

## A Note from Our Letter Exchange Coordinator

Welcome to the Fall 2023 Guatemala Partnership Newsletter! Since our last update, the August delegation visited Santa María Tzejá and witnessed the continued development of education, the arrival of potable water to more households, and met with many of SMT's committees. The delegation also visited Santa Elena, a community of returned refugees near Santa María Tzejá.

In addition, the delegation was able to witness firsthand a political democratic upset in Guatemala's national presidential elections, with a reform candidate receiving widespread support from the vast majority of voters. The election provides an opportunity for the first true reforms since 1954, when a right-wing military coup abruptly ended a prior reform movement. The inauguration of the president-elect this coming January, however, is not guaranteed given the powerful anti-democratic forces in the country.



This is the 36<sup>th</sup> year of our partnership with Santa María Tzejá, and the sending and receiving of partner family letters has been a big part of this transnational community. Over the past year, almost 400 letters have been exchanged back and forth. These personal connections shared through your letters, stories, and photos are an important way that you can help keep the partnership alive and thriving. Of course, you are also welcome to join a delegation! Delegations travel to SMT each February

and August and meetings with partner families are always one of the biggest highlights of our visit.

In closing, keep up the good work! You can email your letter for the February delegation right away to [a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu](mailto:a.clayton-matthews@northeastern.edu) with a subject that includes 'Partner Family.' In any case, **please get your letter in by January 1st, 2024**, so our translators will have time to do their work prior to the February 2024 delegation.

- Alan Clayton-Matthews

## Stay in Touch

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## Upcoming Dates

**Monday, January 1, 2024**  
Partner family letters are due for the **February 2024** delegation.

**February 13-February 25:**  
February 2024 Delegation to Santa Maria Tzejá.

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## *Education Update: Striving Students, Thriving Graduates*

During its time in Santa María Tzejá, the August delegation met with primary school teachers and parents of primary school students. Current enrollment in the primary school is stable at 160 students plus 50 preschool children. Enrollment in grades 4-6, which feeds the middle school, averages a little over 25 students each.

The delegation also met with teachers from Santa María Tzejá's Computer Center. The Computer Center currently enrolls 114 students, including 47 primary school students. Computer Center enrollment is rebounding with a 20% increase over 2022, which is also about a 5% increase over the prior seven-year average; enrollment growth which underscores the value of this important program that has long been supported by the Guatemala Partnership.

While in Santa María Tzejá, the delegation had an opportunity to meet with two regional directors from the Guatemalan Government's Ministry of Education. We learned that many communities, in contrast to Santa María Tzejá, only have a primary school – with some struggling to establish suitable school buildings. The directors mentioned noticeable gaps in reading and writing resulting from pandemic disruptions to education. While they noted no shortage in the number of available teachers, there is a significant need for financial and human resources to support teacher development, and opportunities for more preschool, special education, and adult education programs.

We learned that Santa María Tzejá receives little support from the Ministry of Education, in part because the maturity of programs in SMT exceed those of most regional communities. However, this puts more demands on Santa María Tzejá's school principals and community leaders to provide support for teacher development and student services that are not forthcoming from the Ministry of Education.

In the absence of strong support from the Ministry of Education, the delegation was extra impressed by the pedagogical efforts underway in SMT's middle school. Teaching in SMT's middle school emphasizes small group discussions on current affairs and programs to help students express themselves and develop critical thinking skills. This includes a commitment to maintain music and theater courses despite the Guatemalan government's cutting of funds for programs in the arts.



The delegation also met with five high school and college students, all graduates of SMT's middle school. These students affirmed the effort and investments being made in the middle school. They told us they felt well prepared by their studies in Santa María Tzejá, and particularly noted their confidence in speaking and presenting, which they attributed to the middle school's commitment to theatrical and other public speaking requirements.

Additionally, the delegation met with Santa María Tzejá's Scholarship Committee. Several policy changes have been implemented in recent years to increase access to high school education and make the pursuit of additional education more affordable. The Committee reported that there has been a significant increase in interest and applications for scholarships.

Lastly, you may recall that in our Spring 2023 Guatemala Partnership newsletter we included a message from Gregorio Canil Morales, SMT's middle school principal. In his message, he described a theater production middle school students were working on to raise awareness among youth about the problems and dangers of immigration.

While in Santa María Tzejá, the delegation was treated to a performance of this new play. The play is a response to the current immigration pressures, where many youth in the region have abandoned their education to travel north.

Witnessing the powerful performances of SMT's creative and energetic middle school students put an exclamation point on the week. Their performance underscored the community's investments in education and their commitment to their youth, which the Guatemala Partnership has supported for many years.



SMT Middle School Student's Theater Production

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## *Election Update: Guatemalans Defend Democracy*

*Our friends in Santa María Tzejá are weathering a major political storm right now, with the country's democracy at stake.*

Fundado en 1920  
**LaHra.gt**  
Guatemala, domingo 20 de agosto de 2023 - Época V - No. 610

LaHra.gt  
**DE ELEGIR**  
**2023**

Con más del 70% de las actas procesadas, la ventaja de Semilla es mayor a 600 mil votos

**Bernardo Arévalo gana la Presidencia; primer Presidente hijo de un ex Presidente**

PIERDE POR TERCERA VEZ  
**Sandra Torres continúa sin aclarar si aceptará los resultados**

In August, Guatemalans elected reformist candidates Bernardo Arévalo and Karin Herrera to the presidency by a landslide. Their anti-corruption platform resonated deeply. Like many places across the country, Santa María Tzejá has experienced the effects of government corruption firsthand. Examples include the earlier failed water project in which funding was embezzled at the regional level and the current renovation of the health post in which much of the cost to taxpayers is lost to government graft.

The country's powerful elite, afraid of losing their benefits and being prosecuted for their embezzlement schemes, is attempting to overturn the election results and prevent Arévalo and Herrera from taking office in January. They have tried to cancel their political party and, in September, the attorney general's office seized the ballots from the elections tribunal without explanation.

Upset by this blatant disregard for the vote, Guatemalans from all walks of life have engaged in a national strike as of October 2, taking over streets at some 150 points across the country.

Led by Indigenous organizations, these nonviolent roadblocks feature music, art, dance, speeches, strategy meetings, soccer games, and the sharing of food and companionship. After over two weeks of roadblocks, the movement has transitioned its strategy to focus instead on public prosecutors' offices where many of the anti-democratic measures have originated.

Street Protests



International actors, including the Organization of American States and the US government, have expressed their confidence in Guatemala's election results, their concern at the anti-democratic maneuvers, and the importance of a peaceful and transparent transfer of power.

Over 100 people from Santa María Tzejá have joined this movement of unprecedented scope and scale to denounce corruption and defend their democracy. A dozen community leaders made the day-long journey to the capital on October 20 to join the large gathering to honor Revolution Day and uplift civil rights.



Residents of SMT traveling to the Capital



Residents of SMT Participating in Protests

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## *Sister Communities: Santa María Tzejá and Santa Elena – Shared Dreams, On-going Challenges*

Traveling to Santa María Tzejá, whether your first time or one of many, raises questions about how the community's situation might compare to other communities nearby. The towns we pass through while traveling are reduced to a blur through the bus window as busy visits to Santa María rarely allow for side trips. In August, however, the delegation was able to visit a sister community to Santa María Tzejá, spending a few hours in the community of Santa Elena 20 de Octubre. Santa Elena has about 40 families, and is about 30 minutes from Playa Grande, the Ixcán county center.

The older generation in Santa Elena, a Maya-Q'eqchi'-speaking community, has an intertwined history with Santa María Tzejá. Before war and conflict in the 1980s, they were from Dolores, Santa María Tzejá's close neighbor and the village that provided shelter and support in the early years when Santa María Tzejá's founders first arrived to settle the inhospitable jungle.

In 1994, Santa María Tzejá's war-time refugees returned to their lands following the negotiated departure of occupying settlers. Refugees from Dolores, however, were not as fortunate. They were unable to regain their land in Dolores, and the government did not provide sufficient alternative land with enough acreage to allow the Dolores group to resettle all together. As a result, less than half of the returning refugees were able to settle on the new lands provided by the government and which comprises the community of Santa Elena.



Meeting with residents of Santa Elena

Both Paula Worby and Ali Durbin have distant ties with residents of Santa Elena (former refugees from Dolores) and organized a meeting with community members they thought might remember them. The delegation gathered in Santa Elena's community building and even with no offers of aid or even much of an agenda, the delegation was received warmly and found their contacts in Santa Elena ready to talk about their history, challenges, and successes.

Compared to Santa María Tzejá, Santa Elena, despite active leadership, has more challenges. They do not have enough agricultural land, the village only has a primary school, which makes further study for students challenging, and it took the community a very long time to get a passable road. Additionally, their location at the other end of the Cobán municipality, which is vast and has more than 200 communities, makes getting government attention difficult. They feel fortunate, however, for ongoing ties with an Oberlin College group, Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA), that has aided with scholarships for primary school students to attend middle school, and most recently with funds to support the construction of a health post, which is currently being built. They appreciated hosting us as visitors curious about their wellbeing, and we were humbled and happy to learn a little bit about a new place. The brief time together was a mutual gift we will all remember.