



Guatemala Update: Chamil Letter

May 31, 2002

Dear Family and Friends,

I (Ciro Farina - leftmost person in photo) returned from Guatemala February 16 and vivid images seep into my mind and give me cause for joy. It's easy to say it was a life altering experience and leave it at that. But perhaps I can describe a few experiences that will convey the depth of meaning those ten days in a poverty stricken third world country have for me.



CHAMIL

Many of you are already closely linked to Chamil. This little village high up in a coffee growing region about seven hours north of Guatemala City is where the scholarships you contributed to are being used. We visited Chamil on a Sunday morning as this is the only free time the scholarship children have between school, working at home and in the fields and their twice monthly Sunday community service projects which are part of their scholarship responsibilities.

The dirt road to Chamil passes through beautiful, difficult terrain - deep ravines, narrow precipices, washouts from nearby streams, rocks and other obstacles. Women walk along this narrow road with large baskets of produce on their heads, men pass on horseback or motorcycle as do vehicles of every conceivable shape and size packed to the gills with people. The hillsides are steep but every nook and cranny is planted to corn or coffee. The homes are nothing but huts teetering on the edge of a square of more or less level ground.

Chamil is fortunate in that a chicken bus (so-called because there is as much poultry aboard as people) runs once daily to and from Coban, the departmental capital. So educated kids from Chamil can get to Coban where they would likely find work.

We approached Chamil on our upgraded converted school bus. It is nestled on the side of a small mountain just below its peak and runs down into a valley. The churches, health clinic, most of the homes and market square are near the top and the school is near the bottom. Alighting from the school bus, we descended to the school yard on an endless number of stairs built by the children. You need good legs to get around Chamil.

The festivities began with a teacher welcoming us, thanking us for coming this great distance from America to be with them and expressing amazement that we would be willing to help them when no one from outside their village has ever given them aid in any form. Jeff and Joe Berninger, the founders and leaders of the Cooperative For Education (CoEd), welcomed everyone and then the incoming group of ten new scholarship children were each introduced. By the way, all of this talking has to be done in three languages so the parents who only know a Mayan dialect, we who only know English and those who only know the Spanish national language can understand what's being said. Next, a student representative from each of the three secondary school classes (there are 26 scholarship students in all) came forward and thanked us

for our support which will make a huge difference in their lives, the lives of their families, their community and the entire country. A representative of the parents' committee then addressed us on behalf of all the parents expressing great appreciation for this help which will lift these children out of poverty and well past their parents.

Interestingly, all of these people of humble origin are quite willing and able to speak well before a group of family, neighbors and total strangers. This skill stems from the importance their culture places upon ceremony. It would be an insult and a dishonor not to publicly acknowledge and make a display of their appreciation.

After these formalities Jeff introduced me and told the story of how Anne and you collaborated to provide scholarships for them rather than giving me gifts for my 60th birthday. This was met by obvious wonderment. I then reminded them the feast of Saint Valentine was just a few days away. I told them the legend of Valentine and that I had a small Valentine's gift for them - wooden hearts for the boys and red doily hearts for the girls. I hoped they would decorate these small symbols and give them to someone they loved on Valentine's Day.

With that, the presentations were over and we got to mingle with the children, attempt with much humor to communicate, take pictures and enjoy each other.

After many lighthearted exchanges, Miguel, the student representative for the senior class and a natural leader and Marta, the junior class representative, took us all on an inspection of their community service projects. First, they showed us a field they had planted to cypress seedlings. This was part of a reforestation plan. Next we got to see and walk up the famous stairs which connect the school to the rest of town. After regaining our breath we inspected the health clinic which the kids had painted and landscaped. Lastly, we moved to the town market to observe the first project undertaken. The market had never been cleaned up as far as anyone could remember. So the kids took a day and did it. But the next week after market day the place looked as filthy as ever. To solve this the kids made wooden trash bins and signs with pictures for those who can't read directing everyone to throw trash in the bins. They got the mayor to agree to empty the bins and convinced each woman using the market to pay a very small amount to defray the cost of trash collection. And all this was inaugurated at a major ceremony held at the market with each scholarship child speaking to the crowd on the merits of cleanliness!

Leaving Chamil was hard.

ESPERANZA CHILATZ

This particular day started in a pouring rain. The 21 of us "Gringos" who had volunteered for this round of book deliveries were scheduled to walk a half mile back to a primary school at the end of a dirt road too rough for the bus we were traveling on to traverse. After a quick assessment Jeff and Joe concluded the road was too slippery and dangerous for us to even walk. By some magic of communication with Father Bernie, a local Franciscan monk, technological wizard and close friend of Jeff and Joe, and Viktor and Horacio, two senior CoEd employees, several fourwheel drive vehicles were brought to our rescue. The trip to the school began pretty close to on time

Our destination was a primary school, Esperanza Chilat. This is one of only two primary schools CoEd supports. Our purpose this day was to deliver needed school supplies. The expectation of the students, teachers, and parents that we would make it back to the school this day was pretty low. So when our vehicles came into sight there was great cheering and celebration. The teachers must have instructed the kids to stay inside their classrooms. Consequently, there seemed to be a hundred little faces screaming in delight and trying to squeeze to the front of the few windows and doors so they could see us and make contact with us. One of the volunteers said it will be a real letdown to go home to his grandchildren who just don't make that kind of fuss over him when he shows up.

The school is a typical cinder block corrugated steel roof building with a porch running the full length of the front. A gutter runs along the front of the porch and water is collected and deposited into a cistern. This system was put into place by the local Rotary of which Father Bernie, originally from Minnesota, is a leading member. The only other source of water for the school is a stream a half day's round trip away.

Strewn on the ground between our vehicles and our seats set up at the far end of the porch were pine boughs. This is a sign of great honor. During the Pope's five day visit to Guatemala he never touched Guatemalan soil as his entire route was covered with pine boughs.

A stage had been set up in front of us and many singing and dancing performances were given by the children. Those not performing wormed their way onto our laps seeking warmth and cuddling. And the parents huddled in the rain edging as close to the stage as possible to enjoy their children's performances. Near the end of the performances two large burlap bags tied at the top were carried onto the stage by two fathers. Music began and the sacks came to life dancing around the stage to the rhythm of the music! As I'm sure you can imagine we were all so surprised and so tickled by this finale to the festivities.

With the formal program over we got to tour the school, talk (I use that term loosely) with the children, the parents and teachers and say our farewells to people who treated us as though our coming was one of the greatest joys of their lives and our departure was one of their saddest moments.

CHIPIACUL

This last experience you may find interesting because it reflects so well the view these humble indigenous people have of their future and the obstacles prejudice places before them.

In an effort to further help certain schools that have demonstrated a very strong commitment to the education of their students, CoEd has established two computer labs. These labs are located in village secondary schools near enough to Guatemala City so graduates can reach the growing number of jobs available only to people with technical skills.

This day we were in the village of Chipiacul to participate in the inauguration of the third computer lab. Chipiacul is a typical rural town with a dirt road running through the middle of it. But it happens to be near the Pan Am Highway so there is access to the population centers of Guatemala.

We, the honored guests, were seated to right of the speakers. Students and parents were seated in front of the speakers. Hung on the wall directly behind the speakers was a banner proclaiming the inauguration of the "Berninger Brothers Laborotario Computacion" While assembling we were treated to the lively music of a marimba being played by three young men.

The speakers were plentiful this day. Along with Jeff and Joe were two other CoEd people who played critical roles in establishing this lab - Howard Lobb, who gave up his job in the U.S. to come work with us for two years, and Alvero Arroyo, both computer experts. A Microsoft representative was present. Microsoft has contributed over \$100,000 to our computer labs. A Cincinnati Bell volunteer was also honored. Cincinnati Bell gave CoEd a large number of used computers incorporated into this lab. Even a representative of the Education Ministry was on hand to take a few bows.

There was much music and dancing by the students and many gifts memorializing this event were exchanged. The women are dressed in very bright colors and by our standards their combinations often clash. But the blouses, or wipils, reflect the patterns and colors of their Mayan tribe (of which there are 22 in Guatemala). So you can tell what tribe a woman is from by the design and colors of her wipil.

The highlight of the day was the address by the school principal, Professor Justa. She is a typically diminutive Mayan woman. Soft spoken, but with a strong determination to change life for this little village. Her presentation was delivered in three languages, the local Mayan dialect, Spanish and English which she's currently teaching herself. I've included her copy of her address. Her powerful words and her quiet delivery were so emotionally charged that I was actually in tears by the time she finished. Poignantly, as she was speaking these words from the podium, a man and his horse loaded down with bags of Brussels sprouts was passing on the dirt road behind us.

Education is a marvelous thing. Certainly it will make a great difference in the economic well-being of an entire country. Hopefully the beautiful culture of the indigenous people of Guatemala can be maintained for they are genuinely sweet, good natured, devoted to one another. They are hard working and industrious. The school administrators and parents are always shocked that strangers would want to GIVE them anything to help them. It's understandable to lose passion for an undertaking so far removed from daily life. This visit makes Guatemala and CoEd's objectives vital for me again. I hope this letter will help rekindle your enthusiasm.

With affection,

--Ciro Farina (Board Member)

Will you help? According to our project teachers, textbooks improve the quality of a student's education by more than 70%. Your help can make a significant difference in the lives of Guatemalan children.