

October 2017

I have asked myself many times “What makes me so happy?” The answer is always that I feel the most joy when I am working and especially if my work helps others. Twenty years ago Bob Nakamaru, John Campbell, and a motley crew of Unitarian Universalist Youth went to a Quaker work-camp in Alabama and helped rebuild a church burned by White Supremacists. The project motto was **Work IS Love Made Visible**. It didn’t take long before everyone believed this to be true and a generous way to live: a gift to others is a gift to our selves.

Centro Maya Project has improved the lives of hundreds of people living in San Juan La Laguna, Guatemala, and nearby mountain villages and communities around Lake Atitlán. We became a non-profit corporation seven years ago, but we have been helping families since 2002. The demand for services we provide keeps growing. Fortunately there is transition, and as we add new families to our programs others become more independent, leaving room for change.

Sometimes it is difficult for me to put all of this in perspective. We are all inundated with requests from deserving causes, yet you have chosen Centro Maya Project as worthy of your support. I want you to know, all of your generosity is appreciated by the children, parents, and communities receiving scholarships, medical care, and food. Your Love is visible!

Sincerely,

Jeanne Nakamaru

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Building community while building a house

This past year Centro Maya project became involved in an enormous endeavor of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Quad Cities. Listening to multiple stories of the poverty faced by indigenous Mayans in Guatemala, they developed a dream. It sounded small – build one house for one family – but the reality was huge. The dream required building materials, wages for local workers, travel/housing arrangements for volunteers, and the willingness to construct a block house from the ground up. (UUs are not noted for being builders.)

My goal for Centro Maya Project extended beyond the actual house. It was to develop the feeling of community between volunteers and the owners of the new house, all in about 10 days. I hoped to familiarize the 18 volunteers with our life in an indigenous community and our programs: food assistance, health care, scholarships, and the garden. The volunteers carried 10 extra suitcases filled with books, shoes, toys, medical supplies, and clothing. They lived and ate with host families and were involved in their daily lives. The few who decided living in a hotel was the best option also enjoyed eating *comida típica* (typical daily food) with families, and friendships ensued.

The multigenerational volunteers ranged from 7 to 68 years old: teens, women, men and families. Most did not speak Spanish to effectively communicate. But, as we discovered, there are so many ways to be engaged that language isn't always an issue. To further involve our volunteers with families, we visited three *aldeas*, small mountain villages, to offer clothing, books, and the promise of food assistance.

Our volunteers met the families receiving our on-going food assistance the third Sunday every month and walked with them to their homes, carrying their food. The families welcomed the visitors into their homes as guests and talked with them about their lives, their work, and children. Connections made became invaluable.

Two groups of volunteers accompanied me to the *aldeas*, meeting large multigenerational families who live in housing without water, electricity, or basic necessities yet try to survive with few resources. We could see the visible effects of malnutrition and the sadness in the eyes of parents and grandparents. Their gratefulness for clothing and shoes – even if they did not fit – was heart-wrenching. We visited schools and libraries, donating 150 Spanish-language books we had purchased through the Scholastic Literacy Project. Children in the preschool were thrilled to receive one item of “new” clothes and rewarded us with beautiful smiles. Valentine heart candy with “love you” was a special treat! Truly *Love* made visible!

Neighbors helping neighbors

This year Centro Maya Project has seen Work is Love made Visible through the actions of others. Great joy has come from working with the people from San Juan providing outcomes we never anticipated. Centro Maya Project's successes occur because there are many local people who respect their neighbors with much less and are willing to volunteer. Cooperation and coordination keep the programs working. Maria Cholotio Hernandez and Benedicto Ixtamer Pérez are critical to the accomplishments of Centro Maya Project. We flourish because they are willing to volunteer their time and compassion. They recognize those who are in need who truly cannot survive without help. Every day someone comes to their door requesting food or money. We know their values and are confident with the decisions they make. Our friendship of 15 years has given us this peace of mind.

We also rely on the willingness of the owners of two stores – Super Quic and El Granjero, Hotel Posada La Merced, local pharmacies, a shuttle service for medical supplies, Clínica San Juanerita, and doctors in Guatemala City to provide assistance.

Basic programs grow and evolve

- ❖ Centro Maya Project began with food assistance for three families. Now we are donating food once a month to 33 families with more than 125 children. Initially we helped only families living in San Juan, but we've expanded to assist several families living in three small mountain communities.
- ❖ Twelve years ago I helped one deaf child get a hearing aid from the Lion's Club. GN ReSound, a Minnesota-based hearing aid company, has donated 200 NEW hearing aids in the last 3 years. Regina Yotz, our only paid employee, maintains the program year-round by giving hearing tests and providing follow-up care.
- ❖ Medical assistance continues to help a child with leukemia, people with diabetes or glaucoma, babies with delayed development and genetic disorders, emergency transportation, and transportation to pre- and post-operative appointments.
- ❖ Public education is free, but school supplies cost \$125-\$350 each year. Friends from Washington state began *El Fondo Para Mi Escuela*, a scholarship program guaranteeing one student from 40 families would receive an education. We are extremely happy that children who began their studies 9 years ago are beginning to graduate from high school with the possibility of a professional occupation. Two young graduates plan to attend universities on weekends. Another is hoping to be sponsored to come to the United States to attend a university and study medicine.
- ❖ A new program was initiated in February. Clínica San Juanerita (a private clinic) raised the cost of an exam to \$4, higher than the average wage of a man's work for one day. We worked with the clinic so that our food-assistance families have medical cards and pay only \$1.25 for an exam. People now seek treatment when they begin to feel ill and before the illness has become severe.