

iQue Sepan!

Newsletter of the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA)

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Contributors: William Fuchsman, Viviana Gentry, Judy Kruger, Sue Simonson



¡Saludos desde Guatemala!

HAPPY 2012 FROM THE LAND OF THE MAYANS!

To read the entire text of Viviana's message log onto
www.obsepa.org



I hope that this finds you well and in good spirits. The work I am involved in here is very inspiring and empowering. This work is by no means easy, as it requires a lot of travel and running around the country, but it is as fulfilling as I could ever hope for. It has become very apparent how much easier, in some aspects, it is to fight for your rights and remain alive in the US. This is something that a few months ago, with all the difficulty of the Occupy movement, I wouldn't believe that I would be saying now.

Everyday I am working in the departments of San Marcos and Huehuetenango I am surrounded by breathtaking views of the mountains and valleys. Unfortunately for indigenous Guatemalans, these beautiful, ancestral lands are considered to be rich with highly marketable, lucrative natural resources. A key example of this that I am currently encountering is the Canadian Mining Company GoldCorp.

GoldCorp, as you may imagine is a gold mining company, with presence throughout Central America. The charges against them are the same in Honduras as they are in Guatemala: they are poisoning the local water, and causing widespread illness in the population, all the while further impoverishing already impoverished areas.

As a result, there are many community organizations that fight to get this company out of their communities, but are met with threats against their life, and sometimes death. Just this past month, the little progress that one organization that we accompany, in concert with several other organizations of San Miguel Ixtahuacan and Sipacapa, San Marcos, was reversed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). In May 2010 the Marlin Mine in San Miguel Ixtahuacan and Sipacapa owned by GoldCorp, was ordered to suspend operation of the mine by the IACHR due to the mine's contamination of 18 surrounding communities drinking water and increasing skin conditions of local children. The IACHR earlier this month reversed its decision stating that;

"No proof exists that there is any situation presenting a threat of serious or imminent harm to persons ... and therefore there does not exist a situation of extreme seriousness or urgency to avoid irreparable harm to persons as a result of operations at the Marlin mine."

Meanwhile the mine's gold extracting process exposes thousands of people a day to air and waterborne cyanide and arsenic, producing a wide range of illnesses not present in communities prior to the mine's opening in 2006. GoldCorp claims that the skin conditions arising are not due to the increased exposure to lethal chemicals, but rather "Bad hygiene," "lack of water," and "fleas." The mine uses up to 250,000 gallons of water per hour, the same amount that a rural *campesino* family uses in a lifetime. It is no wonder that within the past few years 8 community wells have dried up.

The mine employs 2,300 people daily, 70% of which are indigenous people from the surrounding area. It is they that are exposed to these hazardous conditions both at work and at home. It is their work that the mine exploits when in a free trade world simply farming can no longer support a family. To find out more on how this same exploitation process has occurred over the past hundreds of years, check out Eduardo Galeano's [Open Veins of Latin America](#).

GoldCorp is just one company imposing megaprojects in Guatemala. These projects of multinational companies often work in concert with the 8 families who hold most of the power and land in the country. Those 8 families also influenced the recent election that saw ex-military intelligence boss Otto Perez Molina gain the presidency for the next 4 years. He managed to win on a security and jobs campaign promise. While he was elected, his campaign and support was based in the wounds of the past that he helped create.

During his time as a G2 (military intelligence agency) Commander, he directed both military and police death squads leading to the horrific deaths of Guatemalans. These tactics served as the means to more easily control the population through fear, while creating the structure to allow for a full transition to the neoliberal economic model. This model, in many ways directly contradicts the rich cultural traditions of Mayan people as it exploits the land and, as we have seen, promotes violence and competition. As a result, the people of Guatemala continue to fight for their irrefutable human rights against the government working with multinational corporations for personal profit and the profit of the 8 most powerful families. This is where my work, and the work of the organization comes in.

As international human rights accompaniers, we are simply present as international observers laying witness to the

struggles of those with the will to exact change.. I have met incredible people and had very moving conversations with people simply talking about their experience. The legacy of the scorched earth campaign in the 1980s is still very present in the minds of the human rights organizers as it continues to affect their work everyday. Whether that work involves judicial processes prosecuting ex-military officers, or protecting their land from the bulldozers of free trade economics, the threat of violent silencing is ever present.

While my work here is only a fraction of a drop in the bucket, my work conveying information to the US is incredibly important to me. In addition to all the facts I've learned, I've also been living in an incredibly beautiful country! As a Chicago native, of course every mountain is beautiful to me, but these are especially gorgeous. I have been in very cold towns high above the clouds and tropical weathered towns with rivers cleaner and bluer than I have ever seen in my life. With a landscape like this it is no wonder that Guatemala's treasures are so coveted. It has been great to be able to travel around so much and see this country, regardless of how exhausting it can get.

Having had the ability to travel throughout my life, I have become accustomed to long rides staring out the window left alone with my thoughts. With all the traveling that we do through the organization, I find myself not only learning a lot about where I am, but also a lot about myself. These past two months have really allowed me to become acquainted with who I am beyond my academic self. With all of the experiences I have been having, I cannot thank you enough for your support in getting me here, doing this incredible work. THANKS FOR READING!

Submitted by Viviana Gentry 1/3/2012



SEPA B&B fundraiser earns over \$8,000 in 2011

By Judy Kruger

SEPA's B&B program has touched many lives since beginning in 2004. Over the past seven years eighteen generous Oberlin area hosts have opened their doors to welcome 345 families netting the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment \$40,873. This amazing amount of money has given us the ability to help many appreciative individuals in Guatemala. It has provided:

- student scholarships
- salaries for competent teachers
- project assistance through village councils who ask for and receive a hand up from SEPA
- subsidies for humanitarian accompaniers who provide a measure of safety to Guatemalan witnesses as they bravely give testimony to force accountability for past atrocities.

The SEPA B&B is a simple operation. Families in the Oberlin area offer a comfortable, moderately priced room and a light breakfast to families visiting Oberlin College. SEPA is the recipient of \$60 for each room per night. Caring hosts often provide an insider's view into Oberlin College campus life and the Oberlin community at large as they meet interesting guests from throughout the United States and beyond.

One hostess put her feelings simply. *"I don't have much money to donate to SEPA, but it is so easy, fun, and interesting to open my home to guests. Thus their donation is my donation."*

As a result of the past two newsletters several new people have volunteered to host B&B guests. I encourage you to think about helping SEPA in this way. If you have a comfortable spare room, and if hosting is something you'd like to try, please contact Judy Kruger 440-775-2330 or judykruger@hotmail.com (put B&B in the subject line).

There are many current and past hosts to thank for their generosity: Nancy/David Brown; Mary Beth Eben; Barb/Bill Fuchsmann; John/Linda Gates; Lori Taylor/Helmut Jungshaffer; Judy/Bob Kruger; Barb Mehwald; Mary Jo/David Ockenga; Sue/Joe Palmieri; Marjorie/Floyd Ramp; Judy/Tom Riggle; Diana Roose; David Snyder/Debra Roose; Linda/Harold Slocum; Kathy/Donald Spencer; Dianna Steele/Peter; Mary Anne/Bill Trost; and Glennys/Joe Weiss.

Very special thanks go to Lori and Helmut, who have opened their home to guests for one day to as long as two weeks and have done this 351 times over these 7 years. Also another thank you to Lori Taylor and Judy Riggle who have filled in as coordinators in my absence.



Stay up to date on current events in Guatemala!

2011 was an eventful year in Guatemala. On November 8th ex-general Otto Perez Molina was elected as Guatemalan President.

A recent appeal from the Director of the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission urges people to contact the US government to continue its support of basic human rights and to monitor the actions of the Molina administration.

Recommended informational sources:

NISGUA:

<http://www.nisgua.org/home.asp>

Guatemalan Human Rights Commission: <http://www.ghrc-usa.org/>

Inter Religious Task Force for Central America:

<http://irtfcleveland.org/>

North American Congress on Latin America:

<https://nacla.org/>

Annual Fund Update:



Annual fund letters were mailed to SEPA supporters in November. To date 20% of you have responded with a donation. The annual fund makes up 20-30% of SEPA's annual revenue. Please give generously!

Donations should be mailed to
SEPA Treasurer
192 Forest St.
Oberlin, OH 44074