

GUATEMALA UPDATE JANUARY 2020

Travelers: Hal Jordan, Mike and Virginia Anthony, Barney Hale, Ruth Menechella, Stephanie Arnold-Workman

After a year's absence (we canceled our August 2019 trip due to political protests and the associated road-blocks), we were happy to be back in Pala. Many of the adults and older children in Pala were busy harvesting coffee and it is a very good year. There is more coffee being harvested and the price this year is about \$53.00 per 100 pounds of sun-dried coffee beans. Last year they received about \$39.00 per 100 pounds.

This trip could best be described as a period of transition. We announced to the residents of Pala our intention to have them ultimately take control of managing the existing programs. It was also a trip of challenges as we faced issues in the computer center, made a difficult move within the educational scholarship program and essentially ended the tilapia program. Read on to find out more.

EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS

One of the key principles of the scholarship program is to have some shared responsibility with the students and their families. These responsibilities have included volunteer work in the library, assisting with library fund-raising, and attending called meetings. Unfortunately, we hear from the library staff that many of the students take a lax attitude towards these responsibilities and that regular reminders do not seem to help much. We have also seen an increase in the number of students that are dropping out of the program. We suspect that some of the students do not fully appreciate the value of the scholarship or embrace the effort that it takes to maintain one.

One of the most important meetings takes place while we are in Pala. At this time, we review the program guidelines with the students, discuss issues that have arisen, and acknowledge the accomplishments of those that have completed middle school, high school or a university program. Attendance at this meeting is mandatory unless there is a valid reason the student cannot attend.

Sixteen students did not show up for the meeting. The most common reason given was that they did not know the time of the meeting. The meeting time was announced in advance and posted on a bulletin board in the village. As a result, they lost their

scholarship for the upcoming year. They will be allowed to reapply next year and funds that were committed to them will remain in place.

All is not lost however. The program currently has 30 middle school students, 14 high school students and 5 university students under scholarship. We celebrated the graduation of Lorenzo Eduardo, who had been sponsored by Bob and Carol Hatley, with cake, presenting Lorenzo with a gift from the Hatleys and taking many inspirational pictures. We are also anticipating the March 2020 graduation of Glenda Cotiy Chavez who has completed a three-year university degree.

University students received their check, so that they can pay their registration fee and first month of school.

COMPUTER CENTER / LIBRARY

We delivered three refurbished laptops. The laptops were intended to be given to teachers as an incentive for learning computer skills and bringing their students to the library on a regular basis. Seven teachers had taken a skills test created by Manuel, the computer instructor and qualified for the computers. The three laptops were awarded with the remaining four to be taken in January 2021.

Manuel had encountered problems with utilizing new software and connecting the classroom computers with a server. Stephanie worked with Manuel on resolving this issue.

The library staff has been raising money to help support library expenses with the intent of helping the library become self-sustainable in the future. Our librarian, Juana, shared that in the past year they had raised \$1,000 through a variety of projects. These include monthly fundraisers with the students selling special snacks, collecting and recycling aluminum cans, renting out tables and a home-made canopy that the library owns and selling school supplies. In addition, the library receives income from photocopies and the computer classes. This was great news because it is much more than the library has been able to raise in the past.

We learned that the Elders and library staff have not been having regular meetings as they had in the past. All agreed that these meetings were necessary for good management of the library and our other programs. Francisco, the pastor, suggested that the library staff come to the monthly Session meetings and he will coordinate the meetings with Juana.

PEACE OF GOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PALA)

One of the most noticeable differences in Pala was the construction associated with expanding the Peace of God Presbyterian church. They are adding a second floor that extends beyond the footprint of the existing ground level. They also expanded the “kitchen” and added wood-burning stoves to replace the open-fire cooking they had previously used for food preparation.

We met with women from the church to thank them for cooking for the group and for giving their time, dedication, and care to the group. The women from the church requested a blender and a stove to make corn tortillas.

MINI-LOANS

Management of the mini-loan program was transferred to Pala residents four years ago. This program is a “closed” system in that funds will continue to remain available as loans are repaid. This program has been an example of how Pala residents can manage financial resources responsibly. There are 86 beneficiaries and all of them have paid the interest money for last year. The loan principal money is expected to be paid in February and new loans will be issued in March.

The mini-loan committee plans to add 1 to 3 additional people and will start writing guidelines and resource document for the program. The intent is to have institutional knowledge that can be passed to future committee members and help ensure the long-term future of the program.

TILAPIA PROGRAM

The program will not be active for now because people are confused about the fish care and they do not have enough time to invest for now. Juana Tzep did express her willingness to continue trying to raise fish on her own in her tank. Her husband was very supportive. An offering will be given to her so that she can start with her first batch of fish. Anibal, who we gave a scholarship to study fish farming, agreed to help the couple set up their fish operation and provide advice when he could, as he has taken a job outside of the village.

LUNCH PROGRAM

The school lunch program uses meals supplied by Rise Against Hunger and is very popular. The first three days after school was concluded for the year, multiple children would line up with their bowls for lunch, but to no avail. Meals are tied to school attendance and are not served when classes are not in session. Also, the supply of meals in Pala is just about exhausted and will not likely last for more than a month when classes resume.

We will again apply to Rise Against Hunger for a grant of food to continue this valuable program. There are challenges with continuing the lunch program. With multiple organizations requesting meals, the demand is exceeding the Rise Against Hunger supply. In addition, the Kirk of Kildaire will need to secure funds to pay for shipping the meals to Guatemala and finding (and paying for) a suitable storage location. Raising the funds will be a focus of the Peach on the Porch event the Kirk will host in July, 2020.

WEAVING PROGRAM

We made payment and took delivery of 256 scarves and one custom order table runner. The payment accounted for another \$3,400 of economic infusion into the village. Since 2015, the weaving program has paid over \$50,000 directly to the weavers. This cash is especially important since it can be used by the weavers in direct support of their families.

The weaving committee had already done a quantity and quality control check. To show trust and respect, we accepted all scarves without further inspection. We will find out if this was a good decision once the scarves arrive at the air freight office of the RDU airport and are subjected to further washing and processing.

Arlindo Valesquez accompanied us to Pala on Sunday. Arlindo is a university professor that teaches business classes. He also works with multiple manufacturers and retailers to promote products produced in Guatemala. Arlindo grew up in a village like Pala, was able to go to school due to a scholarship and learned to weave as a young boy. He has pledged to help the weaving program. Our concept is to have textiles woven in Pala be the source materials and accent pieces incorporated into other items like cosmetic bags, small cases or handbags. More sophisticated manufacturing capability than what is available in Pala will be required to develop this concept. We will start with making a small number of samples.

CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

Between 25 and 30 children gathered for Bible story time and games on the Friday we were in Pala. Due to coffee harvest time, many children were not able to attend because they were working on the coffee plantations helping their parents. There was also a bell ringing session using color coded bells and 24 x 36 size "sheet music" with colors representing the notes.

WOMEN'S / MEN'S WORKSHOPS

Women's: Mike and Anthony Virginia, Stephanie Arnold-Workman and Patty Ajanel held a Women's Seminar where information about women's rights and female menstrual health education was shared. "Days for girls" kits and toiletry kits were given out! About 40 young girls and adult women attended this meeting. They were all engaged!

Patty had already researched and developed a discussion about women's rights. She discussed discrimination based on gender and social/indigenous class. She described physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse and economic abuse in detail. As she was doing this, she used the basis that God created women and men equal and violence and discrimination against women is a sin against God. She detailed why women should not expect mistreatment to be acceptable.

Mike Anthony further advised that women in the village can support one another when they know another woman is being mistreated by her husband. Mike pointed out that men who abuse usually were abused as children and asked they discuss this with their young boys.

Using information from www.timeforgirls.org Mike explained sexual development of girls and boys with emphasis on the menstrual cycle. As Mike talked about cramps, nausea, headaches and back aches, a few of the older girls freely discussed their experiences. They were aware of using heat and moving around to ease discomfort, but they were unaware of using ibuprofen to help with the pain. This is an option easily available to them. There were also many questions about periods being irregular and why this happens.

Throughout this discussion Mike interjected more information from previous discussions about equality, physical, emotional and sexual violence. For clarity, Mike explicitly explained what sexual intercourse with respect to the more common term of "sexual relations". Mike discussed the concept of "consent" and advised that a girl can become pregnant the first time she ever has sex to prepare them for common myths/lies they may

be told by boys. Mike also gave examples of how boys/men may give excuses for having forced sex by saying the girl “deserved it” or “she really wanted it” or because of how she may have been dressed.

While Mike did not specifically discuss various options for family planning, he did stress that many different types of family planning are available and that they are safe and DO NOT prevent pregnancy later in life.

Stephanie presented a section on the conditions of immigrants in the US without documentation. She related her work experience with undocumented immigrants and described how many of them came with unrealistic expectations of success. She advised that without legal documents, they were at the mercy of bosses who can mistreat them and that their children live in fear that the parents will be taken away and deported leaving the children behind.

At the Women's Meeting we learned that one of our original scholarship students, Juana Susannah, who was sponsored by Hal and Gail Jordan has been working for a government funded program that helps educate adults in indigenous communities. Pala is one of the areas where she works. Six people have graduated from her program to date. One of the women graduates encouraged the women to attend this program. We were thrilled to hear about the success of this program.

Men's: A young men's seminar was led by Mike Anthony and Stephanie Arnold-Workman with Patty Ajanel translating. Sixteen boys, ages 12 to 16, attended. One boy's father was also present.

The presentation addressed respect for women and girls and the occurrence of abuse. Key points were:

- Problems in this area are worldwide, regardless of country, culture or class,
- Mistreatment of girls and women can become socially acceptable.
- Boys can break this cycle by speaking up.
- How they would feel if their mother/sister were abused.

A separate meeting was held with about 25 men in attendance. Stephanie began by outlining the conditions faced by immigrants without documentation; essentially the same information that had been previously shared with the women.

The presentation also integrated the points about abuse of women and gender inequality that had also been previously shared with the women. A key point was that violence and gender inequality harm the entire village and perpetuates from generation to generation.

The meeting then focused on Type 2 Diabetes which is very prevalent in their population.

PLAN FOR PALA'S PROGRAM MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY

When we began our partnership with Pala 14 years ago with the hope of arriving at a time when we could transition management of the programs to them. We feel the time has arrived. We announced to those present at the community wide meeting our concept of implementing a five-year plan for Pala. We held a frank discussion and answered questions about what this entailed. Ultimately our plan is:

- continue to make annual trips each January through January 2025,
- during this time frame we will work together with people in Pala to set up guidelines so the programs will continue,
- Wendy de Rodas, our long-time interpreter, has a great deal of experience with the education system in Guatemala. For the past year she has been working with the university students and that has led to better student retention. She will now assume the role of In-Country Director of Education Programs and will work closely with the library staff and scholarship selection committee on selecting new students and better managing the students and their needs.
- Wendy and Patty Ajanel, In-Country Director of Operations, will visit Pala twice each year in our absence to oversee programs and help them become more confident in their abilities to manage the programs.
- we will continue to provide funding for the scholarship program as financial sponsors continue to participate.
- funding needs for programs like the library and computer center will be assessed as the transition develops.

The next KOK group trip will be January 6 to 12, 2021.