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Oaxaca Learning Center September 2008 Newsletter

Oaxaca Learning Center Begins Women's Group

After two months of research, planning and organization, the first meeting of a Women's Support Group was held at the Learning Center in early August. The founding coordinator of the group is Anabel García, a seventh-semester student in the School of Architecture of UABJO, the state university. Anabel previously had been a tutor at the Center, teaching mathematics and physics.



Women's Program Coordinator, Anabel, with founder Gary

About half of the Center's students are young women, mainly between the ages of 12 and 18, although there are also a few older women enrolled in the program.

"Women today, especially adolescents and young women, need information, advice and support in their life decisions. The role of women in our society has changed radically since the time of our mothers and grandmothers," Anabel pointed out. In organizing the group, which has yet to pick its formal name, Anabel worked with a visiting scholar from the United States, Heather Berg, who is doing graduate work in international feminist issues. They developed an initial questionnaire which they distributed to 25 Center students, and received 17 replies.

All of those responding acknowledged the need for such a mutual support group and confirmed their interest in participating.

The issues, in rank order, which most concerned them were:

- Sexual issues and information.
- Women's rights.
- Violence and self-image.
- School and work.
- Interpersonal relationships.

The goal of the group will be to meet weekly at the Center, in order to provide ongoing social and psychological support.

Women in Mexican society have traditionally been relegated to a secondary role, with fulfillment to be achieved in marriage. The advent of birth control, the growing presence of women in the workplace and a variety of global cultural influences have profoundly affected this model. In Oaxaca, the current generation of young women may be experiencing the most rapid change historically in this process.



Anabel, Heather, Lucy and Frida

Anabel and Heather have identified other, likeminded organizations in the city which will be of help to the group.

These include the Casa de la Mujer (Women's House), which has a Support and Education Group for Women among its many activities, and the organization, Young Catholics for the Right to Choose.

In mid-August, the newly formed Oaxaca Learning Center Women's Group went to the Casa de la Mujer for a program entitled, "Sexuality: Between Love and Pleasure."

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Berkeley High Meets The Learning Center

We've all heard of "Berkeley radicals," and while the eight Berkeley High School students who turned up here in Oaxaca recently may not yet qualify for that label, they were involved in a learning program that certainly does. For two weeks, the team shared their expertise in videography with some 18 wide-eyed, enthusiastic Learning Center students who couldn't get enough of what these young Californians had to offer.

Berkeley High has a Department of Social Justice & Communications, and it was from that department that these ambassadors came, chaperoned by two Berkeley teachers—Leah Katz and Molly Offerman. The team's mission was to help their Oaxacan counterparts, in a scant two weeks, learn how to make video documentaries.

For both parties to the undertaking, the experience scored as a home run.

Who paid the freight to get these kids, their equipment and their two chaperones down to Oaxaca? Who footed the bill for their home stays with Oaxacan families? They did, all by themselves. Back in Berkeley, they rustled up merchandise for garage sales. They hosted a \$20-per-head barbeque dinner. ("We thought it was too expensive and that no one would come," said one of the team. "But there was a *great* turnout!") A mainstay of their fund-raising efforts were so-called "50-50" letters asking donations from friends and families for any amount from 50 cents to 50 dollars. The response was enthusiastic and generous. In all, the group brought in some \$11,000 to fund their expedition into unknown territory. Would the natives be friendly?

Leib Sutchter is 15 and will be a sophomore at Berkeley in the fall. This was his first time in Mexico, and he was frankly taken aback by the avid reception he found at the Learning Center. "It was like there were all these potential videographers just waiting for us to come into their lives and show them how to do it," he says.

Making the transition from being students to being teachers, though, was a strange, new challenge for most in the group. Malenca Logan, who will be a Berkeley senior next semester, had to work on self-restraint. "At the beginning, I found it so hard to keep my own hands off, to let them learn by making mistakes. I felt like I wanted to show them how to edit their material, for instance, by going ahead and doing it for them."



Luis Flores, 16, learned a different teaching insight. "Struggling to get our knowledge across made me realize that different

kids have really different learning styles," he says. "Some learned best by picking up the equipment and just going for it. Others, though, needed to read about it and think about it first." Luis was the group's translator. Born in the United States of El Salvadoran parents, he grew up with Spanish and could help both sides surmount the language barrier. For Luis, this adventure was his first trip out of the U.S.

All the Berkeley team spent the mornings in Spanish language school before working at the Learning

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Center from 4 to 8 in the afternoons. Even bi-lingual Luis. What was there for him to learn in Spanish class? “A lot,” he says with a smile. “The Oaxacan way of speaking, for example. The teachers were hard on my accent, the way I cut words short. The Spanish here is a lot different from what we speak at home.”

Crossing cultural barriers was easier to manage than surmounting the obstacles of language. According to Malenca, that was largely thanks to the constant enthusiasm, receptivity and excitement of the fledgling Oaxacan videographers. And there was enough free time for the groups to eat out together and do their halting best to talk about things other than technology.

Trying to pass on the basics of all this know-how in two weeks—actually, only nine working days—was obviously a tough undertaking for the young teachers. How did they rate?

Anabel Garcia is 21 and half way through Architecture school. In addition to participating in the hands-on documentary making, Ana also took on the responsibility of acting as the Learning Center’s official liaison person between the groups, keeping track of the machinery and timetables, keeping everyone going in the right direction, and keeping an eye on the well-being of the Berkeley team. In retrospect, she gives the teachers high marks.

“At the beginning, it wasn’t easy for any of us,” she acknowledges. “Luis was the only one of the visitors who spoke Spanish, and he had to translate everything back and forth. But as we got to know each other, we did better, using gestures and drawing pictures. We communicated a lot that way, and they managed to teach us so much!” What was lacking, Ana regrets, was time. Getting used to each other,



Waiting for the show to start

learning their way around the cameras and computers, choosing subjects and then doing the filming ate up most of the week.

When it came to the finished editing of the pieces, time was running out, and it was a race to get even short pieces of a minute or two done in time.

When asked what part of the project they enjoyed most, the students voiced a variety of technical preferences, but the most frequent responses were of a different kind: “interaction with my fellow workers,” “the working atmosphere,” “making new friends,” and “the feeling of companionship.” On the human level, the ambassadors from Berkeley had clearly done a good job, and even the short documentaries that resulted from the encounter left no doubt that they’d been competent teachers as well.

On the day before the Berkeley team left, the collaborators showed four short pieces to an invited public at the Oaxaca Lending Library. They ranged from interviews about the meaning of the Guelagueta to moody, poetic abstraction; from watching weavers at work in Teotitlan to local architecture and a celebration of the beauty of the Centro at night. The effort and the enthusiasm that had gone into the work were obvious, as was the technical mastery the students had so quickly acquired.

A question remains. What makes teaching videography to Oaxacans a worthwhile undertaking in

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the first place? Teacher/chaperone Leah Katz put it this way:

“Lots of kids have trouble with speaking and writing as means of communication. We see that with our Berkeley students. Videography offers them another way to interact with their world—to understand it and comment on it. It’s nothing short of an alternate form of literacy.”

But now that the Berkeley team has left, will this tantalizing taste of the new literacy turn into a frustrating hunger for more, a hunger that can’t be fed? Not so. With admirable forethought and outstanding generosity, the U.S. team left their Oaxacan counterparts all necessary equipment components along with the know-how to continue their video explorations.

“There’s no way that stuff is just going to stay in a closet!” says Ana Gomez. “No way! We’re going on with what we learned.”

To you citizen ambassadors from up North—chaperones Leah and Molly and your hard-working, good-natured group—heartfelt thanks from down South!

Through the eyes of Oaxacan Christian Olivares

Christian’s sojourn at the Learning Center didn’t come about either through needing help or an intention to tutor those who did. He was out job hunting one day and happened to pass the Center’s doors and its sign on the wall. Out of curiosity, he stuck his head inside to see what was going on in this self-styled “learning center”. His reaction to what he found, as seen through the eyes of a native Oaxacan, is significant and throws into sharp relief what the Center does that is different and unique.



“I saw, right away, that the level of teaching that was going on was good. But what surprised me was the *kind* of teaching that was happening. It was something I hadn’t seen before.”

Christian, who is 23, is on his way to get a Masters degree in Ensenada in Baja California. He’s been through the Oaxaca school system from primary school all the way up to a degree in Telecommunications from the Technological Institute. He knows the ropes. “At the Learning Center, I didn’t see the usual distance between teacher and student that I was used to. Our teachers told us what we had to memorize, and that’s what we did. It didn’t matter to the teachers if we understood what the things we memorized *meant*. And we never got personal attention from the teachers to help us with our individual needs.”

He was really surprised to see that such personal attention—the backbone of the Center’s teaching philosophy—went even beyond academic help and into the problems of the students’ personal lives. Something else he noted immediately: a lack of the traditional, fierce competition among students. “At the Learning Center, the students were actually *helping* one another learn!” It was of course astounding to him that all the Center’s students were there free of charge.

The atmosphere of the Learning Center was so appealing to him that Christian asked to be allowed to tutor there. He spent four months at the Center while he was doing an unpaid internship at the Comision Federal de Electricidad. It was all an eye-opening experience for him.

“There is something important I would like to say in this interview,” Christian insisted. “I would like to say thanks to the people who support the Center. Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico, and your support of a place like the Learning Center is making a big difference for many, many young people. In the whole state of Oaxaca, I don’t think there is another place like it.”

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“Las Lomas” Satellite Center funded for second year



Tutors Edith, Maribel, Abigail, Sonia, and Luis

The Oaxaca Learning Center's efforts to secure funding for the continuing operations of its satellite center in the impoverished neighborhood of Las Lomas de San Jacinto has met with success!

A grant from the Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL) for \$146,700 pesos (nearly \$15,000 dollars) will cover expenses at the Las Lomas Center from July through the end of 2008. This represents a considerable increase from last year's funding of \$117,000 pesos.

The grant is a victory for the Center team that worked three months to put together the proposal. Led by the Center Director, Jaasiel Llaven, the team also included Las Lomas Coordinator Sonia León; its former Coordinator, Luis Gutierrez; and Armando Carmona, a business administration student at the state university (UABJO) who is working with the Center to improve its administrative procedures.

As in 2007, the SEDESOL funds can only be used during the designated grant period; none of it can go toward operations during the other months of the year. So for the first six months of 2008, the Las Lomas Center was able to maintain operations due to the generosity of an anonymous donor.

Some 75 young people who live in Las Lomas took advantage of their neighborhood tutoring and learning facility during the last school year. Las Lomas is perched high above the City of Oaxaca in the foothills of the Sierra de Juarez, with million-dollar views and humble houses. Most of the houses have been constructed by their working-class occupants. The streets of the neighborhood are steep and almost entirely unpaved.

The founding coordinator of the Center, Luis Gutierrez, spent several months meeting with neighborhood leaders last year in a patient effort to secure the cooperation of the community. A neighborhood organization offered space for

the Center and parents and Center volunteers pitched in to clean and paint the new facility.

There is no secondary (junior high) school or high school in the neighborhood, only a “telesecundaria,” in which most of the class material is transmitted by the national educational network. In these circumstances, the Las Lomas Center has become an invaluable resource, with three tutors, plus the coordinator, offering their support. The Center has five computer stations for teaching computer skills, although there is no internet service due to the fringe location of the neighborhood.

Each Saturday, the Las Lomas tutors and coordinator gather at the Center's downtown facility for English classes, group presentations and a work session devoted to plans and projects for their Center.

Currently the tutors at Las Lomas are:

- Abigail Lucas, who tutors in history, math, physics, biology, chemistry and computer skills;
- Maribel Jiménez, who will be entering the Instituto Tecnológico next year, tutors in mathematics and computer skills.

The new coordinator for Las Lomas, Sonia León, worked for two years as a Center tutor, the last year in Las Lomas. She is a student at the National Pedagogical University (Universidad



Pedagógica Nacional). The former coordinator, Luis Gutierrez, an electrical engineering graduate, still helps out

when not devoting himself full-time to his new career.

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Las Lomas Coordinator wins scholarship to visit U.S.



Sonia León, coordinator of the Las Lomas satellite learning center, spent six weeks during July and August in the United States, one of ten students from Mexico awarded scholarships to study at the Institute for Training and Development at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. The program was organized by the Western Hemisphere Institute of the U.S. Department of State.

"My image of the U.S. had been formed by the media," Sonia said, "and this perspective really changed once I actually got there. I think it was the diversity of cultures, more than anything else, that really stood out." She also was impressed by the quality of the educational experience she encountered and by the sense of individualism and reliance on personal merit she found among young people in the United States. Not only was this Sonia's first trip outside Mexico, it was also her first airplane flight.

Sonia, who turned 20 in April, was awarded the travel scholarship after a rigid selection process by the Education Office of the U.S. Department of State. Basic requisites called for the applicant to be a young university student, member of an indigenous community and active in community work. Sonia's work as a tutor with students in Las Lomas, and this year as coordinator, certainly demonstrated her community involvement. She grew up speaking Zapotec in the mountain village of Santa María Josaá, an eight-hour journey from the City of Oaxaca. She is studying for a degree in Educational Intervention at the National Pedagogical University in Oaxaca.

The ten students from Mexico joined a delegation from Guatemala to study for four weeks in Amherst, learning about the social and political history of the U.S., its economy and culture. There were field trips to governmental and non-government organizations involved in community activities, workshops in leadership, and visits to both Boston and New York.

Sonia and her colleagues spent the fifth week in Tucson, Arizona, visiting a Yaqui Indian Reservation and observing the work of the group Human Borders, which places

barrels of drinking water in the Arizona desert along the border for Mexican immigrants making their way north through a torrid, waterless landscape. The adventure ended in Washington, DC. The young people from Mexico and Guatemala joined their counterparts from the other nations participating in the hemisphere program in a closing session. A major topic was how to follow up on their experiences once they returned home. "Our group from Mexico decided we would create a website where each of us can post updates on our community activities", Sonia said. "That way, we can continue to learn from each other, sharing ideas and experiences."

"My goal now is to help develop young leaders dedicated to issues such as gender, sexual and reproductive rights, and indigenous rights. We need to work for better living conditions in Oaxaca, especially for its minority groups."



Help! I need somebody...

Geri Anderson has lived in Oaxaca for ten years. She often uses Learning Center helpers to lend her a hand.

"Not wanting to do all the 'stuff,' such as painting and yard work, I gave Gary a call. He answered my call, and several subsequent calls for help, pronto.

"When stray cats turned my yard into their mating brothel, Gary sent Pergentino to give me a hand installing wire mesh to block the feral intruders.

"Then neighbors on both sides of me painted their walls. Gerardo, brush in hand, masterfully turned my graffiti-ridden front wall into a charming peach hue that intimidates the graffiti artists.

"Whether it's scrubbing, grass trimming, painting or mending fences, Gerardo and Pergentino are there, at the ready. You should see Pergentino crawling behind bushes to clean out dead leaves and accumulated yucky junk! Nothing escapes his eagle eyes.

"These young men are prompt, energetic and hard-working, all the while smiling".

When we reached Geri, she was bailing out her flooded basement in New Hampshire. Hey, Gary, any of your people got visas?

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Tutors and Staff ready for Fall semester

The heart of the Oaxaca Learning Center is its tutoring program, and the heart of that program is the tutors themselves. Although the tutors earn a stipend to help with university expenses, it's clear that money alone is not their motivation.

"I'm really looking forward to working with the students," said Jorge Romero, a newcomer to this year's program. "I expect to learn from them also." Jorge, a student in Education, will be tutoring Spanish, history and mathematics. He is one of four new tutors who will be helping junior high and high school students at the Center's downtown location and at its satellite center in the working-class neighborhood of Las Lomas de San Jacinto. They join six returning tutors.

"My advice to the new staff," Frida Vidals, a returning tutor said, "is to be patient and work hard. Not everyone learns the same, so we tutors have to be coming up with different ways of presenting our subjects."

In addition to Jorge, the new tutors for the fall semester include:

- Angélica Ramos, an engineering student, who will be tutoring in algebra, geometry, physics and chemistry at the downtown center;
- Maribel Jiménez, an English major, who will tutor English, Spanish, computer skills and mathematics in Las Lomas; and
- José Rodríguez, civil engineering, who will focus on mathematics, chemistry and physics at the downtown location.

Returning tutors at the downtown location are:

- Frida Vidals, an architectural student, tutor in mathematics and sciences;



- Edith Nicolás, a graduate in psychology, also offers psychological assessment and support at the Las Lomas center; and
- Emanuel Acosta, electrical engineering, who tutors science subjects and mathematics on the weekends.

The returning tutors at Las Lomas are:

- Abigail Lucas, a tourism industry student; and
- Luis Gutiérrez, a civil engineering graduate and former coordinator at Las Lomas, who will occasionally fill in as tutor. Luis is now focused on building his civil engineering business.

Sonia León, a student in education intervention (a program stressing curriculum development, planning and learning strategies) is returning to Las Lomas this semester as the center's coordinator.

Jaasiel LLaven, the Center Director, oversees the tutoring program, with support from Armando Cruz, who studied business administration and has taken responsibility for most of the Learning Center's administrative activities. Anabel García, an architectural student and former tutor, is the coordinator of the Center's new women's group.

Both locations of the Oaxaca Learning Center offer tutoring throughout the day, Monday through Friday, and on the weekends.