

## *A Note from Our Letter Exchange Coordinator*

Welcome to the Spring 2023 Guatemala Partnership Newsletter! Inside are many updates from this past February's delegation, as well as news on upcoming events and information about our August 2023 delegation.

The February 2023 delegation was one of the largest delegations in recent years with a diverse group of 16 travelers ranging in age from the teens to the mid-70's and hailing from Oregon, California, Texas, and Massachusetts. The delegation was supported by two translators, Paula Worby and Ámate Perez, both with deep historical ties to Santa María Tzejá, having been recruited by Clark Taylor in the early years of the partnership and having traveled to Santa María Tzejá with delegations in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Each brought a long history of working in solidarity with indigenous communities in Latin America and provided valuable connections to the past, facilitated rich connections in the present, and offered much wisdom for the future.

In Santa María Tzejá, the delegation encountered a community that continues to vibrate with the collective energy of its founders. It met with schoolteachers, scholarship students, leaders of the Water Committee, leaders of the Roads to Farms Project, leaders of the Women's Union, and with conservationists protecting the community's new nature reserve. Woven throughout the many meetings and discussions was the community's concept of 'integrated development' and their idea that everyone must benefit from the collective efforts underway -- a deep community spirit of 'no one left behind.'

On a more somber note, the delegation also met with survivors of the massacre who continue to fight for justice and who voiced that, despite growing older each year, they will continue to pursue their cause.

In traveling to Santa María Tzejá, members of the delegation carried with them your well wishes, your hugs, your support, and your solidarity. The letters enclosed with this newsletter were gathered and carried back by them. Within each letter is the spirit of Clark and Kay Taylor and their still bold idea of bringing people together and inspiring them to tune in, reach out, and connect.

Thank you for your continued involvement in this project. In a world that struggles with deep divisions, your support and participation in the Guatemala Partnership is a shining light of hope.

- Alan Clayton-Matthews

## Stay in Touch

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## Upcoming Dates

**Saturday, June 10:**

Farm-a-Thon Fundraiser to support education and development in Santa Maria Tzejá at the Natick Community Organic Farm.

**Sunday, June 18:**

Partner family letters are due for the **August 2023** delegation.

**August 02-August 13:**

August 2023 Delegation to Santa Maria Tzejá.

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## *First Delegation Visit to Cerro Cantil Reserve*

For the first time in Partnership history, a delegation visited the Cerro Cantil Reserve, 450 acres of remote rainforest set aside by the original founders of Santa María Tzejá. Community guides led the delegation adeptly through the dense foliage to emerge on the banks of the refreshing Sorec River.



Biodiversity was evident everywhere, from the industrious leaf-cutting ants that we tried to avoid squashing, to the abundant lush greenery reaching high into the sky and the pops of color from orchids and butterflies.



We felt respect, wonder, and gratitude for this sacred place. During the Cold War era, the reserve's Cantil Ridge sheltered community members fleeing genocidal state violence. Now, in the face of climate change, the preserve is once again safeguarding the community's resilience and survival for generations to come.

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## *Looking Toward the Future: "Clean, Green, and Prosperous!"*

While in Santa María Tzejá, the delegation met with COCODE, the community's Coordinating Committee that is made up of the leaders of the community's various committees and organizations. The meeting provided a central place to discuss developments in Santa María Tzejá and the community's vision for its future. The meeting synthesized many of the conversations that delegation members had in family homes during the week — conversations around kitchen tables that often ran late into the night, as people reflected on their past and spoke of their hopes and dreams for the future.

In speaking about various projects and their goals for the future, the committee expounded on their concept of 'integrated development.' They talked about the 'Roads to Farms' project to create better access to their farmlands and their continued focus on education to build a professional class not tied to farming, and how those efforts need to integrate into community projects that bring these things

together. As an example, they noted how the new Farmers' Market provides farmers with easy access to a place to sell their goods, while also providing the community's professionals with a place to purchase goods. Thus all areas of development serve to benefit each other.

Members of the committee also discussed the Cerro Cantil reserve and how it is an important connection to the past as well as part of SMT's future. They also spoke about their dream to someday have a high school, so students would not have to leave the community to continue their education. Recognizing that communities need a place to come together, they mentioned their plans to turn a piece of communal land near the town center into a park. In discussing this, they shared their idea about having an interpretive trail as part of the park's features that would trace the history of Santa María Tzejá, as well as the history of the partnership between our two communities.

Towards the end of the meeting, in reflecting on all the projects and looking towards the horizon, the head of COCODE summarized it best when he succinctly and enthusiastically stated that the future of SMT is: "clean, green, and prosperous!"



Photos of the 'Roads to Farms' project, the new Farmers' Market, and Santa María Tzejá's future generation of leaders.

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## *A Message from the Middle School's New Principal*

The academic school year in Guatemala runs from January through November. This past December, the middle school's new principal, Gregorio Canil Morales, sent a letter providing an update on the middle school. In his letter he shared several observations and achievements for the 2022 school year, his first year as principal and the first year students returned to in-person classroom instruction after the pandemic.

Below are excerpts from his letter:

*[This is my first year as principal] and I am enjoying putting into practice what I have learned through my university education studies. I feel proud and happy to be back in this middle school, since I grew up and studied here; all my work is a way of giving back to today's youth something of what I learned here from my teachers and the administrative staff. I have set many goals for myself, and one of them is to ensure that we have a quality education, a liberating education, one in which our students demonstrate knowledge through ideas, where they apply their learning in their daily lives. The students must*



*interpret the theories they have studied into practice and must teach others what they understand. It is a somewhat difficult process, since in our environment we have grown accustomed to memorizing information for an exam. All too often, we do not study for life, we study for the moment, and in my opinion that is very bad; we must leave these study techniques to the past.*

*The return to the classrooms in January was a joyous and emotional experience! With great enthusiasm, [the students] arrived punctually in their classrooms, full of energy and ready to receive their classes. Over the course of 2022, they maintained their interest in learning and the grades of each of our students were very high compared to the other years. Their success motivates us even more, as administrative staff and teachers, to work harder to polish our skills, and that is why each of us continues to study education at the university level.*



*This year we achieved many of our goals, [including] the planting of fruit trees around our institute. We are glad that former students who are currently working donated the trees to us. For the ninth grade students, it is a great memory they have left planted on the school grounds.*



*Another of our objectives was to create a new theater production, something we have not done for several years. With little time for preparation, we developed and performed a play which we entitled 'Emigration'. We did so because seven of our students abandoned their studies and headed north to the United States this year. At the municipal level, it can likewise be observed that class sizes have shrunk by a large percentage. We created the play to raise awareness among our youth of the problems and dangers they could face during the trip.*

*Your support for our program is very important to us, since through education we are prepared holistically. Education improves us and makes us more cultured, and more aware of what is happening in our surroundings. Education in Guatemala has not been valued by the government, as evidenced by the minimal funding its budget receives year after year. This results in its low quality in much of Guatemala. The curriculum provided to us by the government does not promote critical thinking. It rests upon us, as teachers and administrators, to investigate and create our own curriculum, so that our students know and understand the reality in our nation and why our country is awash in corruption.*

*Thanks to people like you who support education, we will not waiver and we will continue to do our best. We thank you, and hopefully our friendship will last for many more years. We are very happy to know that we have your support, as we strive to prepare a generation of young adults who will, with a critical eye, stand vigilant over life and nature in the creation of a better world.*



While in Santa María Tzejá, the February delegation visited both the middle school and primary school. During their visits they witnessed much enthusiasm and excitement from the many energetic students who were just at the start of their new academic year.

Photos from visits to the middle school and primary school





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## Upcoming Event: Guatemala Partnership 2023 Farm-a-Thon Fundraiser!



Register to join the Guatemala Partnership's 2023 Farm-a-Thon Fundraiser! We are seeking volunteers from both the Congregational Church of Needham and the First Congregational Church of Natick 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 is 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 12:00 pm on Saturday June 10<sup>th</sup> to work at the Natick Community Organic Farm. As we approach the summer, this is a great way to celebrate our earth and support our friends both globally and locally.

To register or learn more, please contact Jeff Clausen at: [clausenj@gmail.com](mailto:clausenj@gmail.com)

Photos from the 2022 Farm-a-Thon



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## August 2023 Delegation: Connect and Be Part of the Story!

Now is the time to begin thinking about your summer travel plans! We encourage you to consider joining us in Santa María Tzejá this August. Whether this is your first time and you have never traveled to Santa María Tzejá before, or you have been in the past and are looking to reconnect – wherever you are on life's journey – we invite you to join us!



From high school age youth to those of us more 'seasoned' delegates, all are welcome! Share your spirit and be part of the story.

*Travel dates for the August 2023 delegation are  
Wednesday August 02, 2023 – Sunday August 13, 2023.*

To learn more about joining the August 2023 delegation contact Alan Clayton-Matthews at [a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu](mailto:a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu) or Bill Garrett at [wgarrett@mit.edu](mailto:wgarrett@mit.edu).