

A Note from Our Letter Exchange Coordinator

Welcome to the Spring 2024 Guatemala Partnership Newsletter! Inside are many updates from this past February's delegation, as well as news on upcoming events and information about our August 2024 delegation.

The February 2024 delegation was comprised of a diverse group of travelers hailing from Oregon, California, Massachusetts, and Vancouver, Canada. Travelers ranged from 17 to 80 years old and included high school students, a recently retired schoolteacher, a documentary film maker, and a graphic designer, among other professions. Each traveler brought valuable perspectives and a multitude of personal talents. As your delegates, they embodied—and carried forward—your commitment to building community and living in solidarity with the people of Santa María Tzejá.

In Santa María Tzejá (SMT), the delegation encountered a community that continues to vibrate with the collective energy of its founders. It met with schoolteachers, scholarship students, local families, and community leaders. Through meetings and meals, laughter, and deep conversation they shared in the enthusiasm and energy of this special community.



While travelers on the February delegation were there in-person, you were there in spirit as well. The above photos were taken shortly after the delegation arrived in SMT. In the photos, members of the delegation are distributing your letters to an enthusiastic crowd eager to hear from you. You and your letters are an important and integral part of this enduring partnership and we thank you for your continued participation.

- Alan Clayton-Mathews

Stay in Touch

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Upcoming Dates

Saturday, June 1:

Farm-a-Thon Fundraiser to support education and development in Santa María Tzejá at the Natick Community Organic Farm.

Sunday, June 18:

Partner family letters are due for the August 2024 delegation.

July 30-August 11:

August 2024 Delegation to Santa Maria Tzejá.

Contents

Page 2: Seeds of Freedom
Page 4: "Democratic Spring" in Guatemala
Page 4: From Mindfulness to Math
Page 6: Community Market Inauguration
Page 7: Music in Santa María Tzejá Inspires a Recorder Project
Page 8: Film Night in SMT

Seeds of Freedom

by Jeff Clausen

When a delegation arrives in Guatemala City there is a flurry of activity as it orients to the country, gets updated on the current political situation, and learns important historical context.

This past February's delegation arrived at an especially meaningful time, as our first day overlapped with the anniversary of the destruction of Santa María Tzejá by the Guatemalan military in 1982 and the first month of the historic new government of Juan Arévalo, who came to power through the support of an indigenous led movement against corruption. It was also the first day of Lent, a time of reflection on the past and hope for the future.

In this vein, we started our first day in Guatemala visiting the House of Memory, an indigenous museum that tracks 500 years of history from the arrival of the Spanish through the present and that deals with the racism, violence, genocide, and destruction that has occurred to the Mayan people. Connecting the museum with SMT's history, we then visited the national cathedral and the memorial pillars at its entrance that contain the names of the villages destroyed—and innocent persons massacred—by the Guatemalan government in the 1980's. Absorbing the magnitude of the hundreds of villages and thousands of names on the pillars, we stopped at the one that contains Santa María Tzejá and touched the names of relatives of members of our group.



We then shifted to the present and had lunch with members of NISGUA (the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala) an NGO that provides international accompaniment and support to indigenous groups working to protect their lands and who continue to seek justice for the past crimes of the Guatemalan government. We learned about their current work and their approach to solidarity. In doing so, we discussed the role and importance of working together across borders to address and combat issues of violence, repression, and political corruption that threaten us all.

From there we shifted to looking toward the future and met with former Guatemala Congresswoman Sandra Moran, an indigenous woman and first openly LGBTQ person elected to Guatemala's Congress. In our discussions, we reflected on the successful 106 days of protests by the people to stop the right wing's attempt to prevent the Arevalo administration from coming to power. We discussed how the success of the movement was not based on one person, but instead came from the collective efforts of the people. We reflected that there is now a sense of energy and hope among the people, a feeling that this time there really could be a chance for a better future if everyone works collectively and against individualism and corruption.

The day, however, was not all politics and heavy conversations. In the late afternoon, we made time to visit a small independent bookstore to find children's books for Santa María Tzejá's library. Our shopping excursion was the happy result of a generous donation from a retired librarian and member of the Natick church who specifically asked that we use her donation to buy children's books for SMT's library.

At the bookstore, my daughter, Jenna, came upon Clark Taylor's book *Seeds of Freedom*, translated into Spanish. This is Clark's book on Santa María Tzejá and the community's historical and long-standing effort to educate its youth as a way to bring about freedom and liberation from oppression.

It was especially meaningful to chance upon this book, as this is the first delegation to SMT since Clark's passing in October of 2023. Finding Clark's book on education, while searching for children's books for SMT's library seemed a fitting reminder of the continued importance of education, acting collectively, and the idea that the seeds of freedom and a hopeful future for SMT are in its children.



Photos clockwise from top left: Jenna finding Clark Taylor's book in a Guatemala City bookstore; current students in Santa María Tzejá's middle school; Marycelda staffing the community's library; Chely teaching a coding class in the computer center; Clark Taylor in Santa María Tzejá in the early 1990's writing in his journal (and likely thinking about the hopes and dreams of Santa María Tzejá).

“Democratic Spring” in Guatemala

By Ali Canil Durbin

There are times in history that define and transform a country. This, right now, is one of those times in Guatemala. The delegation met with Sandra Morán, an activist and musician who was the first openly LGBTQ+ member of Guatemala’s Congress. She described the current moment as one of change, hope, and joy, a “democratic spring” for the country.

Elected in a landslide, reformist President Bernardo Arévalo and Vice President Karin Herrera took office in January despite attempts by powerful actors to overturn the election results. A massive, Indigenous-led, widespread public uprising that lasted 106 days ensured a peaceful transfer of power.

Despite a largely corrupt justice system, Arévalo and Herrera are strengthening participatory democracy. They eliminated hundreds of fake government jobs, uncovered a secret chamber in Congress used for shady backroom deals, and implemented a more transparent process for selecting governors. The new administration is also bolstering environmental protection. This is good news for Santa María Tzejá, which is actively protecting its 450-acre Cantil Reserve to preserve the ecosystem and mitigate climate change.

From Mindfulness to Math

by Kirsten McDonough

This was my first year visiting Santa María Tzejá. Being part of the delegation that has visited SMT twice a year for 30+ years allowed me a unique experience. When I arrived, I was welcomed with warmth and acceptance, hugs, and personal stories, as if I too had been visiting twice a year for 30+ years.

As a recently retired middle school teacher, I was looking forward to visiting the elementary and middle schools, and to meeting the teachers and students. After a few days of getting to know members of the community through breakfasts and dinners in their homes, hikes in the rainforest, gatherings, and just seeing people on the streets, it was finally time for the middle school meeting.

I had been planning to do a science experiment, but getting the equipment to Guatemala was difficult. So, I switched to teaching mindfulness, which I knew a little about, and didn’t need equipment for. But, when I arrived in the village, I noticed this natural mindfulness amongst the adults and the children. I found myself questioning what I might offer, when, actually, I wanted to learn about mindfulness from them. The meeting started and I introduced myself as a retired math and science teacher. As the introductions continued, I noticed a young man, Johnny Pastor, who I didn’t know at the time, get up and talk to, Martha, one of the interpreters. She communicated to me that he was interested in a math workshop; could I do a math lesson? I had never considered they would want a workshop on math! But that I could do.





So, after preparing overnight, I went to the middle school to meet the 7th, 8th, and 9th graders. I wrote the number 50 on the board and told the students “50 is the answer, what is the question?” Martha interpreted for me, and they started sharing some basic arithmetic answers: “ $20 + 30$ ”; “ $60 - 10$ ”; “ 2×25 ”; but then their answers went deeper: “ $1/10$ of 500”; “50% of 100”; “a very hot temperature.” We continued to look at patterns in multiples, square numbers, primes, and explored how to use the math they knew in deeper and creative ways.

The most remarkable thing for me was the enthusiasm of the students. Younger students were eager to play with multiples of 11, like $11 \times 96 = 1056$, which they were answering very quickly after seeing the pattern. Older students asked for more mathematical patterns. Their excitement, I think, reflects the values instilled within the village community.

Coincidentally, I later had dinner at the home of this new math teacher, Johnny Pastor, where he lived with his parents and siblings. We spent some of the time talking and looking over his math book and sharing ideas. Then we exchanged emails and have since been in touch a couple of times. Johnny shared that he is really enjoying teaching math. He told me his students are looking for patterns in his math lessons. And I am grateful for this budding friendship and opportunity to mentor a new, young, math teacher in a Mayan village of Guatemala. I had wondered how I was going to use my teaching experience in retirement, and this feels like a win-win!



Community Market Inauguration

by Brenda Metzler

It was delightful to return to Santa María Tzejá and to witness so much progress as the community pursues its goal of becoming ‘clean, green, and prosperous.’ A definite highlight was attending the inauguration of the huge, open-air community market that has long been a dream of the community.



The project has undergone various stages of construction over several years, as funding became available. As the delegation approached the market, people of all ages streamed into the space, some setting up tables around the perimeter to sell their local products—everything from fresh heart-of-palm stalks to baby chicks.

The whole community seemed to be there, either seated or observing from the perimeter of the marketplace, left open by design to showcase the beauty of the natural environment. The event featured a ribbon-cutting ceremony, marimba music played both by adults and middle school students, and a series of traditional dances performed by the students. Ninth graders also held a lively raffle to raise funds for their class trip to Tikal.

The main focus of the event was to acknowledge the many contributions of planning, funding, building materials, and community labor provided by individuals, the community, and outside entities over several years that brought the vision of a community market to fruition. Each donor organization was recognized and invited to say a few words, and each was glad to have been able to contribute to the collective effort. This is in the community's tradition of each person contributing their 'grano de arena' or 'grain of sand,' however small or large, to benefit a greater good.

Toward the end, leaders from Needham were invited to speak to its contributions to the project, in particular those funds given in memory of Kay Taylor. It was a special moment to remember Kay and the solidarity and love that she and the people of Santa María Tzejá shared over many years. Then the community and delegation gathered around the unveiling of a beautiful commemorative plaque in Kay's honor.

There is hope and expectation that the market will bring economic and even health benefits to the community by fostering the sale and purchase of fresh, local products to and from residents of Santa María Tzejá and surrounding communities on their Sunday market day, while also strengthening social connections within the community. It was clear virtually every resident felt the satisfaction of having given their 'grano de arena.'

Music in Santa María Tzejá Inspires a Recorder Project

By Alan Clayton-Matthews

Music lives in Santa María Tzejá. The community has a pair of marimbas and a marimba program in the middle school. The marimba is Guatemala's national instrument and there are Guatemalan radio stations devoted to marimba music. The community also has several adults who play the instrument, as well as persons who perform in music ensembles in the churches on electric keyboard, electric and acoustic guitars, and the marimba.

The voice, of course, is the primary musical instrument and it doesn't require any special equipment. As in schools here, every student in SMT sings, as any delegation can attest to. Moreover, traditional dances are also taught to all children. The schools occasionally compete in regional song and dance competitions.

The middle school has a rigorous music program where students learn marimba, guitar, and recorder. I am not familiar with the details of the music curriculum, but I have attended music classes where students are taught how to read music and how to perform written music.

My experience with recorders in SMT began as a delegation member. I would bring my plastic soprano recorder to family meals as a way to communicate and interact with the families. Often one of the children or young adults would bring out their own and we would play together. At the community's farewell celebration at



the end of a delegation week, I would often accompany the delegation’s musical performance on my recorder.

One time, I participated in a middle school recorder class. Every student had a soprano recorder – they are the small ones with piercing high notes. Every recorder was different, with a dissimilar pitch and sound quality. There were at least two different fingering schemes – baroque or German—and the quality of the instruments varied enormously. When we played a chord it sounded like it was from some contemporary atonal piece.

The memory of that class gave me the inspiration to propose an experiment which I am now working out with the middle school music teacher. The idea is to bring a set of alto recorders on the next delegation—enough for an entire music class—so each student has a recorder of their own that is of the same make and of good quality. Alto recorders are larger than the soprano, with a lower pitch closer to the modern flute, and were the instrument of choice for recorder players of the baroque era. With identical recorders, pleasant harmonies will be much easier to achieve. Recorders are a good choice of instrument for classes because they are affordable. Plastic recorders are not affected by the humidity, are maintenance free, and can last indefinitely. If the experiment is a success, it would be a sustainable music project for the Partnership.

The cost for a good quality recorder for a student is about \$60. If you have a passion for music and you would like to sponsor a recorder, please reach out to me.

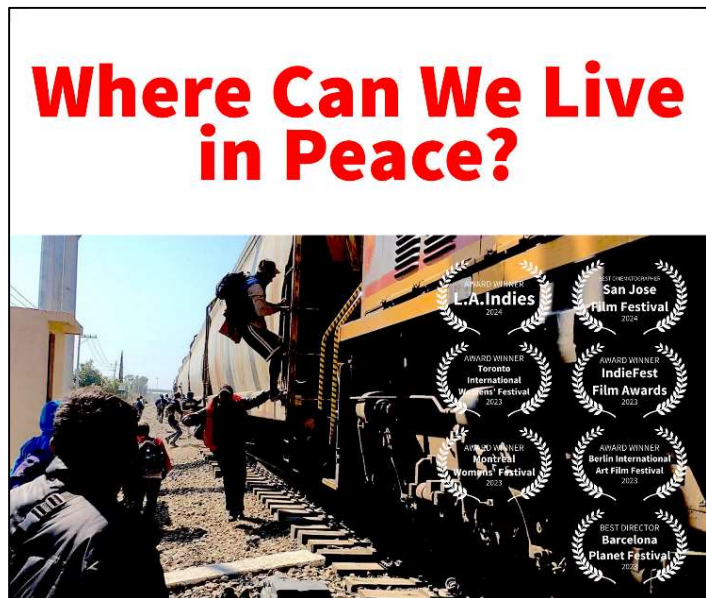
We will report back on this project in the Fall newsletter.

Film Night in SMT: Documentary and Discussion

by Jeff Clausen

The February 2024 delegation was honored to have the award-winning Canadian filmmaker Judy Jackson as a member of the delegation. Judy brought a copy of her recent documentary ‘Where Can We Live in Peace?’ to share with the community.

The documentary is centered on the ABBA House migrant shelter in Celaya, Mexico that helps tens of thousands of migrants, many of them woman and children, as they make the perilous journey north. The documentary humanizes the struggle and dangers migrants face from robbery and violence to exploitation.



Working with the middle school leadership in Santa María Tzejá, Judy hosted a screening of her documentary in the community's cooperative building with a conversation afterward. On the evening of the screening, the cooperative was filled with middle school students, parents of students, and members of the community.

Everyone found the documentary informative and the discussion that followed was rich and engaging.



August 2023 Delegation: Connect and Be Part of the Story!

Now is the time to begin thinking about your summer travel plans. We encourage you to consider joining us in Santa María Tzejá this August. Whether this is your first time and you have never traveled to Santa María Tzejá before, or you have been in the past and are looking to reconnect—wherever you are on life's journey—we invite you to join us!

From high school age youth to those of us more 'seasoned' delegates, all are welcome! Share your spirit and be part of the story.

*Travel dates for the August 2023 delegation are
Tuesday, July 30, 2024 – Sunday, August 11, 2024.*

If you have questions or would like to learn more about joining the August 2024 delegation contact Alan Clayton-Matthews at a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu or Bill Garrett at wgarrett@mit.edu.

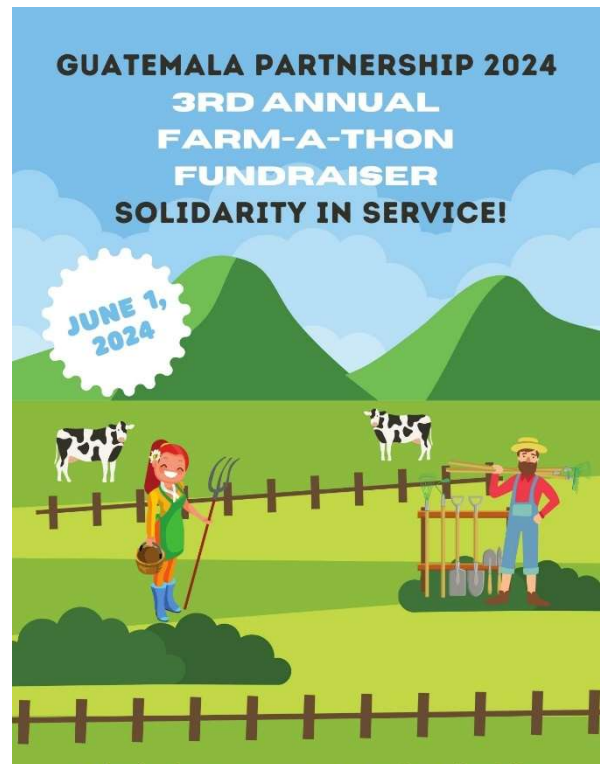
Upcoming Event: Guatemala Partnership Farm-a-Thon Fundraiser

Think Globally, Act Locally!

Register to join the Guatemala Partnership's 2024 Farm-a-Thon Fundraiser! We are seeking volunteers from both the Congregational Church of Needham and First Congregational of Church Natick to collaborate in this event. All funds raised by participants will support education and development in Santa María Tzejá, while all physical work performed will support the Natick Community Organic Farm. It is a perfect opportunity to support two organizations in one day!

Participants will raise pledges from family and friends to support their day of volunteering and then join together in good company from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm on Saturday, June 1st to work at the Natick Community Organic Farm. As we enter summer, this is a great way to celebrate our earth and support our friends both globally and locally.

To register or to learn more, please contact Jeff Clausen at clausenj@gmail.com or Brenda Metzler at bmetzler7@verizon.net.



Photos From the 2023 Farm-a-Thon



August 2023 Partner Family Letter Reminder!

With our August delegation just around the corner, now is the time to write your partner family response! This will provide time for our team to translate your letters and have them ready to go. Please send your letter to a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu by June 18, with a subject line that includes "Partner Family."

Additional Photos from February 2024

