

## A growing family!

By Dave Johnson

The Guatemala Partnership began in 1987. Shortly after the connection was made between the Needham Congregational Church and the village of Santa María Tzeja, the cherished citizen-to-citizen Partner Family Correspondence element was added to this intercommunity relationship. By connecting families in this way, a deeply personal avenue to engagement came about. Two distinctive “who’d have guessed?” outcomes came about from this:

- 1) Over the years, many delegation travelers to Santa María Tzeja were motivated to visit the village by their ongoing interchange of letters with a partner family.
- 2) As the years have gone by, quite a number of families who while in the Needham church community took on a partner family, have moved elsewhere. They now live in all corners of the US and beyond. Yet these families have held onto their treasured relationships with a family in the village, and continue to exchange letters through the partnership.

Over the same span of time, the Needham church has encountered dramatic changes. Clark and Kay Taylor who founded this relationship, disengaged as members of the Congregational church, and passed the reigns of leadership to a well prepared group who have taken this partnership forward for the past decade. Meanwhile, there has been turnover in attendees, staff, and church leadership, and feelings about church role toward helping others in our ever more complex world.

Yet with all this dynamics, the number of families that are bonded to one another via this partnership has been steady, and recently began to grow. The exciting news that 2019 brings is that two of our newest family relationships are with the current ministers at the Needham Church; John Gage and Maddie Forester. They are the *first ever* ministers of the congregation to directly connect to the community of Santa María. Like many readers of this newsletter, they too will be swapping a note of good will twice a year with a family in the rural rainforest regions of Guatemala.



A villager replying to a letter from pen pal in US

Four years ago, I was having a mid day meal at the home of the mayor of SMT and he pointed out that while he knew Clark and Kay Taylor, and he knew many others from the Needham church, he could not name any past or present ministers in Needham. “How could that be?” I wondered. A note-to-self from that trip was to elevate interest from ministers in this project that many times has brought national recognition to the Needham Congregational church.

Maddie let me know of her interest last year, and that she writes in Spanish too. John, who was called to our senior minister role in January, ran over to the home from which February travelers were departing to put his letter in the mail bag in the nick of time. (Late letters are not something we encourage, but *this* was a worthy exception!)

New ministers “on board”. Mission accomplished?

Not quite. There are more families in the village who want to be part of this network. If YOU have valued the experience of being a pen pal with a family from our indigenous partner community, and you know someone who might also find similar nourishment, let us know! Send such tips to [davejohnson77@gmail.com](mailto:davejohnson77@gmail.com).

## Fundraisers

**Servathon Fund Raiser — Saturday, April 28** Congregational Church. Be sure to *support a worker!*

**Benefit Yard Sale — Saturday May 18** Home of Caryl and David Johnson, 505 Great Plain Ave, Needham



## Reflections on the Partnership Following a Return to the Village

By Jeff Clausen

I first traveled to Santa María Tzejá in February of 1992 when I was a senior in high school and returned a number of times throughout the 1990's, with my last visit occurring in February 1998. I met my partner family on that initial visit in 1992 when Pedro and Amalia appeared in the community center looking for a partner family and Kay Taylor pulled me over asserting: “Here is your partner family!” We quickly proceeded to take the below photo, and that was the beginning of twenty-plus years of partnership between our two families. Over those years, through our twice-yearly letters, our families have shared the joys and losses, ups and downs of our lives. As my mother visited the village in 2000, and my daughter accompanied me on this February’s delegation, three generations of our families have now met in person.

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1992



2019

## Middle school for all

By Brenda Metzler

As usual the February delegation to Santa María Tzeja enjoyed a lot of interactions around education in the village. Visiting and teaching in the schools, we witnessed the enthusiasm and dedication that teachers bring to their classrooms. Over the years families in Santa María Tzejá have come to value education for the progress and opportunities it offers their children.

So it was with great pride that many villagers attended the inauguration of the second two-classroom module of the middle school, to accommodate the 7th grade. This followed last year’s opening of a first building that houses the

8th and 9th grades.

Elaborate floral decorations, balloons, and streamers decorated the building, as middle school students performed dances and a skit that critiqued the Guatemalan government for reducing the music and arts curriculum. Following some words by community officials, a prayer from Rev. John was read in Spanish, and holy water from both Needham and the village was sprinkled on the new building as a blessing. Then hundreds of delicious chicken tamales were served to top off the event.

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### Contact Information

Guatemala Partnership  
of Needham

781-444-3383

[GuatemalaPartners.org](http://GuatemalaPartners.org)

Dave Johnson, Publisher

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## Reflections on the Partnership Following a Return to the Village...

(Jeff Clausen)

On this most recent visit, I brought some old photos I had taken during previous visits. Looking at photos from the 1990's, Pedro's grandchildren were amused, claiming they did not recognize the man with the dark hair as their gray-haired grandfather. Earlier in the day, over breakfast, I had shared the same photos with Pedro's brother Abel. Seeing photos of his nephew Henry at age 6, Abel joked light-heartedly how Henry had been such a troublemaker at that age.

Beyond our amused observations on how much we'd aged, we all noticed and commented on how much the village had changed from the one depicted in the photos, with roads, buildings, and trees in areas that used to have none. In sharing these collective memories, I realized how longevity, the amount of time Needham has been connected to the village, is a unique and powerful aspect of the Guatemala partnership.



Jeff shows photos from 1992

Returning to the village after more than 20 years, I had been concerned that it might not be the same, that what had made it special back then would somehow be missing now that there is electricity, internet, a road into the village, and you can drive there in a day from Guatemala City. Happily, my worries were unfounded. I discovered that what makes visiting the village such a unique experience isn't really the village, per se, but rather the richness of the bond between our two communities and the multitude of individual connections that have been borne from it.

There are currently 240 families in the village and 120 partner-family relationships, with some of those dating back more than 30 years. As a result, nearly everyone you meet in the village has a connection to the partnership and, through partner-family letters, is connected to someone

you know in Needham. Each morning and evening we would dine with a different family in their home, and during those visits we would learn more about each other and inevitably discover new connections. It turned out that part of the fun of being in the village was the constant discovery of all these many connections.

Thinking about the partnership, we often measure success in terms of concrete tangibles, such as how much money

has been raised in support of the village, but I believe the true foundation and heart of the partnership, the strength that has enabled it to succeed over all these years, is not the amount of our giving, but rather the relationships we have developed. And it is the combination of our partner-family letters and visits to family homes that have made those relationships possible. It is what has woven the two communities together and is what has enabled the partnership to succeed and endure over all these years.

At the end of the week, families in the village start dropping off their partner-family letters. The letters arrive like a flood, with over a hundred letters in a matter of hours, and yet there is a waitlist of even more families seeking to have a partner family in Needham. Watching the letters come in and realizing that there is a waitlist, it is hard not to be struck by the wonder of it all.

## Middle school for all...

(Brenda Metzler)

The 7th graders are delighted to have their new space, a definite step up from sharing space with the primary school. But they and their teachers faced a challenge when the school year began in mid-January. There was an unexpectedly high enrollment in the class, numbering 41 students versus the anticipated 25. Not only was this a huge number of students for a single teacher to manage, but their 41 desks made for an extremely jam-packed classroom.

Needham unintentionally helped create this situation. The cost of monthly tuition in the middle school was preventing some students from continuing their studies beyond 6th grade. So when the partnership received a grant in honor of Clark and Kay Taylor, we decided to offer to pay the monthly middle school tuition (\$50 annual cost per student) for every middle school student, regardless of family circumstances. The happy, but challenging result was that many students who had dropped out over the last several years re-enrolled. One of the teachers gratefully commented, "You are rescuing our older students!" We will continue this funding for 3 years, until this large class graduates from 9th grade. And everyone is hopeful that with this support, fewer students will get left behind.

When the Needham delegation later met with the middle school staff and parents' representatives, both sides shared concerns that the quality of education would suffer with such an unfavorable student to teacher ratio. Since the government refused to help fund a second 7<sup>th</sup> grade class, the teachers turned to Needham with a proposal to fund a second section. Ultimately the partnership committed to finding a way to provide the necessary \$5,700 per year to split the class. So on April 1st the two classrooms of 7<sup>th</sup> graders began their studies with 20-21 students each. The class sizes should be particularly helpful to the 10+ students who have been out of school for a year or more. The middle school will monitor the success of the students, and we hope to hear that they are doing well.



Middle School, new Classrooms unit #2 Feb 2019

A delegation visit to the Primary School revealed progress of a different sort. Through a grant from a regional health entity, and with some funding from two Needham donors, six flush toilets are being built for the school. Given the extreme rarity of flush toilets in the village, a humorous thought crossed my mind: might another inauguration be in the offing?!



Middle School students presenting using iPads.