

## Digital Divide and Digital Connections

By Ali Durbin

Are you suffering from “Zoom fatigue”? For better or for worse, people in Santa María Tzejá are not! For one reason, most SMT residents do not work on computers. During the pandemic, the community’s farmers, ranchers, builders, carpenters, and weavers have largely continued their jobs as usual. While SMT’s teachers, shopkeepers, drivers, and office workers did experience significant changes in their jobs, many turned to farming during the Covid-related lockdowns, when schools were closed and it was not possible to travel freely to and from SMT.

Also, people in SMT do not suffer from Zoom fatigue because they cannot easily access Zoom. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the digital divide between those with and those without high-speed internet and internet-enabled devices. Some – by far not all – people in SMT have access to the internet on their phones, but service is intermittent, slow, and dependent on the weather.

While people in Needham can generally count on steady Wi-Fi, a simple rainstorm in SMT can knock out power and cell phone service for days. During those times, people cannot even place a simple phone call, much less look up a question on Google, log in to a class, or join a virtual meeting. The digital gap between our sister communities reflects and exacerbates broader inequalities around resources, access to information, and opportunities for employment and education.

By supporting the Computer Center, participants in the Guatemala Partnership are working to bridge this digital divide and equip SMT youth with the latest skills in information technology and word processing. Despite the technical challenges, we are strengthening digital connections between our two communities. Many residents of SMT follow the Guatemala Partnership’s Facebook page, and people in our church community and beyond who are proficient in Spanish can watch news coverage on pressing social issues produced by SMT reporters Rolanda García and Santiago Botón.

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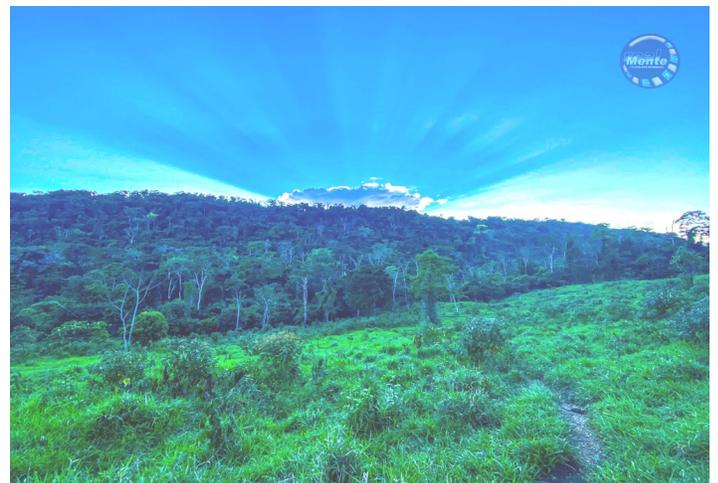
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## Environmental Stewardship Benefits All

By Ali Durbin

To respect and protect nature, the original founders of Santa María Tzejá designated a large section of their communal lands as a forest preserve. Encompassing 450 acres, the Cantil Reserve is to this day a diverse haven for regional wildlife, including howler monkeys, spotted pacas (*tepezcuintles*), tapirs, and an astounding assortment of birds. SMT visionaries spearheading this ongoing environmental initiative emphasize that the preserve helps mitigate the effects of climate change while providing clean air, water, and a vibrant site for research and recreation for generations to come. In addition to these incalculable gifts, as of 2021 the protected area will also provide tangible benefits to community members.

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Sun rises over Santa María Tzejá’s pristine nature reserve. Photo by Santiago Botón Simaj.

## ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP BENEFITS ALL

DURBIN (PG 1)

Through a land protection incentive linked to a European carbon-offset program, Guatemala's Council of Protected Areas (CONAP) awards land stewards a yearly stipend for protecting old-growth forests or for reforesting cleared areas. Upon learning of their eligibility for this grant, SMT leaders surveyed families through a participatory decision-making process to determine how to use the funds. The community has decided to invest the money in two eco-friendly, sustainable health projects: composting latrines,

which do not use water and will provide rich soil for crops; and fuel-efficient stoves, which will reduce smoke from cooking fires in homes while consuming a minimal amount of firewood. These chosen projects will contribute to public health and wellness, while safeguarding water and trees. The Cantil Reserve project is therefore a triple win: a win for forest protection, a win for resource conservation, and a win for families in Santa María Tzejá!

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## DIGITAL DIVIDE AND DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

DURBIN (PG 1)

In other digital connections, the Needham Channel is preparing a program to honor Kay and Clark Taylor, with a significant section devoted to the Guatemala project. When the creators asked for videos from Santa María Tzejá, we reached out to Carmen Reyes, director of the SMT Computer Center.

She interviewed long-time leaders María Pérez and Miguel Reyes about the impact of the partnership. However, the digital divide remains present, and when she attempted to upload the videos, she was stymied by the slow internet speed. Carmen ended up traveling over an hour to the nearest major town to be able to send the files! We will let you know when the Taylors' special will air.

As with our other committee meetings, the February delegation connected with the Women's Union leadership team via Google Meet. It was their first videoconference ever. They were tickled by the experience and took to it quickly.

The four women shared one cell phone for the call, seeing our faces flit by on the small screen and taking turns to occupy the designated seat nearest the phone to share their stories and perspectives. Our in-person delegation meetings with the Women's Union are unfailingly thought-provoking, lively, and full of laughter, and our virtual meeting was no exception! While we were unable to be there in person, the laughter from the meeting, transmitted thousands of miles through the internet, brightened our day!

During this pandemic, we have found new and creative ways to connect across the miles. We thank the partner families who sent in heartfelt and jolly greetings for our holiday video to our sister community. People in SMT viewed it on Facebook and WhatsApp, sharing it widely amongst family, with youth showing it to their elders. Our friends watched it with appreciation and joy!



Pre-pandemic delegation meeting with the Women's Union, February 2020. Photo by Jeff Clausen.

## School Highlights

By Brenda Metzler

During the church's virtual delegation with our friends in Santa María Tzejá in February, we met via videoconference with teachers from both the Middle School and the Primary School. They told us of the very negative impact of the pandemic on education in 2020. We learned that the remote nature of middle school education in 2020, with students getting homework packets to complete at home each week, ultimately resulted in one quarter of the students dropping out over the course of the year. Teachers and parents are more hopeful this year, as middle school students began the new school year in mid-January with hybrid learning that involves in-person classes three days a week and at-home written assignments on the other two days. Each classroom is following COVID protocols, with students using hand gel before entering class, wearing masks, and social distancing with 15 students per classroom. Teachers are clearly so happy and energized by being back in the classroom with their students and teaching the full curriculum.

Students are likewise showing an appreciation to be back in school with their teachers and classmates. One teacher commented that she thought the students had gotten bored without in-school classes in 2020 or perhaps had been doing more work around the house or on the 'parcelas' (farms) and were ready to return to the classroom. Whatever the reason, they are showing more interest in their studies and greater appreciation for their teachers. They are even complying without complaint with the mask requirement and the cancellation of group sports and games. The principal, Adelina Chom, believes the students are responding to the creative energy and enthusiasm of the teachers, who she says "are extraordinary; everyone is giving their all."

Adelina also acknowledged the success of the middle school tuition program. Since 2019 a three-year pilot program, implemented with a grant in honor of Clark and Kay Taylor, has paid the tuition for all 7th, 8th, and 9th graders. The cost of \$50 per student

per year was previously borne by the student's family. The goal of the program was to enable all families to send their children to middle school, regardless of economic circumstance. The program's first year saw the 7th grade class burgeon to 41 students, nearly double the usual registration. The principal noted that the program continues to increase access to education. She related that this year, over the course of registration, seven families who had initially just enrolled one child in the middle school later returned and enrolled a second child, after learning that the partnership was once again paying for all students' tuition in 2021. We hope to be able to continue this program beyond 2021, at the end of the three-year grant. Meanwhile, none of the regular government funding for school operations has arrived yet, so Needham funds are helping the middle school to stay open.

The delegation also met with the Primary school teachers, who look forward to having in-person classes this year. Due to the need for social distancing, they will split each grade into two groups of students, with one group attending on Monday and Tuesday, and a second group attending on Thursday and Friday. The government has strict COVID-prevention protocols for schools but does not fund them, so the school was delayed in opening this year. However, the teachers submitted a proposal to our partnership to access a portion of the COVID relief funds raised by our church last year. The school has now received the necessary funds to purchase student masks, teacher face shields, gel, a thermometer, and cleaning supplies to facilitate a safe learning environment for all.



Covid-19 prevention: Kindergarten student gets temperature check. Photo by V. Gutiérrez O.

We are thankful that there have been no verified cases of COVID in Santa María Tzejá, but we shared with the teachers that we in the United States have had a very sad and different experience. We expressed our support for the schools' adherence to government health protocols in order to keep their students and staff safe. Despite not being able to gather in person for such meetings during the pandemic, the feelings of caring and friendship that we have for each other are evident in the smiling faces on the screen. One teacher expressed the appreciation the community has for the solidarity and educational support extended by the Needham church. "Your support is a benefit to the whole community. Although we are not blood relatives, we are close friends -- and brothers and sisters in community."

## After Many Years the Achievement of a Long-Standing Dream

By Jeff Clausen

The people of Santa María Tzejá have long sought to have a central marketplace where they could sell their goods and produce. Without such a marketplace, community members must pay for transportation to reach the nearest market an hour away in Cantabal. As documented in early delegation trip reports from the late 1980s and early 1990s, travelers have frequently brought back news of Santa María Tzejá's goal to build a central marketplace where people in the community could exchange their goods. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, including scarce resources and competing needs, the construction of such a marketplace has continued to remain only a dream, always just out of reach.



This past year, during the early days of the pandemic, Santa María Tzejá (SMT) closed its borders to outsiders and restricted entry to and from the village. These preventative measures, while protecting the village from exposure to the coronavirus, resulted in the community losing access to the marketplace in Cantabal. With no access to a marketplace, during this shutdown the people of SMT relied on an informal bartering system, exchanging goods amongst themselves. Through this experience, the community became more acutely aware of its need for a central marketplace to facilitate such exchanges. With a community marketplace, not only would the people avoid incurring the costs of transportation and time to reach the market in Cantabal; they would also be able to better support each other and boost the local economy, purchasing produce and goods from their neighbors instead of from intermediaries outside the community.

To this end, over the past year, the leaders of Santa María Tzejá have worked to develop a concrete plan for a community marketplace, and through their communal efforts have raised nearly enough funds to build it. Unfortunately, due to a recent increase in the price of raw materials, the community discovered that it was considerably short of the total needed to build the marketplace at its original intended scale. Accordingly, they developed an alternate plan for a significantly smaller marketplace that could be built with the funds they had raised – reducing the size of the planned marketplace from about 2,500 square feet to 950 square feet. However, the story does not end here.

During the February delegation, an individual from the Needham Congregational Church, learning that the village would have to markedly downsize its planned marketplace, realized that an opportunity might be presenting itself. For more than a decade this individual had been quietly and consistently setting aside small amounts of funds for SMT, \$10 here, \$5 there. While engaging in this effort over the years, the prospective donor did not know how the funds would be used and waited until an achievable, community-prioritized purpose would become clear. Upon learning the amount needed to complete the project at its original size, the donor recognized that they had found the intended purpose for their long-term savings project and offered to donate the needed funds!

There is a beauty here. The church's partnership with Santa María Tzejá started as a leap of faith in 1987 with a handshake between leaders of our two communities and with no real plan other than a commitment that we would visit the community every six months. Through that commitment, we have come to share in SMT's dreams and aspirations. The community marketplace is one of those dreams.

The village will soon proceed to build the marketplace at its originally intended scale, to benefit everyone in the community. It will be the result of a grassroots effort of a transnational community of people who came together in solidarity -- a reminder that through faith and a commitment to join others in their journey, our individually modest but consistent efforts over many years can help realize a long-standing dream that spans generations.