

**International Day of Indigenous Peoples (from Pg 1)**

ethnic groups from Guatemala. In this riverside community, we were invited to share a celebration of life and culture with the children and grandchildren of survivors of a genocide that threatened the physical and cultural extermination of their



families just 30 years ago. As children chanted "Resistir para Vivir! La Vida es Lucha!" (Resist to Live! Life is Struggle!) I realized the genocide has not stopped touching these lives. "

The International Day of the Indigenous Peoples is now an educational endeavor for Santa María Tzejá. The middle school (also known as the Institute of the Basico) encourages its students to research the many indigenous and current cultures of Guatemala so that all may be represented during the ceremony. The students conduct their research by talking to community elders, perusing books from their library, and on the Internet. The Computer Center is available to support the research, where the director assists students in locating resources. As proficiency with computer usage are now a government-driven requirement to graduate from a middle school, the computer director has incorporated the necessary skills into the process of studying indigenous cultures. Aside from the performance, students create a presentation to be used during Indigenous Peoples festivities.

Delegates, along with student families and village leaders were delighted to see and hear the student's presentation on Saturday afternoon. Culture is expressed through dances, and history is portrayed by narrated dramatizations. Integrated with the program are a number of marimba performances by students, played on the two beautiful new instruments.

**An Awakening in Guatemala (from Pg 1)**

In the Supreme Court a petition to rescind the President's immunity from prosecution was presented by the indigenous Congressman Amíclar Pop. Congress had to decide whether to strip the President of his immunity, so that he could be investigated. But Congress did not act and the case was dropped.

The peoples' movement was very important in the resignation of Baldetti, for the way in which it began and attracted support, with the students' groups, the indigenous people, the middle class, and civil society organizations. After the marches there were more concrete actions taken, such as presenting Electoral Law and Political Party reforms, which is one of the most urgent ways in which future national governments would be elected. It also asked for the postponement of the elections until the reforms were approved, but this was not possible.



In the elections of September 6 there was an unexpected result with the candidate that was leading in the polls didn't

win the election. With these results, there is still much lack of hope in the population for a change. Political parties and candidates are still attached to corrupt policies. The challenge at the national and local levels, after the elections, is to pass the Election Law reform in order to change the system.



Photo: Madeline Bolanos

**International Day of Indigenous People**

By Kayla Myers (NISGUA), Caryl Johnson (Partnership)

The international day of Indigenous Peoples is celebrated widely throughout Guatemala. Our partner village Santa Maria Tzeja marks this day in a manner that has become customary in many villages, with school youth presenting a ceremony to the community. Over the past four years, our August delegations have taken front row seats to witness this ceremony. It is a profound honor to the delegates that villagers integrate this ceremony into their statement of welcome. It is festive, informative, imaginative and entertaining.

A NISGUA accompanier from Colorado, Kayla Myers put this day in a wonderful context.

"We have survived the oppression, we are proud of our Indigenous youth!". I heard this declaration and saw this colorful sight on International Indigenous People's Day sitting in a community center echoing with giggles and squeals of wiggling children. The children represented 13 different

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**An Awakening in Guatemala**

By Regina Perez, Journalist, Guatemala City and citizen of Santa María Tzejá,



The awakening of the Guatemalan people begin on April 16 2015, when the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the Attorney General exposed the existence of a criminal organization that operated within the office of the Superintendent of Taxes (like the IRS). The organization operated through bribes to avoid the full payment of taxes and people in political office were implicated, among them the private secretary of the ex-vice president Roxana Baldetti.

Shortly after the case came out in the media and awakened the indignation of the people. Guatemalan Citizens used Facebook to call for a demonstration in the central park. The march was set for April 25 and had as its demand the resignation of the president and the vice-president, with the well-known hashtag #RenunciaYa (Resign Now). Since the private secretary of the then vice-president Baldetti was involved in the organization, she was the target of the protests. After the march of April 25, the clamor for her resignation grew. It was a conjunction of factors that brought her resignation, not only the peoples' movement, although it was important. As the president, Pérez Molina, did not resign, the people continued gathering in the plaza.

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## A life story: Amanda & Julio

By Dave Johnson (interpreting by Paula Worby)

There are several people I know who have taken more trips to the rural village of Santa Maria Tzeja than they have kept count of. One imagines such seasoned visitors could claim that they have met and come to know pretty much everyone in the village. But part of the magic of our partner village is that there are in fact citizens whom our delegations have not yet met. There are stories aplenty that have yet to be heard by a visitor from Needham.

For me, this was trip number six to Santa Maria Tzeja. Some math reveals that I'd be visiting a family to enjoy breakfast, lunch or dinner for the 100th time. Could there be a corner of this forested village where I had yet to hike? In fact, there were still many, and one was eating lunch with Amanda.

Monday lunch was hosted by Amada Lopez Alvarado. A path meandered westward through the forest just north of Santa Maria Tzeja center for half a mile upon which we encountered a cardamom nursery, a large hedge and then the home of Amanda and husband Julio Marroquin. While this does not commonly happen, Amanda sat down with us as we finished the hearty lunch she'd served. While nursing her daughter, Valeria, Amanda told us about her life. It was one of those stories that you can't forget.

Life began for Amanda in Antigua, Guatemala, which is over the mountains west of Guatemala City, 250 miles south of Santa Maria Tzeja. Even though Antigua is tropical, it is at a high elevation where the air is cool year round and much less humid. Amanda was the oldest of 10 children. As she reached her teens, her mother had been widowed twice. The need for family sustenance gave her no choice but to stop her schooling after 2nd grade.

At age 13, she took a job in a vegetable packing factory. Her shift was 7am to 6pm, 7 days a week. Some weeks she got part of Sunday off. Her pay was Q850/2 weeks, or around \$50/week. She would toil there for 8 years, the prime of a young woman's life.

Amanda's husband Julio could not find work in or around Santa Maria Tzeja and went south searching for a job. He



settled in Antigua Guatemala and started working in the same vegetable plant that Amanda had been working in for 6 years. They were friends at first but soon fell in love and wanted to get married. After the wedding the couple was

uncertain about where they should live; stay in Antigua or move to Santa Maria? Antigua had jobs but there are pervasive costs such as rent. Santa Maria had few jobs, but there are hardly any housing costs. Julio's mother convinced the newlyweds they should move to Santa Maria. Amanda didn't know what to expect but agreed to this move. At first Amanda was plagued with the sadness and

loneliness of missing her family in Antigua. Furthermore, the climate was so very hot and humid in Santa Maria. Julio and Amanda worked hard to clear the jungle where their house stands today and the fruit trees are planted. In time she adapted, made some friends, started a family. Julio and Amanda have four children ages 13 years old to 2 years old. Her family in Antigua has never come to the village.

Julio has a story of his own before meeting and marrying Amanda. In February 1982, he was a young boy and living with his family in Santa Maria. The army entered Santa Maria intent on terrorizing. Julio and his family fled into the rainforest, heading for their farm lands where they could hide from the soldiers. After several months, fellow villagers decided to walk north to Mexico to escape the hardship of living in the jungle. Others villagers returned to Santa Maria and were then detained at an army base for months. Julio's family decided to continue living in the jungle, raising corn where they could, making fires during the night, and constantly moving to elude the army.

Helicopters were a constant threat to spot them. One day the un-thinkable happened and the army encroached upon Julio's family in the jungle. As the family dispersed in all directions, Julio and one of his sisters were captured by the army. The two siblings were brought to the army base and held while distant family members could be found. Julio

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## Computer Proficiency: A costly requirement

By Caryl Johnson

Santa Maria Tzeja experienced a major leap in 2006 when a generous donation was given by Jeff Taylor, with help from Microsoft Corp, that resulted in the construction its computer center. This was an unprecedented and innovative advancement for our partner village, wherein its youth surged into a 21st century that has welcomed computer use and the internet as cornerstones to learning and research. Students from the village could hence forth be on a level with students from anywhere in Guatemala, particularly if they matriculated to a high school. Equally important, the ideal behind the center was to make computers "freely available" to the community. Many computer users in Guatemala must rely on Internet Café's where they pay user fees. And the nearest such outlet to SMT is a punishing and costly hour-long drive to the small city of Cantabal.

Most importantly, the computer center filled an increasingly essential need for the middle school curriculum. In Guatemala, standards have emerged for each middle school grade applying to proficiency with computers. The instructors must have college training. This has imposed

### A Life Story: Amanda con't

would be re-united with an uncle, who was abusive, treating him in the manner of a slave. As Julio reached age 14, another uncle who was far kinder, adopted him.

In 1993 in Guatemala peace talks were taking place between the Guatemalan Government and the rebels. Julio's family had returned to Santa Maria. Shortly after the accords were agreed upon, Julio's uncle was able to reunite him with his parents in the village.

These interwoven tales of survival and perseverance are ones that make me pause and think. I think about what I consider hardship to be. How I would have accepted a fate of needing to support my family at a young age? How would I endure the

greater demands on the computer center, making costs of operation and maintenance grow accordingly.

New patrons were needed if the ideal of low cost accessibility for students was to be maintained. But patrons are hard to come by. So the computer center was forced to levy user fees on each student. Today, those fees have grown to Q50/month which amounts to about \$80/year. In a place like SMT, that's a heavy burden, and it is threatening to

cause a drop off in enrollment of the middle school. As enrollment has fallen to roughly 120 students, the village must cut back teachers who have been a tremendous resource for education, and it could even threaten the limited subsidies that come from the regional government. The implications could get dire.

The partnership recognizes this as an utmost

priority— to raise funds that directly help with computer center costs and thus make it possible to substantially lower student usage fees. "Freely available" is an ideal that can be met with modest cost yet will have enormous impact.



fear, and then separation and isolation, over the many years of civil conflict?

For those of us born in the land of plenty, where we can expect to attend schools, gain an education, train in a profession and secure our prosperity, the circumstances of Amanda and Julio are pretty unimaginable. I could have sat on her porch all afternoon, as long as the story she would tell lasted!

Amanda and Julio are far from alone in carrying the baggage of struggle and survival. Remarkable life stories can emanate from almost every family in Santa Maria Tzeja. It is an utmost honor that people like Amanda would sit with 3 strangers on their porch and recite these life tales to us, nurturing our minds with an appreciation of sacrifice, after nourishing our bodies with a wholesome meal.