

# The Oaxaca Learning Center



Making a difference, one young person at a time!

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## Summer 2011 Newsletter



*Some of our students attending a health fare presented at the new Learning Center Extension. The new space is already filled with activity.*

### Learning Center Extension

The Oaxaca Learning Center has expanded, opening a nearby satellite center with more space for students to meet and study, and for our staff to run our programs. Located at 518 Abasolo Street, the extension center is just one block from our main building.

For a long while now it's seemed that The Center staff and students were up against an insurmountable barrier: overcrowding and nowhere to go. Tables jostled one another in the entryway and the garden area; a group working on physics at one table trying to block out the English irregular verbs coming from the adjoining one; and elbow-to-elbow students at the row of computers along the side trying to focus on screen research, while the Center's several special-interest groups vied for space in the single, small classroom.

And the B&B's ground-floor guests looking for a quiet place to read? A peaceful snooze in the hammock? Bless them for their forbearance and appreciation of The Center's hectic vitality!

Now, thanks to the generosity of supporters like you, The Center has taken a year's lease on additional quarters quite close by our main building on Murgia. Volunteer labor and donations have refurbished and furnished the space. What's more, this urgently needed expansion has come just in time for The Center's busiest summer program ever. The new space opened in June and the relief is immeasurable! The extension building is already a busy hive of activity, with eighty students enrolled in our intensive summer program. The new location provides The Center with a large room that can hold a group of sixty, two smaller spaces for study and tutoring, and a separate lab space for the bank of computers.

We want to thank everyone who helped find, renovate and furnish the space, and those whose financial support made it possible!

### Summer Program At The Oaxaca Learning Center

This year a record number of eighty students will be the beneficiaries of The Center's five-week summer program, and the program itself is expanding to include four innovative workshops to complement the traditional academic study. The tried-and-true basics remain in place:

- Help with all the courses students find hardest to master, like math, chemistry, physics and English.

- Tutors specially trained to maximize learning outcomes in the course of the short summer session.
- An emphasis on individual attention with students working in groups of no more than eight at a time.

What's new this year is that summer scholars can choose to participate in any two of the four challenging workshops the Center is offering for the first time:

- **The development of our multiple intelligences:** What are our individual, unique abilities, aptitudes, attitudes and values? Group exercises will encourage students to deepen their understanding of who they are and to clarify their goals.
- **Love and other addictions:** This workshop will provide a safe space for participants to share their feelings about adolescent emotions that are often hard to talk about. It will also encourage a frank examination of the possible effects on emotional development of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, video games and social networking.
- **Violence in dating relationships / sexual and reproductive rights:** Betsaida Arango, the Women's Group Coordinator, will lead this cautionary exploration of the tragically frequent dark side of romantic entanglements, while at the same time encouraging personal responsibility for relationship outcomes.
- **Oral Expression, body language, self esteem:** Self confidence in expressing oneself is important in all careers, yet is a skill that is goes untaught. This workshop will help students learn how to express themselves effectively with others, whether in a social context or giving a presentation before a group.

We feel justifiably proud of the way our summer program has developed over the years. Besides being academically strong, it offers a range of discussion and interaction that our students won't find anywhere else. The days are intense, starting at nine in the morning and running until six in the evening. This full day gives students, tutors, staff and volunteers an opportunity to develop a collegial sense of community based on mutual interests and mutual respect. From this summer experience come lasting friendships and strengthened self esteem for participants to take with them when they return to regular public school classes.

## Student Profiles

In this issue, we highlight four students who were successful high school graduates and have been able to continue their studies through TOLC support. This is something they once considered an unreachable dream, but now see as a realizable goal. They are now partially funded through donations and payments of guests who stay at the Bed & Breakfast. They will be beneficiaries of new donations that the Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center (FOLC) receives.



### Anel Sánchez Cortés

Anel is a bright young woman from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region of Oaxaca. She grew up in a family of very modest means, and earned a scholarship for college. Through determination and self motivation, she has just finished two years of studies in communications—with excellent grades—at the University of Mesoamerica, in the City of Oaxaca.

Initially, the university supplied one half of the scholarship and a non-profit organization in Tehuantepec covered the balance. The Learning Center in Oaxaca has helped her find free accommodations and, through its donation fund, has been giving her 300 pesos a week for expenses. Just recently, the non-profit supplying one-half of her scholarship ceased to exist, leaving Anel short of funds. We are hopeful our generous sponsors will come to her rescue!

### **Patricia Virginia Robles**

Patricia is a very dynamic and enthusiastic young woman and an outstanding student. She is completing her third semester in food technology at a new public university in Zimatlan, Oaxaca, with an outstanding 9.2 cumulative grade point average. She will graduate in May 2012 with a technical degree and then hopes to complete two additional years to complete a university degree in food engineering. Creating innovative products using local inputs is an important aspect of her study program, and something that is especially motivating for her. Patricia is from a family of very modest means in Huayapam, a small town near Oaxaca, where she lives with her parents and three siblings. Patricia counts on her stipend from The Learning Center to be able to continue her studies.



### **Kevin Pérez Hernández**

Kevin came to The Learning Center in 2006 and completed his high school studies with our support. He is now completing his second year in the nursing program at the State University of Oaxaca (UABJO). His parents are separated and have not been able to offer him any financial support for his education or his basic needs. He is a very kind and caring person and a solid student. He needs support for housing, food, university fees, and books and materials required for his courses and practical training. His program requires three more years to complete the nursing degree. Your contributions to the Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center will help Kevin reach his goal.

### **Elizabeth Martínez González**

Elizabeth completed her high school studies with the backing of her parents. Then her father had serious health problems. She came to The Learning Center for support for her university studies in accounting. She has finished her third year of studies at the public university, and has improved each semester, beginning with a 8.0 grade point average in her first year and attaining a 9.3 in the semester just ended. Like many of our participants, she values The Learning Center for many reasons above and beyond the financial support she receives. Elizabeth says that before becoming part of The Learning Center community she was very timid, but over time the supportive environment helped her gain self-confidence and learn to study effectively -- keys to her present success in university. Being able to devote full time to her studies and not have to combine work and studies has been key to her excelling academically.



## ***Intercambio* Builds Language Skills**

“What do you think? Should we speak Spanish or English?”

“Pues, vamos a hablar español.”

It's another afternoon session of *intercambio* at The Oaxaca Learning Center, and Yessica Mesinas Hernández, in her last year of high school, is talking with Karen Grove, a professor of geology at San Francisco State University, currently visiting Oaxaca for two weeks of morning-long Spanish classes. “I originally was thinking of taking an hour of private lessons to improve my conversational ability,” Karen said, “but this is much more fun.” For Yessica, who wants to major in languages at the state university, it's a chance to learn a little more English from a native speaker.



*Karen and Yessica meet at the Center to sharpen their language skills in an English/Spanish intercambio.*

And that's *intercambio*—(language) exchange—a learning experience for visitors to The Learning Center's Bed and Breakfast, friends, or friends of friends who happen to stop by. “It's been great. I learn about Oaxaca and life in Oaxaca, and we have fun. I feel that, even in our short time together, we've become friends,” Karen said.

Yessica concurs. Even though her English skills are limited, she has been able to increase her vocabulary and pick up some grammar in the thrice-weekly sessions. “I want to become a professor of English. That's my goal,”

Yessica said. She's been coming to the Oaxaca Learning Center since 2008, and the *intercambio* with Karen is a head-start on summer school at the Learning Center, where she'll be studying English.

Karen Grove is studying Spanish at the Vinigúlaza School, whose English-teaching facility, Cambridge Academy, has awarded scholarships to several Oaxaca Learning Center students. Karen's Spanish is excellent, after previous study in Guatemala and teaching geology for several months at the University of Chile in Santiago. She'll soon be taking a sabbatical in Patagonia to write a book on its geology, so the *intercambio* and lessons are a chance to polish her skills.

Language exchange sessions are a relaxed way to learn for all levels. There are always Spanish-speaking students at the Learning Center who would be happy to join with visitors in a Spanish-for-English trade. And the bonus is to make new friends and learn more about life in Oaxaca beyond the usual tourism attractions. Several *intercambio* partners who began at the Learning Center have continued their exchanges via Skype.

So when you're in Oaxaca, why not stop by and volunteer for *intercambio*? You'll be glad you did, and you'll definitely be helping our students improve their career opportunities.

## **FOLC ACHIEVES TAX-DEDUCTIBLE STATUS**

It's official! The Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center (FOLC) is now a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, chartered in the state of Maine, and eligible for tax-deductible donations.

“This is a tremendous step.” said Fay Henderson, president of FOLC and a Oaxaca-area resident. “The 501(c)(3) status will allow us to institutionalize fundraising for the Learning Center, guaranteeing its future and helping us expand services to meet growing needs.”

Until now, the Oaxaca Learning Center has been financially dependent on the largesse of its founder, Gary Titus, a Oaxaca resident for more than 20 years; income from its adjacent bed and breakfast; and individual donations -- usually from visitors to the Learning Center or from Gary's annual December fundraising letter.

"I'm so happy to have someone else take over fundraising responsibilities," Gary said. "Now I can just fade into the woodwork." Yeah, right! Actually, it will give Gary more freedom to dedicate his efforts to counseling the Center's young students, helping them develop a vision of their own future. "I find our students too often just go from day-to-day -- even those with the best grades -- instead of developing a sense of aspirations and a career path," Gary said.

According to Fay, the Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center is currently consulting with advisors experienced in fundraising for non-profits and grant searches and preparation. FOLC will then put together a fundraising plan based on this information, with an initial focus on:



*Fay Henderson, the president of the new "Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center", and Gary Titus meet regularly to brainstorm about future projects for The Learning Center.*

- Providing support for deserving young scholars who are finishing high school and now face the increased expense of university studies.
- Serving greater numbers of lower-income students in need of free tutoring. The Learning Center has rented space in a nearby building for more classrooms -- which, of course, means more overhead expenses.
- Funding expansion of the Center's women's program, so that its members can train as advocates for gender equality in their schools and other organization beyond the walls of the Center.
- Broadening career-planning capabilities for students to help them take responsibility for their own future.

"We're also looking for fundraising ideas from the entire Learning Center community," Fay explained. "We would like to hear from those who have visited the Center and maybe volunteered for a period of time; from folks who have stayed at the bed and breakfast and become interested in the Center's work; and from friends whose knowledge of the Center may only be secondhand. For The Oaxaca Learning Center to continue to succeed, we have to keep growing our family of friends and supporters." For example, some members have made presentations to church groups or civic organizations as a way to spread the word. Others have sold Oaxaca folk art as a fundraising activity.

"Give us your best ideas!" Gary said. "We know there's a lot of creativity out there and we want everyone to be involved."

## **Donate now to The Oaxaca Learning Center!**

*Now that your donation is fully tax deductible, please consider helping the Oaxaca Learning Center. Remember, the Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center is a totally volunteer organization. Every cent of your contribution goes toward assisting deserving students.*

Send your check, made out to "Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center" or "FOLC," to:

Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center  
P.O. Box 926  
Blue Hill, Maine 04614