



\* The meaning for young Guatemalans is more complex than simply "It's worthwhile to study." The ideas behind the words are "getting an education is worth the struggle and sacrifice" and "education has an intrinsic value."

## **Report for the School Year January – December 2005**

### **Escuela de la Montaña**

Caserío Nuevo San José

San Martín Sacatepequez

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

## THE YOUNG LEADERS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The Escuela de la Montaña is a project of the not-for-profit Spanish language school Proyecto Lingüístico Quezalteco de Español (PLQ) of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Founded in 1997, the Escuela provides Spanish language instruction for students from all over the world along with the opportunity to live and study in a poor, rural community in the coffee-growing region of Colimba Costa Cuca in the highlands of Guatemala. The Escuela de la Montaña provides decent jobs to teachers and staff as well as to the women from neighboring communities who provide daily meals for the students.

More importantly, profits are used to support activities and grassroots organizations (for example youth, campesinos, labor, women, demobilized ex-combatants, returned refugees and displaced persons) working to promote citizen participation, community development, education, human and workers' rights and cultural activities. The Escuela also uses outside funding to support these efforts and scholarships for young secondary school students.

### *La Zona Cafetal*

The Escuela de la Montaña is located in a region that has been devoted to the cultivation of coffee for almost 150 years. Historically the coffee plantations (*fincas*) maintained a permanent workforce of families who lived and worked on site, supplemented by a larger migratory workforce brought down from the highlands of Guatemala during the harvest season. It was common for generations of families to be born and raised -- living, working, and dying -- on the *finca*. Within the past twenty years, *finca* owners began to reduce their permanent labor force and contract out to daily-wage workers, thus eliminating any responsibility for housing, education, health care and other benefits. Most of the residents of the rural communities surrounding the Escuela de la Montaña were displaced from their homes and their jobs on the coffee *fincas*.



**Displaced labourers often find themselves and their families living in a "ranchito" constructed from corrugated sheet metal, wood and cardboard. This dirt-floored shack starts as temporary but often becomes their permanent housing.**

With the dramatic fall of coffee prices on the international market in the past six years, many *finca* owners have been abandoning all or part of their cultivation or turning to other, less labor-intensive alternatives such as avocados or macadamia nuts. The wages on the coffee *fincas* average around Q20 per day (about US \$2.60) or less for piece work (for example, in one *finca* workers are paid 40 centavos (US .05¢) for each shade tree they prune in order to give us "shade-grown" coffee). There is no enforcement of the legal minimum wage of Q37 per day (with benefits) and no one complains for fear of losing the opportunity to work. (*Finca* owners routinely share "black lists" of troublesome workers.)

Because of the low wages and loss of jobs many men are leaving the area and traveling long distances searching for work in construction, agriculture and the informal sector in the cities. There is increased migration to southern Mexico and the United States in search of jobs. The destructive impact on the family of losing the male head of household contributes to the emergence of youth gangs, increased teen pregnancy, and higher dropout rates from school. The U.S. State Department Background Note on Guatemala (2003) estimates that only 41% of primary age children attend school and only 55.6% of the population is literate.

In light of this situation, the Escuela de la Montaña decided to focus a scholarship program on secondary level students. Grades 7, 8 and 9 are called *básico*. *Diversificado* includes grades 10, 11 and 12 and has a career focus (bookkeeping, computers, elementary teaching, secretary, etc.). For most young people it is a

struggle to stay in school beyond the sixth grade as the lack of resources within the family puts a great deal of pressure on them to quit school and start working. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), almost a million children in Guatemala work, mostly in agriculture and street vending. Even a small scholarship can make the difference between staying in school and early entry to the labor force. The scholarships range from Q35 per month (US \$5.00) for *básico* to Q180 per month (US \$24) for *diversificado*.

Funds have been provided by generous gifts from numerous friends and ex-students of the Escuela. No administrative fees are deducted from donations. Staff of the Escuela de la Montaña and representatives of neighboring communities who work with youth activities evaluate the scholarship applications and administer the program.

### Developing Future Leaders

The scholarship recipients commit to maintaining passing or higher grades and to demonstrating leadership by participation within their communities. Participation might include involvement with local youth groups, grassroots organizations, church youth groups or activities at the Escuela de la Montaña such as leadership training sessions or the Arte en el Campo courses in music and art. Scholarship students are also required to participate in regular Youth Encounters held at the Escuela de la Montaña where speakers have covered topics such as children's rights, the Peace Accords, HIV/AIDS, gender issues, alcohol and drug abuse and responding to gang activity. Our intention is to promote a sense of leadership and community responsibility among the youth, stressing their roles as future leaders in their communities and in Guatemala.



**Children assume their share of household responsibilities from an early age. This boy is carrying home a two-day supply of firewood.**

### Hurricane Stan

On Monday afternoon October 4, 2005 Hurricane Stan entered Guatemala and began to dump torrential rains over most of the country. By Wednesday many rivers were overflowing their banks and mudslides carrying trees, boulders, crops and houses were sliding down the mountains. The destruction left 670 people dead and 844 disappeared (and presumed dead). Many people lost their corn crops and the export crop of sesame was ruined. As a result of the heavy rains the coffee plants ripened early and much of the crop was ruined.

The area around the Escuela de la Montaña was isolated for two weeks because of mudslides and damaged bridges on the routes to Quetzaltenango, Guatemala City and Mexico. The market in Colomba closed after two days and shopkeepers raised prices on their remaining goods: no one could go to work and the schools were closed down. The sense of desperation was tinged with fear as the heavy rains continued over the week. Families were moved into the schools in Colomba for safety as their hill-side locations became threatened.

Hurricane Stan damaged an already precarious economy throughout Guatemala and caused serious damage to the infrastructure – roads, bridges, schools and housing – as well as to the environment. Precious resources now have to be diverted from education and health into rebuilding the transportation system.

Hundreds of communities have lost the only road or bridge that connected them to the highway or nearest village. Families lost weeks of income which is devastating to a situation of hand-to-mouth survival.

The need for financial support to stay in school becomes even more critical.

### **Where do our “young leaders” come from?**

The scholarship committee decided to focus on youth from the surrounding communities of the Colomba and San Martín municipalities. This year applications from youth in distant communities were not accepted due to the high needs in our immediate area.

The criteria for evaluating all the scholarship applications are:

- 1) a demonstrated commitment to and involvement in their community through participation in youth groups, church youth groups, activities at the Escuela de la Montaña or grassroots organizations;
- 2) successful completion of the previous school year, and
- 3) No other scholarship or financial support.

Ninety one scholarships have been granted for 2006, mostly to youth well-known to us through various activities.



**Elder Joel is studying his first year of basico thanks to a scholarship. He and his sister Maria Esperanza are avid readers and frequently borrow books from the library of the Escuela de la Montaña.**

The program includes eight youth in our closest neighboring community of Fatima. This community was established in 2002 by 17 families who purchased the coffee field next to the Escuela from the Catholic Church after settling a five-year labor struggle on the coffee *finca*. When they arrived the teachers from the Escuela de la Montaña held a summer school session with the children to prepare them for classes because the *finca* owner had banned them from the finca school in reprisal for the labor organizing of their parents. Now eight of these children are studying at the *basico* level.

The Escuela de la Montaña has worked from the beginning with the community of Nuevo San José. Like Fatima, these 25 families were transplanted from a coffee *finca* after years of struggle for their salaries. Thirteen families of Nuevo San José are part of the scholarship program.

The other neighboring communities that are home to scholarship recipients consist mostly of displaced workers from the coffee *fincas*. (Santo Domingo: 15, Nueva Esperanza: 8, Los Angeles: 6, Miramar: 6, El Carmen: 5, Mujulia: 4 and Nueva Santa Rosa: 1) Most of the fathers leave home to search for work in the highlands and their mothers usually work in the nearby *fincas* picking coffee.

In 2003 and 2004 the scholarship fund supported a group of adults studying at the primary and *básico* levels through a radio correspondence course. These adults were part of a group, organized by the Civil Society of Colomba, which occupied an abandoned coffee finca in the hopes of purchasing it from the bank that held the title. Although hundreds of fincas have been occupied by landless campesinos since the mid-1990's in Guatemala, this was the first occupation in the Quetzaltenango Department. In the spring of 2005 they were finally successful and have established a new community on the *finca* La Florida! This year 7 youth from La Florida have scholarships.

Eighteen of the scholarship youth are the children of ex-combatants of the revolutionary forces of the URNG from the 36-year civil war that ended with the signing of the peace accords in December 1996. They grew up in Mexico where their families had fled to escape the violence; most did not know their fathers until they were able to return to Guatemala and settle together on a small coffee *finca* called Santa Anita outside the town of Colomba. The community consists of 35 ex-combatants and their families. Re-adjusting to life in Guatemala has been a challenge for the families of Santa Anita. For many of the men, leaving behind life in the mountains and a revolutionary movement that was the focus of life and dreams has been a frustrating and painful experience. At times parents have been unable to support their children emotionally as they cope with the changes in their own lives.

### *Noche Cultural de los Niños*

A year after we opened the Escuela de la Montaña a four-year-old boy in Nuevo San José suggested that we open the school one night a week for the children to come up and play, read and spend time with our students. For the first year between six and twenty children would spend Wednesday evenings at the school, participating in various activities planned by the students. This became a popular activity, providing a space to simply play and spend time together. Now almost 90 children and youth attend on a regular basis.

Three years ago, with the support of Dr. and Rev. Shatz, we created five "work-study" jobs for *básico* students to plan and implement this weekly activity. These scholarship students are trained in non-competitive games and crafts activities and work as a team to create varied activities, including discussions and presentations for the older children. Their monthly plans include objectives for each activity as well as a budget for a nutritious snack and materials for crafts that the children can take home. Our Spanish school students continue to participate and the laughter of play is heard every Wednesday night at the Escuela de la Montaña.

### **¡Muchas Gracias!**

On behalf of the families, the youth, and everyone who works at the Escuela de la Montaña, we wish to express our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who makes it possible to provide these scholarships. Without this support many of these young people would not be able to continue their studies.

The collective of the PLQ believes that the promotion of relationships of solidarity with the most marginalized and excluded people of this country are the only means to construct a society of real democracy based on social equality and justice. We believe that social development is a basic right of all Guatemalans and is one route to meeting the necessities of life.

Our youngest and most vulnerable neighbors, children, have a basic right to time and space to play and express themselves creatively. The lack of time and place to be children is one consequence of a crushing economic situation in a background of the violence and repression that caused and prolonged a 36-year civil. The Escuela de la Montaña supports and sponsors activities targeted toward children and youth:

arts and music courses, workshops, community clean-up days and skills workshops. The scholarship youth are encouraged to become involved as participants and volunteer leaders and teachers as part of our goal to develop and promote leadership skills.

Our work here in Guatemala relies on generous support and international solidarity. So far this year, a little over half the funds for the scholarships have been raised and committed to the project. The Guatemalan school year begins in January and ends in November. Funds are needed to now to maintain support for these young people in the year 2006 and beyond.

<b>Budget for the School Year 2006</b>		
<b>Basico:</b>		
60 Scholarships	28,275	
<b>Diversificado:</b>		
26 Scholarships	52,910	
<b>Noche Cultural:</b>		
5 Básico	7,450	
<b>Youth encounters (speakers' fees)</b>	<u>540</u>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>Q89,175</u></b>	<b><u>US\$12,000</u></b>

**For more information, you may contact us:**

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**To send donations for the scholarships or any other program of the Escuela de la Montaña:**

**For tax deductible donations in the US** send checks payable to "Project Quetzal", with a note specifying that it is for the Escuela de la Montaña, to:

Project Quetzal  
 93 Rattling Valley Road  
 Deep River, CT 06417 USA

**For tax recoverable donations in the UK:**

The North South Development Trust  
 Moulsham Mill  
 Chelmsford CM2 7PX  
 UK

Please include a note specifying that the donation is for the Escuela de la Montaña.