

iQue Sepan!

(That you all know, find out!)

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Newsletter of the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA)



Visit to Santa Elena and Copal AA

By John Gates

I was looking forward to my visit since I had not been in Guatemala since January of 06 when I was traveling with ten Oberlin College students and Anne Getzin, an Oberlin alumna. This time I was traveling alone. The trip began with a stop at the Guatemala Accompaniment Project (GAP) office to leave some things for the community of Santa Maria Tzeja and pick up some other things for Copal AA. I was carrying a telescope (a SEPA response to a solicitude from Copal AA) and a camcorder that was to be delivered to Copal AA.

In Copal AA I hoped to pick up ten sets of place mats that had been ordered in January (each set had 8 place mats), make arrangements for a delegation from Oberlin College to visit in January, and discuss with the health promoters the feasibility of bringing a medical delegation to Copal AA during the summer of 07.

In Santa Elena I needed to get the names of students who would be asking for scholarships for 2007, to discuss with the Mama Maquin group (a



Children of Santa Elena love to spend time coloring.

women's cooperative) the feasibility of bringing a medical delegation to Santa Elena during the summer of 07, to clarify the terms of a solicitude that we had received in January concerning food and seed aid, to inquire about the progress of repairing the water pump, and to make arrangements for a delegation from Oberlin College to visit in January.

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SEPA Supports Short-Term Accompaniment

By Barbara Fuchsman

Threats and attacks on grassroots organizations working for justice and human rights have greatly increased, while the need for accompaniment in returned refugee communities has diminished. The Guatemala Accompaniment Project (GAP) has responded by creating the Organization (or Short-Term) Accompaniment Program (OA) to provide experienced accompaniers to these grassroots organizations. A team of two accompaniers based in Guatemala

City, both with previous experience working in rural communities, responds to short-term requests for accompaniment by organizations such as labor unions, indigenous groups, and exhumation teams. This team is supported by the in-country GAP coordinator in Guatemala City who works with an international accompaniment coordination group, ACOGuate, that represents some ten different countries.

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After an early morning bus ride, I arrived In Coban about 10 a.m. and began looking for the truck from Copal AA. After looking unsuccessfully for about an hour I decided to return to the Monja Blanca bus station and hoped the person with whom I had made arrangements for my visit would come looking for me. Sure enough around noon Diego Perez walked into the bus station and introduced himself. Diego helped me with the telescope and camcorder and we walked to the truck. I climbed in and added my baggage to the already well packed truck. The ride from Coban to Copal AA takes about three hours.

In Copal AA I stayed at the home of Doña Maria Ordonez. Doña Maria is a member of the Mam cultural/language group. Her husband recently passed away. She has three daughters and a son living with her and another son who lives in Copal AA with his own family. Much of her day is spent weaving intricate and beautiful cortes, huipiles, morals, table coverings, and small purses. In Copal AA there are about forty women who weave. They are capable of producing a large volume of weavings, however their problem is that they do not have a market where they can sell their weavings. Coban would normally provide the most opportunity for sales, however there seems to be some ordinance in Coban that prevents outsiders from selling inside the city. Doña Maria and her family were gracious hosts. I spent five days in Copal AA before catching the boat that leaves Copal AA at 3:00 a.m. and travels to the community of Primavera. In Primavera I caught a microbus to Cantabal and a truck from Cantabal to the entrance to Santa Elena.

In Santa Elena I stayed in the former accompanier's house but ate all of my meals with

families throughout the community. Santa Elena has just organized a new committee that will supervise the scholarship program. The committee is composed of the two teachers at the primary school, one person from the school committee, one person from the cocode or village council, and one parent.

There will be at least fourteen students who will need scholarships for 2007. There will be four high students and ten middle school students. Of the four high school students two are studying forestry in the department of Huehuetenango. These students are probably three days by bus away from Santa Elena. Last year they did not come home at all from the middle of January to the end of October. The third student is studying at Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, a city about five hours distance from Santa Elena. The fourth student will be studying in Cantabal, a distance of about an hour and a half from Santa Elena. Of the middle school students three will be studying in Cantabal, three in Santa Lucia (about an hour and a half from Santa Elena), two in Victoria (three hours from Santa Elena), and two in the Peten (about five to six hours away). The total cost to fund these fourteen students for ten months will be between \$5110 and \$3054. The final cost will be determined by whether SEPA will be able to fully fund the two students who are studying in Huehuetenango (Each of the students is asking for \$1888) or whether we will have to hold to our policy of not funding any one student for more than \$500 and in this way we will ensure that every student who requests funding will receive some money.

Three other projects for which Santa Elena requested help were emergency aid in order for twenty-seven families to buy food and seeds, help with road building, and providing a salary for Victor Choc so that he can continue to teach in Santa Elena. I need to include a note of explanation with this last request. In a display of incomprehensible and unimaginable bureaucratic red tape the education office in Coban is refusing to pay Victor because prior to returning to Santa Elena he was teaching in a private school and

“There will be at least fourteen students who will need scholarships for 2007.”

January 2007 Delegation of College Students to Guatemala

By Bill Fuchsman

John Gates will be leading a delegation of up to 12 Oberlin College students to Guatemala for the month of January 2007. At press time, 18 applicants have been interviewed and the opportunity has been offered to 12 students. The delegation will visit both Santa Elena and Copal AA for several days to a week each and will help teach English in the schools of both villages. This is particularly useful for the new middle school in Copal AA, because the Guatemalan government requires a modest knowledge of English for middle school diplomas that allow students to proceed to high school.

The delegation will meet with members of human rights organizations in Guatemala City and in Cantabal (the nearest town to Santa Elena) and also with a representative of the U.S. Embassy in

Guatemala City. Members of the delegation will study Spanish one-on-one for a week in Xela (Quetzaltenango on the map) and will stay briefly in Santiago Atitlán and Cobán while on route to Xela or the villages.

Students who participated in the five previous January delegations (from 1999 to 2006) commonly report that the experience changed their lives. Students from the January 2003 delegation founded the Oberlin College student organization OSSGUA (Oberlin Students in Support of Guatemala) with which SEPA continues to cooperate. The delegation's costs are borne mostly by student participation fees, supplemented by approximately equal support from SEPA and Oberlin College (through its Winter Term Committee).

**THANK YOU FOR ANOTHER SUCESSFUL YEAR AT
THE OBERLIN FARM MARKET.**



Pictured are John Gates, Bill Fuchsman, and Jan Thornton at the local food fair on the square. Behind them are some of the beautiful quilts that SEPA sells. Judy Riggle generously makes and donates the quilts to SEPA. SEPA sold local foods, baked goods, and textiles at the Oberlin Farm Market from May through October. Most weeks the Market is held near the library. Look for us there again next year! (photo by Ben Wisner)

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therefore had not been evaluated by the public school administrators. The reason he left Santa Elena was because the government did not pay him for the three years that he taught in Santa Elena! Last year 27 families lost corn and beans to flooding in December and again in July. Their request was for \$10.00 per family. The request for help with road building involved the purchase and installation of concrete pipe that would be used to drain water away from the road (the cost was \$225). SEPA responded positively to all of these requests.

Finally, I had a very animated discussion with the women's empowerment group, Mama Maquin, about the possibility of a medical delegation to Santa Elena in the summer of 2007. When I asked what kind of illnesses the medical delegation should be prepared to treat they briefly described seven areas of concern: 1. skin infections, 2. eye infections, 3. muscle and joint problems, 4. stomach problems, 5. respiratory problems, 6. worms, 7. urinary tract infections. The women are very hopeful that this delegation will become a reality.

Accompaniment from page 1

SEPA became part of the OA effort this August, contributing half the support needed for the second accompanier of the GAP team. Our first Organizational Accompanier is Dylan Ramshaw, a 28 year old Canadian from British Columbia. Dylan holds a Masters degree in Economics and International Developmental Studies from the University of Guelph. He has worked in Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Guatemala, and has traveled extensively in Central America. Among other activities, he helped develop micro-credit programs while working for a non-governmental organization in Honduras. Dylan is very concerned with inequality associated with ethnicity, gender and the distribution of resources. He is hoping to learn more about grassroots organizations and to expand his understanding of non-violent resistance as a means for the defense of the rights of individuals, communities, and organizations.

OA provides support to returned refugee communities that have a sudden need for renewed accompaniment, one reason SEPA decided to join this effort. For example, Dylan has spent time at Ixtahuacan Chiquito, a community that GAP accompanied until 2001. On August 21, a joint military police operation invaded the community with airplanes, helicopters, and heavily armed soldiers, some with their faces painted and others with ski masks. The soldiers gave no explanation as to why they were there and entered people's homes and controlled their movements without providing any sort of legal permission. Later governmental explanations varied. Some officials claimed they were looking for arms stashed by drug traffickers, others that guerilla weaponry left over from the civil war was being hidden. Community members strongly denied

"...support to returned refugee communities that have a sudden need for renewed accompaniment..."

all these allegations. Ixtahuacan Chiquito immediately asked for accompaniment and after two shorter visits, two accompaniers will be staying there for 4 months, after which monthly visits will be continued. There have been no more incidents.

Dylan and his teammate Ellen Moore work with an active list of 11 groups and one individual. SEPA expects to receive a full report from Dylan later in November. Some of the threatened groups that have been accompanied include ECAP, the Movement Pro-Justice Nueva Linda, and the organization of victims K'amalb'e. ECAP is a non-profit organization that provides projects for psychosocial support, helping people, social groups, and communities to recover from the physiological, social, and cultural damage caused by the political violence in Guatemala. The campesino group Movement Pro-Justice Nueva Linda has continued to be threatened, including an attempt to kidnap a 12-year old girl, despite a consistent and visible accompanier presence. The K'amalb'e group carries out exhumations and proper reburials; accompaniment is provided when exhumations or reburials are taking place. In all these cases the accompaniers witness, monitor and report, serving as the eyes and ears of the international human rights community.

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 judykruger@hotmail.com, 440-775-2330 or Judy Riggles at 440-774-4106, judyriggles@oberlin.edu. Include SEPA B&B in the subject of emails. Many, many thanks to Judy Kruger for organizing this.

Upcoming SEPA Events

All proceeds from SEPA sponsored activities support indigenous Mayan communities

- **Nov 2006:** School supply drive. Contributions can be dropped off at Kate Loose 's house 582 Beech St in Oberlin (440-775-2184). See related story below.
- **Dec 2, 2006, 7pm:** Guatemalan dinner and speaker. Heather Dean who has lived and worked in Copal AA for many years as a teacher and community organizer will talk about Guatemala at La Casa Hispanica (Harvey House, 96 S. Professor, Oberlin). A typical Guatemalan dinner will be offered for \$5. Sponsored and organized by the Oberlin Students in Support of Guatemala (OSSGUA) and the students in the Language Club at Elyria Catholic High. All community members are welcome to attend. Program will be in English.
- **Dec 2006:** Guatemalan 2007 Calendars. SEPA is selling calendars that contain beautiful pictures of Guatemalan life by indigenous artists. They can be purchased for \$14 from Bill Fuchsman, 440-774-1804.
- **Dec 2006:** Textile Sales. SEPA continues to sell textiles handmade by the women of Guatemala (especially Copal AA). They will be available at the First Church Santa's Attic on Sat. Dec 9, 9am-1pm, and from Bill Fuchsman, 440-774-1804.
- **Jan 2007:** Student Delegation. John Gates of SEPA will lead a college student delegation to Guatemala (see article on page3).
- **Summer 2007:** Medical Delegation. Plans are for SEPA to lead a medical delegation to assist the people of Santa Elena and Copal AA. If you think you might be interested in joining, please contact John Gates 440-774-5484.

School Supply Drive

School supplies for the children of Santa Elena and Copal AA are being collected. The drive is being held at Elyria Catholic High School (EC) and is sponsored by the EC Foreign Language Club. This is a great opportunity for the children of Guatemala and also a great way to better educate the local youth about Guatemala.

If you too would like to contribute to the drive, supplies can be dropped off at Kate Loose's house, 582 Beech St, Oberlin, 440-775-2184. The teacher in Santa Elena has said that they are in need of chalk, pencils, colored pencils, crayons, ruled and drawing paper, and children's scissors. Children's books in Spanish or English and flashcards are also useful. Please do not contribute markers as they create too much garbage. The college student delegation to Guatemala in January 2007 will be enlisted to help transport the supplies to the Guatemalan students.

How to Participate More in SEPA

SEPA board members meet approximately monthly. Other community members are welcome to attend the meetings and join the board. For 2007, the officers of the board include John Gates and Jan Thornton as co-chairs, Bill Fuchsman as Treasurer, Judy Riggle as Secretary, Barbara Fuchsman as liason to related national and international organizations, and Kate Loose and Marty Buck as newsletter editors. If you are interested in participating in SEPA activities please contact John Gates 440-774-5484 or Jan Thornton 440-775-8341.

SEPA members are involved in educating about the situation in Guatemala and fundraising. Monies are used to fund requests ("solicitudes") from the citizens of Santa Elena and Copal AA. Much of the funding goes toward scholarships to help the Guatemala children complete middle school and high school. Guatemala families must pay for the education of their children after sixth grade.

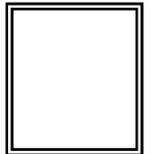
SEPA - THE SANTA ELENA PROJECT OF ACCOMPANIMENT

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.



SEPA c/o John Gates
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Name
Street Address
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