

Global Youth Connect

Guatemala Program Report: 2005

*Human Rights Delegation for Young Leaders
January 2 – January 16, 2005*



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As we crisscrossed through the zones of Guatemala City, we saw many clear signs that the road to peace in this small Central American country is a long one. The list of names of those who died during the armed conflict are etched in gold on the pillars of a cathedral in the Parque Central. Multi-colored murals scattered throughout the city claim public space, reminding us that accountability - - for the crimes of both today and yesterday -- remains elusive.



A squatter community perilously cascading down the side of a mountain, an illegal community that continues to rebuild each time the police tears it down, tells of the unremitting pressures of poverty. The flash of a gang tattoo on the arm of a young man, the brightly colored patterns on the *huipil* of an indigenous woman eking out a living selling tortillas to busy city workers, and the sight of a street kid sniffing glue to erase hunger pangs are all fleeting glimpses of only a few of the toughest issues that continue to plague Guatemalans. Despite the gains made when the Peace Accords were signed 10 years ago, continued violations of human rights -- from illegal street killings to the deep poverty of and ingrained discrimination against rural indigenous communities -- keep too many Guatemalans living without basic human dignity and justice.

We dedicate this program to the victims of the armed conflict, to those that survived and are struggling to understand and seek justice, and to the many who continue to suffer violence, discrimination, and exploitation. We stand in solidarity with human rights defenders, in particular with young leaders who are working hard to make their country a better place for all. We recognize that the histories of our two countries are deeply intertwined; our fates depend on our ability to work together to bring hope and peace to our communities.

In January 2005, a delegation of 11 young leaders from the U.S. spent two weeks taking a hard look at what's happening in Guatemala today. Meeting with leading human rights defenders and government representatives, we learned about the tragedies of the armed conflict and how this violent legacy continues to impact the lives of survivors. Young Guatemalans shared with us their lives, their hopes, and their vision for a brighter, more inclusive future. We reflected on the U.S.'s long history of involvement in Guatemala, mourned for those who have lost their lives, reached out to those who are still suffering and searched our souls for ways in which our small group of "gringos" could be a positive and responsible force for change. We were dismayed and saddened by how far Guatemala still has to go. Most importantly, we were deeply inspired by the many stories of courage, hope and dedication that we heard along the way.



Visits to Human Rights Organizations

In Guatemala, there is a strong web of civil society. There are many organizations and human rights defenders who are advocating for change: they are launching legal challenges to hold abusers accountable, organizing human rights education activities in local communities, guiding families through the difficult process of exhumations, identification and burial of remains uncovered at mass grave sites, and much more. We were privileged to have the opportunity to meet with and learn more about the work of the following organizations. They are all doing amazing work, making a difference in communities across the country -- often at great personal risk to themselves.

"The most important things that I gained from my participation in the trip came from the exposure to human rights organizations and being able to meet with and learn from the remarkable individuals who are doing such incredible work in Guatemala. I learned so much, not just about Guatemalan history, politics and society, but also about the kind of dedication, courage, and selflessness it takes to defend human rights and economic justice in such difficult circumstances."



HIJOS

HIJOS, a collective of young people who were children when their family members were disappeared, killed or massacred during the civil war, are committed to vindicating the thousands of victims. They utilize alternative educational tools -- such as murals, street theatre, strategically placed graffiti, protests and rallies -- to teach youth about their history so that they can understand today's struggle for social justice.

Nuestros Derechos

Nuestros Derechos is an outreach and assistance program for the over 5,000 children living on the streets of Guatemala City, providing a safe and supportive environment for children by helping them to redirect and establish productive lives. Their services include: visiting youths in prison, appearing in court with families, and providing street kids with food, clothing, shelter, alternative education, and long-term housing or family reunification. They also recently completed a study on the administration of justice for minors in Guatemala.

Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (CONAVIGUA)

CONAVIGUA, founded and run by women widowed during the civil war, fights to alleviate and resolve the most immediate needs for food, medicine, shelter and clothing for their children and families. CONAVIGUA also organizes and educates women about their rights and how they can actively participate in society. In a country where women might have

to speak two or three times just to be heard, the empowerment of women is very important to ensure a peaceful and inclusive future.



Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM)

GAM was the only human rights organization that arose during the period of the civil war and military dictatorship and is the oldest human rights organization in Guatemala. The organization was initially founded by women -- the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters -- of the families of people who were illegally kidnapped and disappeared without a trace. Today, GAM's main activities include legal actions and human rights education, as well as providing support to communities who are going through the process of exhuming mass graves and identifying remains.



Hector Gomez Calito and Maria de Rosario Godoy de Cuevas
Two of the founders of GAM, killed in 1985 during the height of the armed conflict

Asociacion Familiares de Detenidos y Desaparecidos de Guatemala (FAMDEGUA)

FAMDEGUA promotes training, education and raises awareness about human rights. Specifically they are dedicated to denouncing violations of the human rights of Guatemalans and organizing concrete actions to defend these rights. FAMDEGUA is also heavily involved in providing support to communities that are

searching for victims of the armed conflict.



Comite de Unidad Campesina (CUC)

CUC, an organization of campesinos, farmworkers, and poor indigenous and ladinos of diverse ethnicities and cultures of Guatemala are fighting to demand the right to land ownership for poor communities. Most of the more than 8 million Guatemalans who live in poverty do not own or have access to land on which they could grow crops to survive; the majority of the land is owned by a small percentage of the population or by large businesses that grow crops primarily for export (e.g., coffee and bananas). According to CUC, this is not only an economic issue but a cultural one as well since the indigenous communities have a deep spiritual relationship with the land and view themselves as its caretakers.



Fundacion de Antropologia Forense de Guatemala(FAFG)

FAFG's mission is to carry out exhumations of clandestine cemeteries in order to establish the fate of tens of thousands of people who "disappeared" and were thrown into unmarked graves during the counter-insurgency operations by the Guatemalan army in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.



"Watching a video on the exhumation process and then taking a tour of the lab was painful yet so important. The small boxes housing the remains of the victims and then seeing the bones all laid out was evidence of our mortality; perhaps most memorable however, were the dirt-covered traditional Mayan clothing laid out to the side which both gave life to the bones and made it painfully evident that rich lives were taken away without a second thought."

Asociacion para la Prevencion de Delito (APREDE)

APREDE is an alliance of human rights organization working to prevent crime in Guatemala. They focus their efforts on crime prevention activities directed towards youth at-risk of joining gangs and also with young people who are working to leave gangs. APREDE provides schooling and other social

development activities to help kids develop their self-esteem.

Movimiento Nacional de Derechos Humanos

The National Human Rights Movement of Guatemala is an association of organizations and human rights defenders who are committed to building a culture of peace and full respect for human rights in Guatemala through the promotion of citizen participation, education, and through strengthening the rule of law.



Procuradaria de Derechos Humanos (PDH)

The constitution of Guatemala authorizes a permanent Human Rights Ombudsman's Office whose main job is to build and defend human rights in Guatemala through ensuring that governmental authorities are acting in the best interests of the Guatemalan people, to investigate and denounce specific abuses of human rights. We visited the office of the Procuradaria responsible for overseeing human rights education activities in Guatemala.

Comision Presidencial de los Derechos Humanos (COPREDEH)

COPREDEH is a government entity connected to the President's office of Guatemala and was created to coordinate the actions of the Executive ministries and institutions (particularly with the judicial system and the

human rights ombudsman's office) and to better exercise vigilance and protection of human rights.

Human Rights Learning Community Quetzaltenango

After a week spent in Guatemala City talking to human rights organizations a brief weekend visit to Antigua (where half the group hiked to the top of Volcan Pacaya and the other half relaxed at the beach), we traveled to Quetzaltenango, the second largest city in Guatemala located in the western highlands of the country.

In Quetzaltenango we joined with 12 young Guatemalan leaders for a three day human rights learning community. A "learning community" is an interactive educational experience where participants build connections and work together toward common goals for which all share responsibility. Participants share learning, skills and understanding with each other as well as increase their practical knowledge on the complexity of human rights issues. A learning community is a very interactive experience and encourages dialogue, discussion and debate among all participants.

Over the course of the three days of the workshop, participants had a chance to get to know each other, sharing their lives, cultures and perspectives with each other in a rich exchange of ideas and solutions. Workshop topics included sessions devoted to discussions and presentations on:

*Building a Common Understanding of Human Rights
Motivations and Strategies for Action
The Root Causes of Violence
Effects of Globalization and Development in Our
Communities
Education as a Preventative Tool for Change*

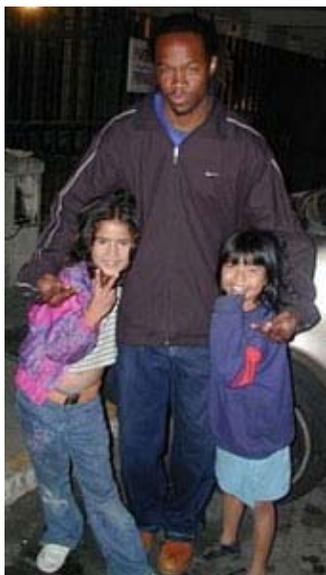


"It was really amazing to find that despite cultural differences, we are all linked together in this life as we attempt to survive and find happiness."

Service Project with Street Kids Ciudad Guatemala

Due to two unanticipated events -- a protest against a mining company's unpopular plan to extract the resources of a local community and the protests of a group of former civil patrolmen (ex-PACS) conscripted by the army during the armed conflict demanding payment for their past service -- which might have led to the potential blocking of a major highway intersection in Guatemala, the group returned to Guatemala City a couple of days early. After briefly attending a peaceful protest rally in the Parque Central marking the one year anniversary of the current president's administration, we spent the next two days working with Nuestros Derechos, GYC's local partner organization, on service projects in support of their work with street kids. We painted the inside and outside of their shelter (including a mural reminding us all that "The Future is in Our Hands"), put together a series of educational posters on human rights issues and Guatemalan culture to decorate the walls of

the shelter, and spent a night in the streets with the organization's outreach team.



"One of the most important experiences that I had was going out with Nuestros Derechos to feed street kids and some of their families. More than any other experience, that was our moment of greatest exposure to the biggest injustices in Guatemala -- people who have next to nothing, people from the illegal barrios we saw from a distance, kids who live near trash dumps, kids who sniff glue and solvent so that they would forget about the hunger and cold that envelops them -- drug users out of necessity."

On Saturday night, our last night together as a group in Guatemala City, we went out for a few hours with the Nuestros Derechos team to get a first-hand glimpse of their street outreach with kids living on the streets.

The first place we visited was in Zona 10, blocks away from the US Embassy (where we had visited with the US Ambassador the week before) and near the ritzy shopping mall and a Hooters restaurant. We met a large group of people working as street vendors and who live near the atrocious conditions of the city's garbage dump. There were many young and energetic girls among the group, ranging from 10-13. They wanted to play so we chased them

around the parking lot, gave them piggyback rides, and generally got goofy with them. The girls asked us to sit with them as they ate the dinner provided by Nuestros Derechos, a simple bowl of soup, two tortillas and a cup of coffee. Everyone wanted their picture taken and loved the instant playback offered by a digital camera.

The second site that we visited is a popular spot for Guatemalan lovers and families to spend a Sunday afternoon. The park overlooks a vista of the city (including the wealthiest neighborhood in Guatemala City). Here we met several teenage boys who live and work in the park. One of the Nuestros Derechos staff members, showed us the bottle of glue that one young man had been sniffing. The high from the glue takes away from the cold and the hunger; it is cheap, readily available, and strong. We were surprised when they returned the glue bottle to the kids. Why? Could it be that as long as these kids are struggling on the streets that it doesn't make any sense to take away one of their only sources of "comfort", their primary survival tool? Without the intervention of services -- housing, food, education, job training -- wouldn't he just buy another bottle of glue?

Another young boy (15 years old) asked where we were from, how we came to be in Guatemala, and how we learned to speak Spanish. He told us about how on Sundays, his job is to take care of six horses that are rented out for rides to children and families who come to the park to relax and enjoy the view. He cares for them all night and then pulls the horses around all day. For this he earns 5 quetzales or less than \$1 per day.

The last site we visited was the most depressing and strange of the three. In a corner parking lot near a major intersection with traffic and chicken buses roaring by, a group of young boys were playing soccer at 10 p.m. There were several young people hanging around and most of them were very high on a very strong solvent, the smell so strong that their clothes

reaked of it. With some of these kids it was difficult to have a conversation; when we asked them questions, even as simple as "What's your name?", they would look at us with vacant eyes as if they could not see us or not process the situation, the drugs having robbed them of their ability to be fully present.

This brief experience on the streets reminded us of the urgency of providing services and support to this highly vulnerable population of kids; the experience moved us deeply and profoundly. Without the critical support provided by Nuestros Derechos, the future of many of these kids is very, very grim. And yet given the larger context of human rights abuses in Guatemala, providing shelter, food and counseling is not sufficient. That is why Nuestros Derechos is advocating the government to improve the administration system, providing legal assistance to some street kids that have been persecuted by the police, and conducting their work with the goal of not just soothing the wounds of today but fighting for a better future for all of Guatemala's youth.

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Follow-up Projects

Each participant in the delegation plans to share their experience in some way to help educate others in the U.S. about the situation in Guatemala, particularly the ways in which the histories and current stories of our two countries are deeply intertwined.

Some of the projects that program participants have expressed an interest in working on over the coming months include:

- Raising awareness among others in their community and/or school through slide shows, presentations and inviting guest speakers to talk about Guatemala and human rights in general
- Writing articles for their school or community newspaper and like-minded organizations interested in sharing information and perspectives on Guatemalan human rights issues
- Bringing the issues to other youth in the classroom - from a young teacher participating in the program creating a lesson plan on Guatemala to her students from another participants convincing another high school teacher to incorporate discussions of the Guatemalan genocide into her curriculum
- Launching a radio program to bring the sounds and stories of Guatemala and the program's participants to a U.S. audience
- Returning to Guatemala to volunteer for a longer period of time with Nuestros Derechos and other human rights organizations

Global Youth Connect is also committed to continuing to raise awareness about the human rights situation in Guatemala by mobilizing and inspiring young people to get involved in some way and by supporting and working in alliance with our local Guatemalan partner, Nuestros Derechos. Therefore, we have decided to organize another youth human rights delegation to Guatemala in August 2005.

We have also put together a basic "action guide" with a list of ideas for getting involved

and links to human rights organizations working on Guatemalan issues.

U.S. Participant Bios

SEAN COLENZO-SEMPLÉ

Currently a sophomore at Columbia University in New York City, Sean has long been interested in international issues. As a high school student, he participated in an international youth leadership camp (Camp Rising Sun) and served as co-president of the United Nations Society. Sean is studying economics and political science with a concentration in Spanish, and he has a keen interest in politics, journalism and law. He has served as an intern at the Community Relations Service, a division of the United States Department of Justice which provides mediation in situations of ethnic tension, and he spent six years as a reporter and editor for the youth journalism organization, Children's Express News Service (now Children's PressLine). Sean is a broadcaster for the news and sports departments of WKCR Radio, co-captain of the Columbia water polo team, and an alumnus of Columbia's Emerging Leaders Program.

GABRIEL FELDMAN

Gabriel was born and raised in Washington, DC. The chance to live and work in Nicaragua as a volunteer the summer after his junior year in high school was a very influential experience for him. Gabriel is now a sophomore at Columbia, and his goal remains learning how to effect concrete social change, both in the U.S and globally. He tutors New York City high school students and works with the Brotherhood Project and the Black Students Organization at Columbia. He likes to write. After graduating he hopes to join Teach for America or Peace Corps.

ERIN GEORGE

Erin is studying urban public health at Bryn Mawr College with a minor in Spanish. She is interested in the ways that people provide, or fail to provide, one another with healthcare, and wants to be an advocate for those whose access to the right for a health life has been diminished or cut off. Erin hopes to achieve this goal by eventually pursuing a MD or MPH once she graduates from college. She is particularly interested in learning how

Guatemalans are coping with the aftermath of decades of war, engaging in meaningful dialogue about human rights issues and exploring the steps that individuals and organizations can take to protect health care, women's rights, and develop economic and social structures that benefit all of Guatemala society.

GENESSA GOODMAN-CAMPBELL

Genessa is a junior at Colorado College and is currently studying for a semester through the Peace and Conflict Resolution Program of American University in Washington, DC. As a part of this course, she is completing a research project exploring the effectiveness of the Guatemalan peace accords in addressing indigenous rights. Genessa also works as an intern at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs conducting research on a variety of Latin American issues. She hopes to continue to pursue her interest in Latin America after graduating, possibly joining the Peace Corps or spending time living and traveling in Latin America. As a part of her current coursework, Genessa recently participated in a 3-week trip to the Balkans to learn more about conflict resolution and reconciliation.

RACHEL LOPEZ

Rachel recently graduated from Northwestern University with a triple major in political science, sociology, and international studies. This past year, she was a Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow funded through the Congressional Hunger Center, where she spent six month conducting grassroots anti-hunger advocacy and another six months in Washington, DC doing public policy analysis on the indigenous arts economy as a strategy for economic development and poverty alleviation. Currently, she is pursuing her passion for the arts and has started a small business selling her creative jewelry. Rachel presently works as a legal assistant with the St. Petersburg Community Law Program. In December, she will begin a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala where she will research economic development as it relates to human and indigenous rights.

SARAH MACKIN

Sarah's life was irreversibly changed when, as a high school senior, she was chosen to receive diversity and leadership training from the Posse Foundation that challenged her social justice

consciousness. Currently a sophomore at Bryn Mawr College, Sara is very active on campus in social justice and multi-cultural organizations. In the past year, she has worked as a street outreach worker for the Philadelphia Coalition to End Homelessness, as an ESL teacher and adult education/advocacy intern at a shelter for poor and homeless women, and as an HIV/AIDS awareness and safe-sex outreach worker with the Congreso de Los Latinos Unidos. She is particularly interested in gaining an understanding in education, women's rights, health, HIV/AIDS and economic development in Guatemala and hope to enter the Peace Corps upon her graduation from college.

LATOYA MASSEY

Latoya currently works as a 9th grade Humanities teacher at The School for Human Rights in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. She graduated from Wesleyan University with a double major in African American studies and psychology and recently completed a Masters degree in education at Pace University. As an undergraduate, Latoya acted as a liaison for the Office of the Dean and Office of Student Activities and Leadership Development, coordinating student of color leadership development retreats and seminars. Latoya believes that it is important to inform individuals not only what it means to have human rights but how to execute them in everyday life. She is interested in empowering inner city youth through starting school-based programs promote activism and leadership and hope to bring her experience in Guatemala back to the classroom and her students.

ANA NÁJERA-MENDOZA

Ana is a U.S.-born Guatemalan from Los Angeles who is in her third year of undergraduate studies at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is majoring in Latin American studies and political science and is focusing on examining and comparing democratization and political participation in Latin America and the United States. She currently works as the Latino Youth Organizer for National Voice (www.nationalvoice.org), a national coalition of non-profit organizations and community groups working to maximize political participation in the November 2, 2004 presidential election. Upon graduating from college, Ana hopes to obtain a Masters degree in public policy and a law degree and focus her energy on community organizing by

building bridges between identities in the United States and Latin America.

JULIA RUNTE

Julia recently graduated from George Washington University in Washington, DC with a degree in anthropology with a specific interest in indigenous cultures and rights. During her undergraduate studies, she prepared a paper for her Human Rights and Ethics course on the women's rights in Guatemala. She currently works as a projects assistant at the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership. Julia hopes to pursue a career in the non-profit sector working to protect indigenous rights and promote economic development in Latin America.

WILLIAM SCHMITT

Bill first became interested in Latin American and issues pertaining to human rights and social justice as a high school student when he helped organize a month-long service trip to the Dominican Republic to work with local families to build a school house in a remote mountain village. As an undergraduate at Marquette University, he majored in international affairs, political science, and Spanish. Upon graduation, Bill spent a year volunteering for a center for poor families in Quito, Ecuador. He is now in a graduate program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he is pursuing a Masters degree in international public affairs. Bill is interested in the connection between human rights and economic development and is currently working on a major research project on economic development in Guatemala.

COURTNEY SIEGEL

Courtney is studying at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas where she is studying Latin America, Spanish and anthropology. She has served as a bilingual mentor at a local elementary school as well as a volunteer document translator at the Political Asylum Project of Austin. Courtney recently completed two months of intensive research for her thesis comparing the experience of urban and rural young mothers in Mexico. After graduation, she hopes to pursue an advanced degree in Latin American studies, communications, public policy or anthropology.

EDWARD WARNER

Originally from a racially-charged community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Edward discovered his passion for defending the rights of the wronged at an early age. He recently graduated from the University of Maryland in Baltimore County with a degree in political science and international affairs and remains as a graduate student pursuing a Masters degree in intercultural communication with a focus on Hispanic studies. Edward also works in the university's student judicial affairs department. Upon obtaining his advanced degree, Edward hopes to attend law school with a focus on civil rights law in order to pursue his interest in expanding human rights, integrity and tolerance within the U.S. and other countries.