



Trip Report: Chimaltenango

July 29, 2000

After nearly ten years of travel and work in Guatemala, we thought we had seen it all-spectacular scenery, friendly people, a fascinating indigenous culture, and colorful hand-woven clothing of every sort-but nothing could prepare us for the jewels we found in rural Chimaltenango, our "target area" for book deliveries 2001



The town of Chimaltenango, bearing the same name as the department, is a dirty, polluted, concrete dump of a place. This dismal specter dictated our overall impression of the area. But once we were out of town and on the back roads, we discovered an incredibly beautiful, and abundant area full of sunshine and mountain views, with fields of luxuriant vegetables and fruits carpeting the hills in a patchwork of green.

The people of "Chimalt" are especially friendly and open. Located near the Pan American highway between touristic Lake Atitlán and Antigua, they see their share of traveling Gringos-hence they are not as intimidated or frightened as people in other areas. For instance, when we would pull up next to an indigenous woman on the road to ask directions, she would respond with a hearty "buenos días" and give kindly directions (sometimes in more detail than we wanted!) By contrast, in more isolated areas, like Alta Verapaz, women are likely to turn and run as soon as you lower the window.

Yet despite their kindness and openness, the people of Chimaltenango are desperately poor. Most live in shacks without electricity or running water. Traveling to the aldeas (villages) still requires a four-wheel drive vehicle. The schools we visit often have no electricity-when they do, each room has a single fluorescent tube or a bare bulb hanging from a wire. On cloudy days, it can be hard to read the chalkboard. Only the schools in the big towns boast running water and flush toilets-the rest use foul-smelling concrete outhouses. Teachers scratch out daily assignments on worn-out chalkboards, often standing near broken windows or below leaky roofs. The children have no learning materials of any kind. Using a book is a luxury beyond their reach.

Jeff, Howard Lobb (a Cooperative Education volunteer) and I departed for Chimaltenango on July 29 and spent two weeks promoting the project to thirty-three schools. We were welcomed enthusiastically at every stop: school officials listened intently and often with surprise. Receiving help from an outside organization is a dream that they don't dare to imagine. Most have endured many false hopes and broken promises due to thirty-six years of civil war and dictatorial governments which chronically under-funded education.



"We have many needs here," they would say after hearing our presentation. "These children are extremely poor and cannot afford books. Your program makes books possible; it gives the children a chance to become more literate and receive a good education. With a better education they'll live better lives. This is something that helps the whole community. We give our sincere thanks to you and your supporters for the help you are bringing us."



In response to our visits, we now have some twenty schools in fourteen communities on our waiting list, hoping to receive their first-ever books this year. To meet this need, we are raising funds to purchase more than 26,600 textbooks, which will be delivered in early 2001.

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.

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