



# Que Sepan!



(That you all know, find out!) Volume 18 Number 1 –February 2010

## Newsletter of the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA)

### SEPA SPONSORS THE NINTH OBERLIN COLLEGE WINTER TERM STUDENT DELEGATION TO GUATEMALA

In January 2010 ten Oberlin College students joined John Gates, SEPA's co-chair, and Lynne Purvis, a former SEPA-supported accompanier (human rights monitor), for a 24-day trip to rural, indigenous Guatemala. We visited three rural Mayan villages: Pachaj (in the department of Quetzaltenango), Copal AA, and Santa Elena (both in the department of Alta Verapaz).

The Oberlin delegation performed service projects in each community. In Pachaj we worked with the Chico Mendes Reforestation Project, planting tree seedlings in plastic bags of rich forest soil. The Oberlin group planted approximately 8,000 seedlings, which in May will be transplanted into the surrounding mountainsides. Pine and cedar seedlings become slower growing trees that can stabilize the soil, prevent erosion, and help keep the water clean; alder seedlings become relatively fast growing trees that can be harvested for firewood. We worked with the reforestation project in the mornings and in the afternoons we did language study. Most of the group studied Spanish; however three of us studied the Mayan language K'iche'. In Copal AA and Santa Elena our service projects were to teach English to middle school students (in

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### SEPA HELPS EDUCATION IN SANTA ELENA

#### PART 1: THE LOCAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The village of Santa Elena has an effective, government-recognized elementary school (grades K-6), with two teachers (decreased from three in 2009) and about 50 students (decreased from 75 in 2009). Both teachers and all the students are from Santa Elena. A goal of the school is literacy in both Spanish and the villages's first language, Q'ekchi'. There is strong support for the school among the adults of the village, even though (or possibly because) most adults speak Spanish and Q'ekchi' but are illiterate in both. There is a loving family atmosphere among the teachers and students.

**Paying the teachers.** Teachers in most rural Guatemalan schools, if they are paid at all, are paid by education ministries in the departments (= states). For some time the education ministry of Alta Verapaz acknowledged the need for more than one teacher in the Santa Elena elementary school but gave only one teacher's contract to the school. For five years SEPA paid first one and then two of the teachers in the

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## **Court Convicts Former Commissioner in Guatemala's First Forced Disappearance Case**

On August 31, 2009, a Chimaltenango court sentenced former military commissioner Felipe Cusanero to 150 years in prison for his role in the forced disappearances of six community members in Choatalum, Chimaltenango in the early 1980s. Although a huge step forward in the struggle against impunity, the verdict brings mixed emotions for the family members of the disappeared who still hope to find and bury their loved ones someday. Over 45,000 people were disappeared during the war in Guatemala; Choatalum is the first case to reach a verdict in the court system.

On December 4, SEPA received the following good news from NISGUA:

### **1. Historic court decision on forced disappearance; highest-ranking official to be convicted of war crime**

In the late evening yesterday, December 3rd, the First Sentencing Court of Chiquimula sentenced a colonel and 3 ex-military commissioners to 53 years and 4 months for the forced disappearance and illegal detention of 8 people from the community of El Jute in 1981. This is the highest-ranking military official to be sentenced for a crime committed during the internal armed conflict.

The sentence also ordered the further investigation of ex-Defense Minister Ángel Aníbal Guevara; ex-Chief of Staff General Benedicto Lucas García, as well as officers and soldiers assigned to the Zacapa military base in 1981.

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Santa Elena school, while simultaneously helping the teachers try to get government contracts. The cost of two teachers' salaries plus supplements for school supplies and travels to Cobán for meetings with the education ministry was approximately \$7,700 for 2009. For 2010 SEPA's role is uncertain. In January we were delighted to learn that the education ministry in late December awarded contracts and back pay to the two teachers (the third teacher in 2009, who had a contract, was not from Santa Elena). Whether funds will be returned for re-use by SEPA depends upon whether the two teachers receive government contracts for 2010, an outcome still not known. Worth noting is that government pay is less than SEPA pay and does not include supply and travel supplements.

The elementary school is a source of great pride in the community of Santa Elena. Victoriano Choc Cu is a skilled teacher. Before SEPA paid him, he taught in Santa Elena for several years without pay. Now he is the school's director, responsible not only for teaching but also for completing all school reports and representing the school at Alta Verpaz educational meetings. He has been unusually successful in acquiring both educational materials and funds for a school lunch program. Virginia Yat Sambrano, a former SEPA scholarship recipient, has a warm, inviting, and open approach to teaching. The school has taken the lead in sponsoring a number of community-wide celebrations.

**Teaching English in the school.** There is a Guatemalan governmental requirement that all schools teach English, a difficult matter for rural, indigenous schools like the Santa Elena school. The Guatemalan government provides no assistance to help teachers who know no English. SEPA paid a recent Oberlin College graduate who is fluent in Spanish to help the Santa Elena teachers learn how to teach English. She made some progress but there is a long way to go. Each SEPA delegation to Santa Elena de-

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Copal AA) and to elementary school students (in Santa Elena). In each of the three Mayan communities we met with the village council to learn how local decisions are made and what challenges they currently face. We also learned about each village's history.

Both Copal AA and Santa Elena are communities of returned refugees. In the early 1980's the people who now reside in these two communities were attacked by the Guatemalan army as part of a scorched earth military campaign meant to destroy any sanctuaries or potential sanctuaries that the opposing insurgent army might use in the rural countryside. The Mayan people fled for their lives as their fields and houses were burned and their livestock killed. They found refuge in Mexico, where they lived for more than ten years in UN refugee camps. The Guatemalan government, under pressure from the international community, invited the refugees to return in the mid 1990's. None of the villagers now living in Copal AA and Santa Elena were able to return to their former homes from which they fled in the 1980's.

Pachaj has a different story. It was never attacked by either the Guatemalan army or the insurgent opposition. Pachaj's inhabitants somehow were able to prevent both armies from forcibly conscripting their young men.

After we visited the three communities we traveled to the Pacific Ocean beach for two and a half days of reflecting on the trip, evaluating our experiences, and enjoying the ocean, the sunrises and sunsets, a nearby sea turtle hatchery (where each of us released a sea turtle hatchling into the ocean), and a mangrove swamp. For the last part of the trip we returned to Guatemala City for meetings with representatives of the U.S. Embassy, two very active human rights organizations (HIJOS and NISGUA), and an urban women's self help organization (UPAVIM). After our return to the United States at the end of January, the students who participated in the delegation will hosted a dinner and reported on their experiences before members of the community of Oberlin, both town and gown.

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votes some time to teaching some aspects of English to the students of Santa Elena.

John Gates and Bill  
Fuchsman

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## SEPA HELPS EDUCATION IN

### SANTA ELENA

#### PART 2: SCHOLARSHIPS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL

After grade 6, Santa Elena students who continue their education must travel outside their community to day schools or boarding schools. Middle school and high school students are responsible for tuition, monthly school fees, fees for special courses (such as computer or typing courses), and the costs of their books. Post elementary students also have transportation costs, and for those students who go to boarding schools there are additional costs for housing, food and sometimes uniforms. For the subsistence farming families in Santa Elena these costs would be impossible without financial assistance. Since 2001 SEPA has funded 169 scholarships (on average, 15 per year) for Santa Elena students to continue their education beyond grade 6. Scholarships cover tuition and monthly school fees. Total scholarship costs have been \$4500 - \$6000 per year. Typical SEPA contributions for middle school students are \$300 per student per school year and for high school students are \$450 per student per year. For the academic year 2010 SEPA has committed to \$5700 for 17 scholarships for Santa Elena

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students.

Some middle school students from Santa Elena attend a day school about two hours from Santa Elena that meets on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Other middle school students and all of the high school students attend various boarding schools that are two to four hours distance from Santa Elena, and two current students travel as much as seven hours to their school. Sometimes where a student chooses to study is determined by the residence of a relative who can provide board and room for the student.

Without education beyond grade 6, the young people of Santa Elena can look forward to lives as agricultural laborers, with little income to support themselves and their families and few human rights in contemporary Guatemala. Only through education do members of the rural, indigenous population of Guatemala have the hope of achieving a more comfortable living and of successfully demanding their social and political rights. SEPA is making a difference in the future prospects for children in Santa Elena, but our ability to do so is dependent on our ability to raise funds through sales and donations.

John Gates and Bill Fuchsman



## **SEPA'S EDUCATIONAL ROLE IN COPAL**

**AA:**

### **THE LOCAL MIDDLE SCHOOL**

The village of Copal AA has not only a government-recognized elementary school whose teachers are paid by the government but also a middle school. The middle school is about five years old, is not recognized by the government, and has been funded largely through contributions from the United States. There are three teachers in the middle school. The approximately 40 students in the school come from both Copal AA and also many other surrounding communities. The major donor of support for the school has been an organization of the Church of the Brethren, although SEPA and many others also have made contributions of money and educational materials. When John Gates and Bill Fuchsman visited Copal AA in August 2009, we found that (1) the Church of the Brethren was no longer able to support the middle school, (2) three teachers were still teaching even though they had received no pay since January, and (3) the school director, whose administrative training SEPA had been funding, had left the school because he could not meet his family's needs with no income. While we still were in Copal AA, a community meeting decided to attempt to keep the middle school open through cooperative efforts; approaching the government for help was deemed futile. The middle school completed the 2009 academic year (January through October), and in the fall of 2009 SEPA contributed two month's salary to each of the three teachers. The middle school has begun the 2010 year.

The community of Copal AA is still seeking sufficient funding to carry through the 2010 school year. SEPA has committed to pay at least two months of salaries for the three teachers in 2010, even though at present we do

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not have the funds. The three teacher salaries amount to \$1100 per month. Without the Copal AA middle school, few students in Copal AA and the surrounding area of Alta Verapaz would have access to education beyond grade 6. At present, the only way SEPA can play a major role in the survival of the middle school in Copal AA is through funneling the contributions of generous individuals to the school.

Bill Fuchsman

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### SEPA 'S THANKS

SEPA thanks all of those people whose contributions have helped to make the 2009 Farmers' Market season a success:

- ◆ John Gates baked too many cookies and loaves of bread to count.
- ◆ Emily and Rich Conklin of Brighton contributed the flour for John's bread.
- ◆ Mary Ann Cunningham baked hundreds of dozens of chocolate chip cookies.
- ◆ Nancy and David Browne fried hundreds of Welsh cookies.
- ◆ Ed and Annette McCarty contributed many dozens of organic eggs.
- ◆ Robert Williams (aka Bushel Bob) contributed blackberries, grapes, and tomatoes.
- ◆ Judy Riggle contributed her own hand-made quilts, and also berries from nearby growers.
- ◆ Bill and Barbara Fuchsman contributed fruits and cider from nearby growers.
- ◆ Ron Rollins contributed peas, green beans, onions, tomatoes and potatoes.
- ◆ Cindy and Andy Frantz contributed perennial plants.
- ◆ Anne and Jim Helm contributed plants.

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## AN INTERIM REPORT FROM THE TREASURER OF SEPA

SEPA's fiscal year begins in March, since many of its major expenses occur during January delegations to Guatemala. Hence this report is an interim report only.

**SEPA's income.** SEPA's volunteer staff work hard to obtain the funds that we use to support education and human rights in Guatemala. SEPA's two biggest sources of income are sales from its participation in the Oberlin Farmers Market and proceeds from SEPA's bed and breakfast program. At the Farmers Market (May through October) we sell produce and baked goods mostly, but also some handicrafts produced by SEPA board members and friends and sometimes some textiles and jewelry from Guatemala. The bed and breakfast program places visitors to Oberlin in the homes of volunteer hosts. The 2009 Farmers Market earned SEPA approximately \$6300; most of the items that we sold were donated at no cost to SEPA. The bed and breakfast program to date has brought approximately \$6500 into SEPA's coffers. Thus far donations from churches and individuals have totaled approximately \$2000.

SEPA also has income from the sale of Guatemalan textiles. Although gross sales can be substantial, the net income is much less (approximately \$800 to date). But because the purchase of a Guatemalan textile from SEPA does double duty, a further explanation is worthwhile. First, the net income to SEPA will go towards education in Guatemala. Second, the original purchase by SEPA of textiles from women handweavers in Guatemala (almost exclusively from weavers in Copal AA) provides discretionary income to the women weavers, a result well known to be valuable to their families (such as use for educational or medical expenses of

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their children). In August Bill Fuchsman and John Gates spent over \$1000 of SEPA funds in the purchase of textiles from women weavers of Copal AA; the weavers have essentially no sales outlets other than sales to visitors. Furthermore, we paid prices comparable to the retail prices in stores, thus guaranteeing the women greater income than if they had managed to place their textiles in stores; we did not bargain down the asking prices, since one of our goals is help the weavers. When possible, we also buy organic coffee from Copal AA and Guatemalan chocolate from nearby cacao growers. By any standards, our Guatemalan goods for sale are fair traded.

**SEPA's expenditures.** The largest of SEPA's expenditures is the salaries of two elementary school teachers in Santa Elena (approximately \$6500 to date and anticipated to be \$10,000 by the end of the fiscal year). The second largest expenditure will be \$6000 for scholarships for students from Santa Elena. The third largest expenditure is help for the Copal AA middle school (approximately \$2000 to date with another sum of over \$2000 pledged for calendar 2010). We anticipate contributing approximately \$1500 (airfare for John Gates and Lynne Purvis) to the \$20,000 budget of the January Guatemalan delegation of Oberlin College students; most of the burden of the costs of the delegation is borne by the student participants. There have been and will be other miscellaneous expenditures. The fact that SEPA's actual and expected expenditures exceed SEPA's income to date emphasizes the need for additional donations and purchases of textiles and calendars. Each fiscal year SEPA spends for humanitarian purposes essentially all that it earns.

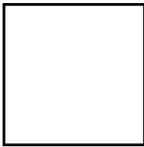
Bill Fuchsman, SEPA treasurer

NISGUA links people in the U.S. with the Guatemalan people and with their grassroots struggles for justice, human rights, environmental protection, and dignity. GAP, the Guatemala Accompaniment Project, is an important NISGUA program, while SEPA is a sponsoring community within GAP. The NISGUA Website, [www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org), is one good way of keeping up with events in Guatemala. Right now economic conditions are very bad in Guatemala, which means the Maya farmers and poor people in the cities are struggling with increasing desperation, homelessness, hunger, and crime.

There is also, thankfully, good news on the NISGUA Website:

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- ◆ Alice Stewart contributed handicrafts from Guatemala and also plants.
  - ◆ SEPA thanks Judy Kruger for organizing the SEPA bed and breakfast program, and Judy Riggle and Lori Taylor for pinch hitting as coordinator when needed.

Thank you from the  
SEPA Board:  
John Gates, co-chair  
Judy Riggle, co-chair  
Marty Buck  
Barbara Fuchsman  
Bill Fuchsman  
Megan Schief



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**SEPA – THE SANTA ELENA PROJECT OF ACCOMPANIMENT**

**I would like to help continue SEPA’s good work by contributing: \$**

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Donations are always appreciated. There is no amount too large or too small.

If you make a contribution, please return this coupon with your contribution, to help with our record keeping. For your contribution to be tax-deductible, make checks out to the Peace Community Church of Oberlin (our fiscal agent). Be sure to put SEPA on the lower left of the check. Send contributions to SEPA’s treasurer William Fuchsman, 192 Forest St., Oberlin, OH 44074.