

Copper Country Guatemala Accompaniment Project

CCGAP Newsletter

April 2007 Number 32

The Happy Invasion of Engineers *Engineers Without Borders complete well projects*



Aurelia tries out the new hand pump at the celebration.

Two years ago, when the members of the community of Fronterizo discovered that our CCGAP delegation had a water engineer among us, they submitted a request for a water project. Karen Endres, the engineer, in turn gave the request to the local Michigan Tech University chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB). The students decided to take on the project, and started by sending down a preliminary team to assess the village in the spring of 2006 and again in the fall.

By now of course, there were two villages, since the community of Nueva Libertad had split away from Fronterizo. So when the students took measure of what might be needed, they had to plan not just one water project, but two. Moreover, the communities needed to be treated fairly; what went in one community had to go in the other.

I have to confess that I had to overcome some initial skepticism with regard to the project. After all, if we, CCGAP, had seen failure of a major undertaking (the school building project), surely these upstart students who knew nothing of the culture or background of the people, would mess up somehow.

As I became involved, however, and realized how sensitive these students were to the problems of working within a different culture, how carefully they planned for every eventuality, how aware they were of their possible impact on the communities, and how eager they were to learn as much as they could from the experience, I found myself completely won over.

The EWB team went all out with fundraising and pulled together a portion of the travel expenses for some 14 students, plus all of the materials and tools that would be needed for the construction of two wells.

At the end of February, I took the funds they gave me and headed on down to the Ixcán. I bought cement and

rebar and had it transported to the Ixcán River where my friend Mary and I were rewarded with a welcome that impressed even the truck driver—streams of people flowing down the high bank of the river in response to his horn. It was almost dusk and the men had been alerted to the arrival of the cement that had to be immediately ferried across the river and shouldered on up to the communities.

When the first team of engineering students arrived five days later, we were ready for them. They set up their tents inside some empty buildings, and the women in charge of their meals had them all assigned to eat with different families.

Thus began three intense weeks of hard work; not only was there the actual labor of *continued next page-*



The well and caisson-lowering tripod is inspected

construction of the concrete well caissons, digging the wells, lowering the caissons and installing the hand pumps, but also there were continuing negotiations—between the two communities, between the engineering teams and the communities, and between rival women determined to out-cook each other.

It took some time for the men of the communities to become really invested in the work.

(The women showed that they were on board by making sure that everyone had plenty of food and drink, but were limited in their capacity to actually do the work.) At first the men assigned to help each day didn't always show up, and when they did, they seemed content to watch the engineers do the actual work.

But as the concrete well-liners took shape and the holes deepened, the men rallied round. Crowds of them were needed to lower the heavy caissons into the well holes after water was found, and the sight of them all working together on the rope was awe-inspiring.

Down in Nueva Libertad at the lower level, they hit water first, and for a couple tense days, it appeared

that one community would have a finished well while the people in the upper community would have to finish their well on their own after the EWB had gone.

water at the bottom. And since they were dug during the dry season, the wells should continue to produce good water when the shallow surface wells have dried up.



Clockwise from bottom left: the finishing touches before the well is covered and the pump installed; it took the strength of many men to lower the heavy caissons; engineering student Grant Ovist turns fire-fried pancakes; children were curious about the caissons and engineering student Juan Morinelly; entertainment included traditional dance by the schoolchildren.



Some of the highlights of this adventure included one of the EWB students making pancakes for us all using mix that his mother had sent along with maple syrup, and turning the pancakes with a trowel.



Watching the interaction between the children of the communities and the EWB students was a joy, and provided plenty of laughter.



The teachers and the schoolchildren sponsored an evening of "actividades" for the guests: songs and dances and skits, including some perform-

ances by the EWB students. The men of Fronterizo rallied in a great show of camaraderie, even starting work at 4am on one day. In the end, their well was also enclosed with their pump installed. The final touches were executed, the wells were celebrated, and within hours we all had to say farewell, crossing the river at 3am.

The whole experience was rewarding in so many ways and we look forward to continuing the relationship among CCGAP, the EWB and the communities of Fronterizo and Nueva Libertad.

Thank you EWB!

SEK

The wells have clean concrete sides and are about five meters deep with nearly a meter and a half of clean



News from CCGAP Accompaniers

Lindsey Engelman

recently returned to her home in Texas after serving as accompanier for six months in the Ixcán region in a community with massacre survivors who are witnesses in the genocide trial. She wrote a beautiful letter about her friend Francisco last January. I have printed just the beginning of the letter here but you can read it in its entirety at our website www.ccgap.org. Lindsey will be visiting the Copper Country in May. Look for notices about where you might hear her share her experiences. She writes:



The past few months I have been spending most of my time at Francisco's house, which is always full of activity. His wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law, all of whom have young children, live with him, and at least one of them can be found standing in front of the fire at any given moment. Doing their continual chores, the women talk amongst themselves in their indigenous language, Mam, while my partner and I play outside with the handful of kids. They call me the *nuera*, or daughter-in-law, as I have promised to marry the youngest of the children, if not all of them. I have spent some of my happiest nights filled with laughter and stories with them.

Francisco himself is a hard person to catch. Sometimes it seems that he is the busiest man in town. He has a warmth that reminds me of my own father and I treasure the nights that I do catch him, and can see him act as such a loving

father and grandfather, and when we can sit and chat for long stretches of time.

Lately, Francisco has been extra tired. In addition to his normal duties, he has made long trips to the pueblo in which he was born to visit his dying mother and across the border to Mexico with his wife in the arduous process of diagnosing her chronic, daily headaches that are so painful they blur her vision. More than tired, he is frustrated. They finally diagnosed her illness, but Francisco does not have the 80,000 pesos it would cost to buy the medicine to cure her.

For the second time this month after discussing his inability to find the loans for her treatment, he tells me certain parts of his past. "Antes, it wasn't like this," he begins to tell me as we sit down to eat. *Before*, things were different.....*read the rest of the story on www.ccgap.org*

Kimberly Kern is also from Texas. As part of her duties as accompanier in the community of Santa Maria Tzejá, she walks to several remote villages where there are also massacre survivors, villages where people only speak indigenous languages. She studied the language Quekchi before coming out to the Ixcán. Her letter can also be read in its entirety at www.ccgap.org

Six weeks ago, I began my work here as a human rights accompanier in the Ixcán region of Guatemala. In a very short time, I have had the opportunity to listen to incredible stories which constantly remind me why I am here. It is important to continue in this struggle for justice and to remind people (like you) about a forgotten geno-

cide. Living as an accompanier in these communities not only helps to deter threats against the genocide case witnesses but also teaches the lesson of survival and perseverance. Some people might think that this type of work would be depressing. Simply put, the fact that accompaniment exists is because massacres happened.

But the stories I have heard about lost loved ones are not told with a defeatist attitude. Yes, people still talk about the tragic losses they lived through, but the remembrance of the dead in this culture is very important. Many new children are named after the ones who died during the conflict... to remember. Yes, survivors still cry and grieve. Maybe that will never stop, but who's to say what is a normal reaction after living through a massacre?

What is apparent in this community is the sense of hope. The collective commitment is evident every day as an ongoing process to raise the quality of life through education and better health standards. Santa Maria Tzejá is organized and it seems that everyone is involved in either one committee or another which is directly related to a decision making process.

The low-land jungle where SMT is located is very beautiful. Everywhere I look I see uncountable shades of green mixed with a bright blue sky. The rolling hills stretch on for miles and miles until they reach the mountains of Alta Verapaz. Goats loiter in the grass outside the door of my house and chickens and pigs run wild where they please. *Continued on page 5*

Problems with Education in Fronterizo

With the help of our donors (especially the Copper Country Reading Council, the Hancock Rotarians and the First United Methodists) CCGAP took on the support of a middle school program in Fronterizo/Nueva Libertad during the year 2006. Although we had contracted with the teacher for three years, the teacher decided he'd had enough after the first year and the program folded.

In Guatemala, the government is only responsible for primary schooling, that is, until sixth grade. For schooling beyond primary grades, students must pay their own expenses. The school year runs from January to October and the primary grades are scheduled for the morning hours. When the basico (middle school) was in session, it used the same classrooms in the afternoon. The teacher was one of the primary school teachers.

This was a great disappointment for CCGAP, but much more so for the fourteen students and their parents, all of whom had had great hopes that they might graduate after the three levels of middle school.



Schoolchildren line up for morning exercises overlooked by Cerro Mico, the mountain behind.

One bright spot was the news that a secondary school had started up in the town just across the Mexican border, about an hour and a half walk from Fronterizo. Many of the children were born while in refuge in Mexico and have Mexican citizenship, so are eligible to attend the secondary school at minimal expense. Three fellows are already enrolled and making the morning and afternoon treks. It is hoped that more of the basico students may take advantage of that opportunity.

Another cause for hope was finding a scholarship program that is already operating in some surrounding communities, offering funds for post-basico schooling, what is called in Guatemala *diversificado* or diversified courses, and also scholarships for university training. The administrators of PROGRESA were happy to hear that there might be some eligible students in Fronterizo and Nueva Libertad. They encouraged us to consider supporting students through their program, with the cost being \$1000 per student per year. CCGAP plans to fund at least two students next year, and maybe three.

Friends of CCGAP

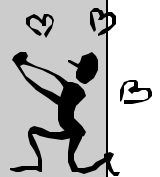
We offer profound thanks to the following people who have supported us financially since the last newsletter in October

Afdahl, Jennifer B
 Arkin, Don & Sharon Emley
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 Veurink, Norma
 Vozel, Amy & Eagle Glassheim
 Waddell, Craig
 Weber, Mark
 Whitt, Laurie
 Yanisch, Kay & Martin Dietl

Thank You!



The Copper Country Guatemala Accompaniment Project (CCGAP) is a group of organizations and individuals who financially support accompaniers to serve as human rights observers and a deterrent to the violence that threatens people in Guatemala who are struggling for justice and an end to impunity.

CCGAP also serves as a sister community for the Guatemalan villages of Fronterizo 10 de Mayo/Nueva Libertad, a community established on the 10th of May 1995 by a group of refugees who returned to Guatemala after 12-15 years in refugee camps in Mexico. CCGAP is committed to maintaining a long-term relationship with Fronterizo and Nueva Libertad, strengthening ties between our communities and expressing our solidarity with them by developing individual relationships with annual visits and by giving financial support to small projects planned by the Guatemala community. We offer educational talks on Guatemala to groups here in the Copper Country along with the opportunity to become involved in this community-to-community relationship with the Mayan indigenous people of Guatemala.

The Guatemala Accompaniment Project (GAP) is a branch of the national organization, NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala). All donations to CCGAP are used to support accompaniers in Guatemala and small community projects as requested by the members of Fronterizo. Funds are also used to disseminate information among people of the Copper Country community.

CCGAP Board members: Linda Rulison, president, Sarah Green, vice-president, Bev Maynard, treasurer, Terry Kinzel, secretary, Suzanne Van-Dam, Floyd Henderson, Stephen Pluhacek, Beth Flynn, Rich Featherly, Ellen Carpenter, Linda and Jim Belote, and Bill Rose.

Kim's letter *continued from page 3.....*

Depending on where I am in the community, I can catch the scents of the banana and orange trees, women making fresh tortillas or food being cooked over an open fire. Everyday, the *molino* (a very loud machine that processes the corn into *masa* to make tortillas) competes with the roosters to wake me up around 5:30 in the morning. All throughout the day are sounds of kids playing and constant announcements for community meetings over the loudspeaker of the cooperative store.

Life here, like anywhere in the rural country-side, revolves around food. All day the men work on their *parcelas* planting or harvesting. Some also have cows and horses that they raise to sell. The women spend the day mostly in the kitchen turning corn into *masa* and *masa* into tortillas, shelling black beans, shucking corn, boiling drinking water and cooking. Along with those duties, they also do all the washing and take care of the many children. Some women also work outside the home as teachers in the school or in their *tiendas* (stores).

I enjoy helping from time to time in the traditional daily activities of women. I am learning to make tortillas and to carry water on my head, which by the way, is WAY harder than it looks. It's something I am sure I will never master while I'm here, but as the señoras say, "*poco a poco*" ("little by little").

I hope everyone is happy and healthy in their lives. Thank you so much for your support. peace, Kim



Meet Hilly McGahan, CCGAP's newest accompanier

I grew up in a small town on a reservation in western Montana. I am not Native American, but I participated in powwows and studied the Salish language since I was four. I learned a lot about the history of the Native Americans in Montana, especially of the Salish Kootenai tribes. Although my education at Arlee High School may have been considered narrow in scope, the cultural experience provided a depth that no advanced class could.



Since I was a baby I have traveled with my family to South America or Mexico every winter for six weeks. We backpacked and camped during our travels. Last summer I went to Guatemala for a month. The first half of the trip was a program offered by Augsburg College and the Center for Global Education. It was an Environmental and Social Justice Seminar that took us all around the country of Guatemala. For the latter half of the month, I lived with a single mother and her thirteen-year-old daughter in Quetzaltenango. I attended a language school there.

During all of these travels, I have adjusted to new foods and limited water accessibility. I have slept countless nights on the ground or someone's floor. The most difficult adjustment is to the visible extreme poverty in which so many people live, while so many of my family and friends live in such excess. In all my travels, I have learned I will never adjust to this.

I am concerned with environmental and social injustice, and especially the varying implications of globalization. I hope that my presence in Guatemala will assist in the Guatemalan peoples' struggle for human rights and justice. Personally, I look forward to working with the Guatemalan people and learning from them. I am ready to leave the U.S. for a while and to be reintroduced to different perspectives. After my commitment is over I plan on attending law school to become a human rights lawyer.

Thanks for your support.

Hilly



**Copper Country Guatemala
Accompaniment Project**

*A Link between Guatemala and the
Copper Country*

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Enclosed you will find five raffle tickets. We are hoping you'll buy them for five dollars apiece (just let us know if you'd like more tickets—sell them to your friends!). As you can see on the tickets, the raffle will take place at our annual dance party on

May 12th, 7PM

**Forestry Building on the Michigan Tech
University campus,
just off 7th Avenue**

RAFFLE: grand prize handwoven wool blanket, from Guatemala, as are the many other prizes
SILENT AUCTION: ponchos, rugs, purses, mirrors
DANCE: Live music with the
MOON DOGS!

FOOD: snack food will be available

SLIDES: learn more about the CCGAP's relationship with Guatemala

MEET: CCGAP's last accompanier,
Lindsey Engelman

Travel to Guatemala!

Another opportunity to travel to Guatemala with CCGAP is coming up in July this year. Explore your options to study Spanish in a language immersion school, attend the annual GAP gathering (July 26th-29th), and visit Fronterizo and Nueva Libertad. Please call or email if you're the least bit interested.

sekingsley@pasty.com

906 482 6827



Mary Coggins, a visitor from the U.S., finds herself surrounded by admirers.