

iQue Sepan!



(That you all know, find out!) Volume 16 Number 1 - March 2008
Newsletter of the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA)

Oberlin College Students Visit Guatemala

By John Gates

During the month of January, 2008 SEPA sponsored its seventh Winter Term delegation to Guatemala. Bill Fuchsman was the faculty sponsor, John Gates led the group, and Sarah Bishop, who graduated from Oberlin College in 2007, was interpreter. Eleven students participated in the delegation. The majors of the students included Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Psychology, History, Latin American Studies, Comparative American Studies and Jazz, Vocal Performance and Economics. The goal of the delegation was to become more aware of the challenges to the Mayan population as they struggle to acquire political power and economic opportunity in the post civil war era. To accomplish this goal we scheduled a meeting with the human rights accompanier which SEPA was sponsoring, a meeting with the CONIC (the Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organizations), a week of service with the Chico Mendes reforestation project, a meeting with the



Oberlin College students gather topsoil to grow seedlings

organization Cultural Action Guatemala, and four days in Santa Elena, where the students taught English in the elementary school.

During our week with the Chico Mendes project we studied Spanish in the morning and worked in the afternoon gathering seeds of pine trees and rich soil

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Join a SEPA Delegation To Guatemala in Summer 2008!!

SEPA is planning a delegation to Guatemala from July 31 to August 22, 2008. The first week will be spent working with a reforestation project planting trees. Afterwards there will be three days of travel that will include a visit to the largest indigenous outdoor market in Guatemala and a meeting with an organization that helps indigenous communities with development projects including micro-credit loans for women. We will spend four days in Santa Elena, an indigenous Q'eqchi' community and four days in another indigenous community, Copal AA.

In both Santa Elena and Copal AA we will spend some time working with elementary and middle school students on developing English language skills. After leaving Copal AA we will travel to either Antigua or Guatemala City. The cost of the trip will be about \$1700 which includes airfare, transportation, lodging, and food in Guatemala. We need at least ten participants for this trip to be financially possible. If you are interested please contact John Gates at 250 East College St. Oberlin, Ohio 44074, or jfgates@oberlin.net, or 440 774-5484.

The SEPA Summer Delegation of 2007

By John Gates and Bill Fuchsman

In July 2007 SEPA sponsored a 19-day delegation to Guatemala. The participants were Meredith Dowling, Bill Fuchsman, John Gates, and Michael Lemon. John is co-chair and Bill is treasurer of SEPA. Michael, an Oberlin College 2007 graduate who wrote a senior honors thesis on the relations between indigenous peoples and the Guatemalan government in the period 1871-1985, served as interpreter.

The objectives of the summer delegation were: (1) to re-visit the two rural, returned refugee communities with whom SEPA works (Santa Elena Veinte de Octubre and CopalAA La Esperanza) in order to discuss current concerns and future needs in both villages; (2) to invite and fund a small group of people from each of these two communities to attend the annual meeting of the Guatemalan Accompaniment Project (GAP), which was being held in Guatemala for the first time; (3) to buy textiles from the weaving cooperatives of CopalAA and Mayalan and from the weaving project of the organization Cultural Action Guatemala (ACG); (4) to discuss with the director of the Chico Mendes reforestation project the feasibility of bringing the 2008 Winter Term delegation to the project site for language study and service to the project; (5) to meet with the leaders of ACG; and (6) to attend GAP's annual meeting.

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from the forest floor that would be used to grow the seeds. We also cleaned up seedlings, which were growing in small plastic sacks. Chico Mendes expects to plant 60,000 seedlings during the months of May through September of 2008. SEPA is planning a delegation that will spend one week helping to plant some of these seedlings.

The director of the reforestation project, Armando Lopez, gave a presentation about the gold mining operation in the department of San Marcos. Before the gold mining operation began there was a plebiscite as to whether or not there should be gold mining in this area. Over 90% of the voters voted against mining. The results of the plebiscite were examined by the ombudsman of Guatemala. The ombudsman confirmed the legitimacy of the vote. In spite of the overwhelming vote against the mining operation the Guatemalan Government allowed the Canadian company, Montana to begin extracting gold. Guatemala will realize only 1% of the profits from this operation.

We also traveled to Santa Elena Veinte de Octubre, a community of 40 Mayan families, located in the northwestern part of Guatemala. During our four days in Santa Elena we stayed with families. Working in the elementary school (k through 6th grade) was our second service project. The assignment was to teach some very basic English with the use of songs, games, and classroom lessons. The Oberlin students worked in teams and used games such as "Duck, Duck, Goose", "Red Light, Green Light", and "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes". The kindergarten students presented a real challenge because they were just beginning to learn Spanish. Some of the older students knew some English because our interpreter, Sarah Bishop was in Santa Elena at the beginning of November and taught English to the elementary teachers. In addition to holding classes for the teachers she also organized classes for the students. We had planned to visit a second community, Copal AA La Esperanza, however because of complications with transportation and the fact that several of the Oberlin students got sick we decided not to visit Copal AA.

We finished our trip by visiting the Pacific Ocean, a mangrove swamp, and a sea turtle hatchery. After our return to Oberlin we celebrated the trip by hosting a fund raising dinner for SEPA on February 16 that included an opportunity for the students to share their Guatemalan experiences with the college community and the town of Oberlin.

An Update on Education in Santa Elena

The families of Santa Elena want their children to be educated but the Guatemalan government only supports schooling through grade 6. Consequently, for eight years SEPA has provided scholarships to those students in Santa Elena who want to continue their education past 6th grade. This year SEPA contributed \$4,093 for eleven students: two high school students and 9 middle school students. Often these students had to travel many miles and many hours from home to get an education.

Within Santa Elena there is a single elementary school (k-6) that currently has 76 students. Recently the education ministry decreed that all elementary schools must provide some English instruction. Because no one in Santa Elena speaks English this was a major concern as lack of compliance might jeopardize the school's certification. With SEPA's support, Sarah Bishop spent 6 weeks teaching English to the teachers of Santa Elena's school. Delegations will continue to help teach English when they visit.

For the first time in five years the elementary

school will have three instead of only two teachers. The government pays the salary of one of the teachers and SEPA pays the salary of the other two. The director of the school is Victoriano Choc Cu and the newest teacher is Virginia Yat Sambrano. Both are members of the community of Santa Elena. SEPA is very proud of having provided financial support for Virginia so that she was able to complete middle and high school and now we are very pleased to welcome her as a member of the Santa Elena elementary staff.

A most significant event happened on the January Delegation when Victoriano Choc Cu, Sarah Bishop, and John Gates met with Humberto Rivera Garcia, the Director of Education for the Department of Alta Verapaz. Mr. Rivera told us exactly what Victoriano needed to do to qualify for a government teaching contract for 2009. He also said that with the current student enrollment Santa Elena qualifies for three teachers. We are hopeful that this means that the government will provide the salary for three teachers in Santa Elena for the 2009 school year.

The Annual Meeting of the Guatemalan Accompaniment Project

Members of SEPA attended GAP's annual meeting in summer 2007. The site was a beautiful retreat center in the mountains near the city of Antigua, Guatemala.

Present were 80 current and past human rights accompaniers, members of accompaniment sponsoring groups, and a good number of Guatemalan members of communities or organizations that have benefited from human rights accompaniment. We thank Bridget Behrens, Ali Durbin, Neela Ghosal, Sue Ellen Kingsley, Sue Kuyper, Catherine Van Norris, and Melinda Van Slyke, leaders in GAP and NISGUA (the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala), for arranging for the agenda, transportation, meeting site, housing, meals, and outside speakers.

The information and ideas that emanated from the discussions, presentations, and questions were in turn stimulating, exciting, hopeful, and at times

disappointing. The good news that came out of this meeting is that individuals and organizations are persisting to establish a rule of law, to provide equal opportunity for advancement through education, to make health care more accessible, and to open a closed political system so that all may participate in the governing process. A most satisfying sight for us was the networking going on among the representatives from Santa Elena, CopalAA, and other indigenous communities at the meeting.

The Oberlin Farm Market

SEPA will again be selling goods at the Oberlin Farm Market beginning Saturday May 3rd and continuing every Saturday throughout the summer. Hand made quilts, baked goods, plants, and fair trade coffee will be available. Join us and support the work of SEPA.

Short-Term Accompaniment in Guatemala By Bill Fuchsman

Short-term accompaniers are human rights observers who stay with or periodically visit communities, organizations, families, or individuals who are under immediate threat of violence because of their human rights or environmental rights activities. Accompaniers of all types are NOT bodyguards; they deter violence by their nonviolent presence because they report rights violations to the international community, making the usual impunity for the aggressor more difficult. For reasons of both credibility and safety, accompaniers also must take care to remain observers, and thus they observe but do not participate in the rights activities of the people they are protecting. Short-term accompanying requires prior experience in Guatemala and special training, since it is inherently more stressful and potentially more dangerous than other types of human rights accompanying.

SEPA began its support of short-term accompanying in September 2006 with partial and then full support of Dylan Ramshaw. From August 2007 through February 2008 we provided full support for Kim Kern from Texas. In October 2007 Dylan visited Oberlin, describing his experiences as a short-term accompanier and Kim will visit in April 2008.

One of the tense situations for which short-term accompaniment has been requested is related to the proposed Xalalá dam. Indigenous communities near the proposed dam fear the flooding upstream and the reduced water flow downstream. Whole villages totaling approximately 3000 people and their small farms will be flooded, and much of the electrical power generated by the dam will go to southern Mexico rather than Guatemala. This past fall the government opened international bidding on the construction of the dam, with no environmental assessment and no consultations with or offers to buy the lands of the communities that will be flooded. The national government has ruled that the regional referendum in April 2007 that showed 89% local opposition to the construction of the dam is legal but not binding. The two villages with whom SEPA

cooperates are on the Chixoy River, but both are downstream and not subject to flooding by the dam; both however are dependent on the river for water.

The need for short-term accompanying in two villages that will be flooded by the proposed dam arose following an incident last fall involving four employees from the National Electrification Institute (INDE), the governmental organization that handled the bidding for the dam's construction. In 2006 four INDE employees passed through several communities in the region of the proposed dam. Although they were allegedly gathering information for the dam project, they told community members they were looking for teaching jobs. A few days later two of the four INDE employees were reported missing (one later reappeared). A search organized by the communities through which they had passed discovered a corpse. Within hours a regional radio journalist on air (Radio Ixcán) and a newspaper in Guatemala (*Prensa Libre*) accused social organizations in Cantabal, the Catholic Church (a voice for human rights in the region), and the municipal government (then organizing the referendum about the dam) of responsibility in the INDE employee's death. According to local

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SEPA Bed and Breakfast



We invite you to be a host if you live in Oberlin or a B&B guest if you desire a place to stay while visiting Oberlin. All monies support Guatemalan indigenous communities. Contact Judy Kruger sepabandb@yahoo.com, 440-775-2330. Include SEPA B&B in the subject of emails. Many, many thanks to Judy Kruger for organizing this.

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organizations, the persons who orchestrated the murder accusations have strong ties to the military, the oil industry, potential investors in the dam project, and politicians opposed to the municipal government. The official investigation into the disappearance has hardly begun, and no one is formally charged with the murder of the disappeared employee. Rumors in the villages suggest that the murder accusations might provide an excuse for militarization of the region.

The Cantabal (aka Playa Grande) region is close to Santa Elena and includes the two villages whose members were accused of the murder. Since the accusations of murder, persons from the two villages whose members were accused have faced direct intimidation and indirect threats, especially in Cantabal. They sought and received short-term accompaniment.

Short-term accompanying has also been offered to survivors of the Rabinal massacres. Some survivors of one of the 1980's massacres of indigenous villagers in the Rabinal area are receiving punitive damages from the Guatemalan government imposed by the Inter-American Human Rights Court, and exhumations of massacre victims continue. Also a human rights organization provides mental health treatment for survivors. It appears that continued exhumations and attention directed towards the survivors are politically embarrassing to the local government, whose members belong to the political party of Efraín Ríos Montt, the former military dictator under whose rule the massacres occurred.

In the fall of 2006 threats and attacks on the mental health providers escalated. A male mental health worker traveling by motorcycle between villages encountered three hooded men in military uniforms who attempted to knock him off his motorcycle but he escaped. A female employee of the mental health organization was accosted on a long-distance bus by an unknown man who warned her not to go to Rabinal and told her that actions against the mental health organization would continue. Members of the mental health organization received short-term accompaniment.

--Accompanier Visits Oberlin--

Kim Kern, a SEPA-sponsored accompanier will be visiting Oberlin March 31–April 4 2008. She will speak at Oberlin College classes on Tues and Wed and will be the guest of honor at a potluck at John Gate's house Apr 3 at 6pm. Contact John if you would like to join us (440-774-5484)

An Unexpected Trip to the Guatemalan Police Archives

The summer 2007 delegation to Guatemala had an unusual opportunity made possible by Michael Lemon's summer job with the non-governmental National Security Archive in Washington DC. Kate Doyle, one of Michael's supervisors, had become involved in the aftermath of an amazing, accidental discovery by the Guatemalan government's human rights office (the PDH) of an estimated 75 million pages of records from the National Police, stored under deplorable conditions that would soon render them useless as historical records. Since the discovery, the PDH has been working diligently to recover, restore, protect, and catalog the documents. Thanks to Kate Doyle, our delegation was able to tour the site, where a crew of about a hundred people were working. The PDH already had made many improvements: repair of leaky roofs; replacement of broken windows; installation of fans throughout the complex of five buildings; and removal of rats, bats and insects. We visited all of the buildings and observed staff engaged in cleaning, cataloguing, and scanning documents and creating databases. The delegation was extremely fortunate to witness the PDH's efforts to preserve historical memories of much that the Guatemalan government and elites would prefer to be lost.

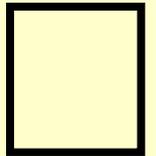
SEPA - THE SANTA ELENA PROJECT OF ACCOMPANIMENT

I would like to help continue SEPA's good work by contributing: \$ _____
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.



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