

Winter 1994
Norwalk, CT

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

As most of you know, on March 1st of this year I left Connecticut and Seattle to study Spanish in Guatemala, with the hope of finding a community within which I could live and work. After only a few weeks in Quetzaltenango (or Xela as the Mayans called it) I knew I had found one such community. The language school where I studied is a small cooperative run by about 12 people whose original idea was to put the money that came into the school back to work in the community. What remains after salaries and expenses are paid is channeled into scholarships for Guatemalan students and several social projects. These projects and the people I've met are the reason I've decided to stay.

Both of our major projects grew out of the ideas and efforts of two women's collectives in the rural outlying areas of Xela. With one group we build brick wood-burning stoves for families that still cook over open fire. With the other we build cement latrines and help cook and donate money to a children's cafeteria that feeds lunch to 100 kids daily. With all of these projects I am continually amazed by how much can be done with so little money. The stoves we build cost about \$15. each yet they reduce the family's usage of firewood $\frac{2}{3}$, dramatically reduce lung and eye ailments caused by excessive exposure to smoke, and eliminate the hazard caused to children by the open fire burning on the floor. The latrines are merely a mixture of pounds of sand and cement - their tremendous improvement to the standard of sanitation is obvious. As social projects are all but non-existent, the school donates the majority of the funding for the children's cafeteria. On our limited budget we manage to serve about 2000 meals for between \$200 and \$300, a meal which for a few is the only complete one they eat all day. In this country where 97% of the people live under the poverty line, in my eyes improving basic living conditions is essential if the goal is to help people get to a level where they are able to help themselves break the cycle of poverty.

Following almost 3 months of study, I stayed on at the school as a volunteer, working for the last 5 months on the various projects. Over this time I really feel as though I have been welcomed in as part of these communities. The level of acceptance I feel is extraordinary, especially among the children whose smiles and cheerful greetings renew my desire and commitment to work daily. As the summer closed and I reached the end of my savings, I was worried that I would have to move on from

this community to find a volunteer position that would at least cover my expenses (ie. room & board) as the school is unable to provide me with more than just a place to roll out my sleeping bag. But after much brainstorming, many thoughts of the kids I would leave behind, and with much support and encouragement from friends on both coasts, I have decided to try and continue my work by seeking sponsorship from within my own communities at home. I have calculated that on a budget of roughly **\$250** a month I would be able to not only support myself but also begin a few new projects in addition to continuing work on the existing projects. Some of my new project dreams include building a new roof on the cafeteria to replace the plastic tarp, painting the interior to brighten the cement walls, beginning a Saturday art project with the kids, and creating an emergency bank account for food.

It has taken me a great amount of soul searching to reach the point where I felt comfortable enough to ask for help. I guess now I am able to see this as an invitation which is open-ended rather than a request which is more confining. The invitation is to become involved in my work in Central America by supporting me, an invitation open to all those who may find themselves with the time or space to respond. It is an opportunity to create a more personal sense of international community by supporting projects which we may believe are important but are not in the position to actually take part in. Some very wise people encouraged me not to forget the true pleasure that many receive when they are able to support work that they believe in. I guess to me it extends the cycle of giving that I feel a part of. I have learned and received so much in return for what I have given. And if I had still a few doubts they were all erased the other night as the energy I received from a small group's excitement after a presentation of my work at St. Jerome proved all of this to be true beyond the shadow of a doubt. It makes it easier for me to pose this invitation when I remember that although **\$250** monthly will take care of my needs, every **\$15** is another stove and every **\$50** is a week's worth of kids meals. And believing in my work as strongly as I do, I know I am bound to find a way to make another year (or hopefully two) possible.

Even though I always thought that service work was really something that should be done in our own country, whose problems are screaming for attention, first, I realize now that focusing on borders ignores the idea that we are all interconnected, as are our difficulties. The issues of poverty and violence in Central America stem from the same roots of injustice from which grow poverty and violence in our own country. Triumphs for the Guatemalans are essentially victories for us as well.

I sincerely thank everyone for the abundance of encouragement I have received thus far. I hope the coming of the holiday season finds you well.

Peace. Julie

If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight. Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world.

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

ps My sister Katie has graciously offered to receive correspondence for me at our parents house in Connecticut since the mail service in Guatemala is less than reliable. A savings account has been set up to receive contributions of sponsorship of my work and the projects. Please send any comments, questions, suggestions as well to:

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(strictly correspondence may be sent to:)

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And of course feel free to pass this letter along to anyone you know that might be interested

Thanks. ♡