



Guatemala Update: Graduation at Chuacruz

November 16, 2001

This past summer one of our textbook project schools in the mountains of Chimaltenango asked me to be the "Godfather" their graduating class. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant at the time, but reluctantly agreed to do it; schools here struggle against so many obstacles and I wanted to help in the ways that I could. I've included, below, a touching and amusing account of the



graduation at Chuacruz. It gives a window into the simple lives of the children served by our projects and underscores their desire to improve themselves through education. I apologize that it is little longer than our normal "one-page" update. Thank you for your support of our work. -Jeff Berninger, Guatemala City, 11/16/01.

Chimaltenango, Guatemala: After two hours on the main highway, we finally reached the dirt road that climbed up the mountain to the tiny village of Chuacruz. The prior days had been cold and windy in Guatemala City and Johanna and I were prepared for the Guatemalan version of a "blizzard" that high in the mountains. But to our surprise, as we climbed into the high altitudes, the wind stopped and the sun came out to warm the mountainside. As we peered over a crest on one of the switchbacks, we saw the school all decorated for the big event. As we pulled up, the principal and several parents ran out and greeted us with ear-to-ear smiles and warm embraces. The principal gave us a quick tour of the area along with the breathtaking views from the mountain-top school. At the edge of the mountain ridge was a tiny Catholic church that shined in the sun and seemed to almost float above the mountain valley.

I gazed at the makeshift auditorium, which was their dirt-floored patio decorated with pine needles and local "exotic" plants. The stage consisted of old boards layed across cinderblocks. The roof was a series of thin cellophane sheets to protect the audience from the sun and rain. The whole thing appeared so beautiful in its simplicity. Then my heart stopped as I saw a banner stretched behind the stage that read "4th Graduating Class 1999-2001 Jeffrey B."

My speech described how I grew up on a small farm and "knew the hoe," something that many rural Guatemalans find hard to believe about their "rich" neighbors to the north. I told them that we planted sweet corn and other vegetables, but it didn't give us much income. Then I told them that we started planting Christmas trees, but the harvest took seven years and it seemed too long to wait. (Just as they must wait many years for their investment in education to result in a better job and better life.)

We then proceeded to hand them their diplomas. Everyone present was visibly proud of the accomplishments of these 8 students, who had successfully completed high school in a country in which over 80% of rural students drop out after the sixth grade. A tear came to my eye as I gazed at the weathered faces of the parents; most of them had little formal schooling; nevertheless, they understood the value of education and were willing to make sacrifices to keep their kids in school.

I realized that a few of these hardworking students would eventually become leaders of



their communities (and perhaps their country). It made me proud to know that the Cooperative for Education had assisted them in earning their high school degrees. The graduates came up to me, one by one, and explained how they planned to continue their education still further: 6 of them will become teachers, one an accounting clerk, and one will try for a college degree (a feat accomplished by fewer than 1% of Guatemalans).

The principal said that the school desperately needed donated computers so that future students could compete for jobs requiring technical skills. If you have an IBM Compatible, Pentium computer to donate, please call the Cooperative for Education office in Cincinnati at (513) 731-0059. Thanks!

I wish everyone a joyous holiday season. --Jeff Berninger

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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