

A Note from Our Letter Exchange Coordinator

Welcome to the Spring 2022 Guatemala Partnership Newsletter! In our Fall 2021 newsletter we noted with much enthusiasm our plan to return to Santa María Tzejá (SMT) in February. Unfortunately, due to the Omicron surge, we had to postpone the February in-person delegation. In its place we held a hybrid delegation in March. Our in-person delegation is now scheduled for June.

While we were unable to physically travel to SMT in February, your many letters (over 100!) were translated, scanned, and electronically sent to SMT. Your letters were printed in SMT's computer center and then members of SMT's improvement committee traveled door-to-door hand delivering each of your letters. A few days later, they returned to each home and gathered responses, which were then scanned and e-mailed back to us. A grassroots postal service and a true community effort to deliver!

With our in-person delegation scheduled for June, now is the time to write your partner family response! This will provide time for our team to translate your letters and have them ready to go. Please send your letter to a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu no later than [date], 2022, with a subject line that includes "Partner Family."

First Hybrid Delegation!



After 33 years of *in-person* delegations followed by three *virtual* delegations during the height of the pandemic, we just successfully completed our first *hybrid* delegation! In mid-March, Partnership members connected with our sister-community representatives online, while Ali Durbin, our Guatemala-based participant, traveled to Santa María Tzejá to represent us on the ground. Through a combination of videoconferences, WhatsApp chats, phone calls, and face-to-face discussions, we covered topics ranging from COVID-era education and health care to the community's ongoing needs for clean water, passable roads, and a decent

internet connection. Ali shared fresh mangos and relaxed conversations with committee members following our meetings and all of us savored the connections, laughter, and inspiration shared during our on-line meetings.

Stay in Touch

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Highlights

Due to Omicron, the Guatemala Partnership's February in-person delegation was postponed. In its place, a virtual delegation was held in March and our in-person delegation is now scheduled for June.

Your partner family letter is due for our **June 2022** in-person delegation. Please send your letter by [Date] so our translators can complete their work.

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SMT Schools Reopen Due to Vaccine Initiative



During the hybrid delegation one of our meetings was with SMT’s primary school teachers, a group of individuals who over the many months of the pandemic never gave up on their students and who continually fought to make sure their students could continue to learn. They are—like all teachers during these past two years—heroes of the pandemic.

In meeting with them, it was great to learn that both the elementary and middle schools in SMT have been able to reopen to in-person learning this year. This is due to a combination of initiatives supported by village leaders, including the community’s achievement of a 65% vaccination rate of eligible residents and ongoing Covid prevention measures in school settings.

Across 12 classrooms, they are currently teaching 74 boys and 78 girls, 152 students in total. The teachers spoke about how both they and their students are very excited to be back in the classroom. They also discussed how they are assessing their students’ educational deficits due to the lack of progress during the pandemic and how they are working with students to fortify those areas as they move forward.

“Education Helps Us Diversify”

This was a quote from SMT’s middle school principal, Gregorio Canil, during our meeting with the middle school. Gregorio was discussing the importance of education in the context of the community of Santa María Tzejá and the environment. He was noting the problems with deforestation, overuse of the land, and land scarcity, and was expressing the importance of education as the solution to enabling Santa María Tzejá to move beyond an overreliance on farming. It was an interesting observation on the intersection of education and environmental justice.

Zooming down to the individual student level, the concept of ‘education helps us diversify’ was apparent throughout the entire middle school meeting, with teachers discussing the multitude of courses being taught and the numerous extracurricular activities their students are involved in. Courses noted by the teachers included Math, Natural Sciences, Art, Music, Spanish, English Language, Mayan Language, Dance, Social Studies, Citizenship, and Productive Skills. In addition to the students’ coursework, the teachers discussed the students’ recent participation



in International Woman’s Day, as well as the students’ participation in community events, where the students contribute their creative energies, including writing and presenting poems, dances, and skits.

Later in the week we met with Santa María Tzejá scholarship committee and learned that there are now over 100 young professionals from Santa María Tzejá working in the Ixcán region, all of whom are graduates of the middle school and who’s high school education was supported by the Partnership. Among other professions, they are working as agronomists, pharmacists, and teachers, and over half of are women. These young professionals from Santa María Tzejá are bringing real development to the region, and hearing about them was strong reminder that Gregorio’s comments on education were more than just words.

Roads to Farms



During the hybrid delegation, Partnership members met with a group of residents committed to improving access to Santa María Tzejá’s farmlands. They highlighted that although it has been 50 years since SMT’s founding, there are still few roads to reach their farmland. This means that residents of SMT, when traveling to/from their individual farm plots, are forced to carry everything on their backs or use pack animals. Their daily journey on narrow paths is made more difficult in the rainy season when the paths often turn to mud and in the harvest season when residents struggle to bring their crops to market. They spoke passionately about their project and how, with no government support, they came together to start the project three years ago, devising a plan for nine (9) access routes and then raising funds to hire equipment to clear the paths.

Meeting with this industrious group highlighted for Partnership members how often we take basic infrastructure, like roads, for granted. Even today, while our delegations enjoy the ease of driving to the village center in a van, the wider community faces much difficulty in this regard, with no way for families to easily access their farm plots.

COVID-19 Update: Access to Testing

Current numbers indicate that 47% of individuals ages 12+ in Guatemala are fully vaccinated, while in SMT the number is 65%. In addition to continued vaccine distribution through its health promoters, SMT now has access to free COVID testing at its health post, something the Partnership was unexpectedly able to experience firsthand.

During our hybrid delegation, our in-person participant, Ali Durbin, started feeling ill. Concerned that she might have COVID, Ali went to Santa María Tzejá’s health post to get tested. At the health post was



Domingo Ralios at SMT’s Health Post providing Ali Durbin’s COVID test results

Domingo Ralios, who administered a COVID test and was fortunately able to inform Ali that she was COVID negative. While her test results were negative, her encounter proved to be a positive reminder of the Partnership's long engagement with healthcare in SMT.



Domingo Ralios on left, Jerry Durbin second from left. Photo taken 1989.

One of the Partnership's first joint projects with SMT was the building of a health post in the late 1980s. In those early days, Ali Durbin's father, Dr. Jerry Durbin, worked with the first health promoters in the village, one of whom was Domingo Ralios. Who would have imagined back then, when Ali's father was working with the community's first three health promoters, that 35 years later his daughter would need to seek the services of the health post and would be attended to by the very same health promoter, Domingo Ralios! A reminder of the many ways our lives are interwoven.

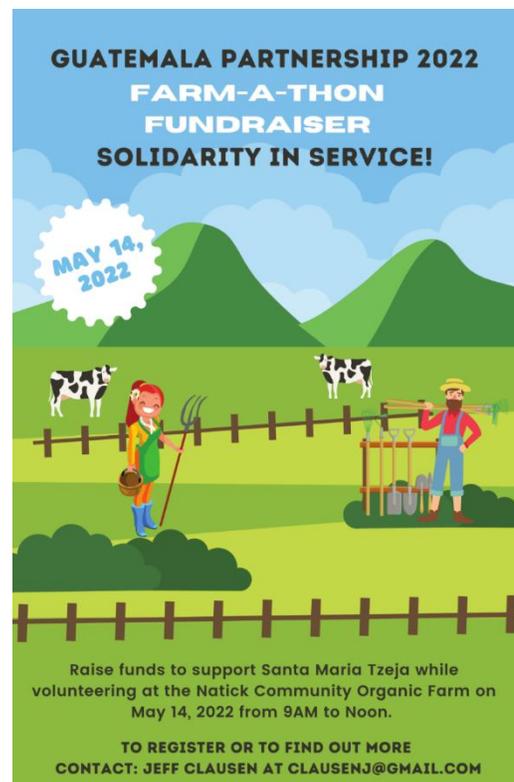
Upcoming Event: Guatemala Partnership Farm-A-Thon Fundraiser

Think Globally, Act Locally!

Register to join the Guatemala Partnership's 2022 Farm-a-Thon Fundraiser! We are seeking volunteers from both the Congregational Church of Needham and the First Church Natick, UCC to collaborate in this event. All funds raised by participants will support education and development in Santa María Tzejá, while all physical work performed will support the Natick Community Organic Farm. It's a perfect opportunity to support two organizations in one day!

Participants will raise pledges from family and friends to support their day of volunteering and then join together in good company from 9:00 am to Noon on the morning of Saturday May 14th to work at the Natick Community Organic Farm. As we enter Spring, this is a great way to celebrate our earth and support our friends both globally and locally.

To register, or to learn more, please contact Jeff Clausen at clausenj@gmail.com or Brenda Metzler at bmetzler7@verizon.net.



June Delegation Reminder!

As noted above, please send your partner family letter to a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu no later than [Date] 2022, with a subject line that includes "Partner Family." We look forward to delivering your partner family letters in person!