 a Guatemalan Court also ruled that 5 of those responsible for the massacre of the community would be sentenced to 7,710 years in prison each.

I was nervous to learn that my first day of work would have me attending a community commemoration for the 30th anniversary of the massacre of Plan de Sanchez. Imagining a melancholy night filled with unfathomable testimonies of violence and suffering, I was unsure how I would personally react to the history of violence and how the community would receive me, an outsider and complete stranger, on their night of remembrance.

My partner and I left Rabinal at 5:00 in the afternoon to make the 45 minute climb to Plan de Sanchez in the back of a pickup truck. I remember being in awe of the natural beauty and at the same time nervous about the night and event I would find at the summit of the mountain. My partner however remained calm, and seemed to know something that I did not yet.

When we arrived in Plan de Sanchez the streets were empty and quiet. The sun was setting over the mountain and

darkness quickly set in. My partner and I went to a community member's house for dinner, where we ate chicken tamales, pinol (a soup made from the seeds of a native squash), and of course tortillas (normally dinner is beans and tortillas, so this was definitely a meal for a special occasion). Over dinner they asked me if I knew why everyone was coming to Plan de Sanchez that night. I replied that the community was commemorating the 30th anniversary of the massacre. Luis stoically looked at the setting sun, and I uncomfortably prepared myself for what I was sure would be his traumatic story of that day. But his story never came—instead he nodded, thanked us for coming, and offered us more tortillas.

After dinner we made our way to the catholic church, a one room building situated on the hill where the massacre took place 30 years ago to the day. By this time the sun has already set. The church was illuminated by a single light bulb and hundreds of candles. We sat down against the back wall to take in the scene. At the front of the church was an altar with a crucifix, steps lead down to the floor which were covered in candles, pine needles, flowers, and photographs. A handful of men gathered in front of the altar, and the women and children of the community sat on benches lining the walls. In total there were probably 100 people present. The church walls themselves were lined with the names of the victims of the massacre, and on one side a large poster hung with the pictures and stories of 20 people who lost their lives on July 18, 1982. All around the room candles were arranged in the shape of crosses, and every few minutes a man would walk around to each and carefully pour liquor, beer, wine, or soda around them in a very precise manor. Three men loudly played a marimba (a Guatemalan instrument like a large xylophone), and the people of Plan de Sanchez talk amongst themselves.

After 10 minutes, I realize that I am not sure what the mood of the commemoration was. Although I felt nervous, everyone else seemed festive. This led me to question what exactly was being remembered here, both publicly and privately in the minds of the individuals present. I had imagined a very western setup for the commemoration—people would be seated in rows facing a speaker, who would say a few words about the violence committed and the lives lost. The mood would be depressing and somber, people would keep to themselves and quietly remember their lost family members, occasionally the sounds of crying would be heard. Instead I found a very different ceremony, more akin to a celebration than a funeral.

One of the members of the community helped me to make sense of my surroundings, and explained that the rituals (the candles in the shape of the Mayan cross, the liquor and soda

carefully poured around them) are meant to call the spirits of the deceased, and the marimba is intended to lighten the mood so people can be happy on this night and in the presence of the spirits of their ancestors.

What was being remembered and *how* it was being remembered were very different from what I had expected. People were not remembering violence, war, and death, but rather the lives of their loved ones. Instead of gathering in a somber and solitary manner, for the community of Plan de Sanchez it made more sense to reflect upon the date festively. In the four hours I spent at the ceremony, I did not see one single tear shed, however I saw countless smiling faces, heard plenty of laughter, and saw people enjoying the opportunity to commemorate their families. Just before leaving, I saw a middle aged man holding his infant grandson in his arms, standing in front of the poster of the 20 photographs of the deceased. Without remorse and with a radiating sense of pride the grandfather introduced his grandson to his relatives who he will never meet, sharing with him stories about his relatives' lives and their accomplishments.

Attending this ceremony made me realize that working in Plan de Sanchez, and in Rabinal in general, I am not working in communities that identify simply as victims. While peoples' identities here are rooted in the history of their communities, they are not defined by this history. Instead of falling victim to their history, they acknowledge their past and celebrate their ancestors, vowing never to forget what has happened but at the same time refusing to be held back by their memories. Many even choose to continue the peaceful fight against the same oppressive forces their ancestors fought against in the 1940s and again in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

My time here in Guatemala has been truly life changing, and my experience at the commemoration in Plan de Sanchez is just one of many examples I can share with you. Please feel free to write me back with questions, or just to let me know how all of you are doing!

In Solidarity,

Erik

Continued support of accompaniers like Erik depends on YOU.

Please donate to SEPA today.