

Oaxaca Learning Center

Making a difference one young person at a time

Fall 2007 Newsletter

Changing Lives

Since the Oaxaca Learning Center opened in the heart of Oaxaca's Centro Histórico in March 2005, its mission has been clear: to help change young people's lives. Its chosen method is to provide secondary and high school students with free tutoring, free help in building learning skills and free counseling in career development.

There are other tutoring centers in Oaxaca, but all of them charge for their services. The Oaxaca Learning Center program is directed toward the least served and most needy sectors of the student population: 1) students coming to Oaxaca from the state's remote towns and villages, often alone, often in the "big city" of Oaxaca for the first time and facing a difficult, extended transition from village life to their new reality; and 2) the urban poor of the City of Oaxaca, neighborhoods where tutoring help—let alone for free—is essentially nonexistent.

In a developing nation like Mexico, nothing can make a bigger difference in a young woman's or man's future than education. Yet for many, just staying in school can be a daunting task, challenged by family responsibilities (especially girls and young women), economic hardship and limited local resources. Many must come to Oaxaca to complete their high school studies and go on to work or, in some cases, to an institution of higher education. Coming from a spotty educational background, they need tutoring to stay in school and move ahead. That's why the Learning Center's free program is so critical to their success.

A Year of Growth

During 2007, the Learning Center increased the number of students enrolled in its tutoring program, growing from 97 to 104 with the resumption of classes in August. More will surely sign up before the end of the year and, for the first time, more than half those participating in the program are young women.

Although most of the students are in the 14-24 age range, we are proud to have several older women who, while continuing with day jobs from janitor to seamstress, have returned to their studies, determined to get a high school diploma.

The average number of months students stay with the program has grown considerably in response to efforts by the Center's leadership and staff to formalize tutoring programs, develop individual tutoring contracts and to closely follow-up with the students. Currently, tutoring is available in mathematics, chemistry, physics, basic science, computer skills, Spanish and other subjects as needed. Classes in English and touch typing is



(left to right) Berenice Cruz Jiménez, student; Alejandra Reyes Cancio, tutor; Wilber Méndez Santos, tutor; and Martha Diaz Medina, student

also offered to all students. During summer vacation, the Center provided free summer courses in these subjects to help students catch up to their grade level, along with a number of roundtables and conferences on subjects of interest to young people, including AIDS education and global warming. The five-week summer session also reached out to students who were not enrolled in the tutoring program.

The tutoring staff now numbers ten. Each is a university-level student or graduate and each receives a stipend for his or her efforts. They typically offer one-hour tutoring sessions to a maximum of three students at a time. The tutors are divided into three shifts and available throughout the day, from Monday through Sunday. The center is open 60 hours a week.

In addition to its more formalized services, the Center is a warm and inviting learning space with tables and chairs in the garden and elsewhere for homework and wireless Internet available at no cost.



English class with volunteer instructor Margarita Killingsworth

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Lomas de San Jacinto Coordinator,
Luis Angel Galindo Gutiérrez



Tutors (left to right) David López Pérez,
Olga Martínez and Edith López Nicolás

New Satellite Center

The biggest news of the year has to be the opening of a satellite tutoring center in Las Lomas de San Jacinto, a low-income neighborhood of just one paved street and few municipal services, high in the hills on the fringe of the city. The new center has been funded through the end of the year with a government grant of \$117,000 pesos (just under \$11,000 dollars). The grant proposal was the Center's first, written by a team headed by Jaasiel Quero Llaven, the Learning Center's coordinator and the tutors. Activities began in June with a summer school session and are continuing with tutoring services under the direction of the satellite center's coordinator, Luis Angel Galindo Gutierrez, a graduate in electrical engineering from the Technological Institute of Oaxaca. Luis previously was a tutor at the downtown Learning Center. His promotion to coordinator of the Satellite Center reflects our policies of continuing career development and promotion from within. Three tutors work with him, Edith López Nicolás, Olga Lidia Martínez García and David López Pérez.

The Satellite Center has 32 students enrolled, 22 young women and 10 young men. The community provided the Center with a rent-free facility, and the whole center staff pitched in to help to paint, wire and plumb the building for student use. The challenge now is to find funding to continue providing services in Las Lomas de San Jacinto after the government grant runs out the end of December.

Working in Las Lomas de San Jacinto

These excerpts from volunteer Shayna Bronstein's story of teaching English at the center in Las Lomas de San Jacinto this summer gives a flavor of the experience:

"I am a college student, a little naïve, but starting to broaden my horizons...arrived on my first day to teach two English classes. A task I felt only superficially ready for as I had tutored English in the past, but had never actually taught a class, let alone two! However, as the first day came to an end and the two hours of teaching disappeared, I realized what a wonderful experience this was going to be...The

students were all a delight to teach and never lost their sense of humor...They attended class regularly throughout the summer and worked hard to improve their English skills. A skill they would need when they went back to school in late August. Everyday was different and challenging, but I am thankful for each one I got to share with my students."

Our Mission Statement

The Learning Center of Oaxaca promotes education and offers services that lead to academic and personal achievement.

We serve youth, primarily age 14 to 24, with little-to-no financial resources; many of whom have traveled alone from small villages to attend high school in Oaxaca City.

Paid staff, who are college students, provide academic tutoring, teach effective learning skills, and offer support during the transition from rural to urban life.

In order to succeed, tutors and students work as a team, each agreeing to:

- *teach and learn,*
- *give the best of oneself,*
- *communicate in an open manner,*
- *arrive on time,*
- *be attentive, respectful and kind, and*
- *reach out and be ready to help.*

The Learning Center strives to:

- *provide free, accessible, and effective services,*
- *develop youth leaders,*
- *promote and hire tutors from within the program,*
- *inspire confidence and self-reliance,*
- *remain open to criticism for improvement,*
- *promote independent thinking,*
- *collaborate with other non-profit organizations,*
- *honor our donors, and*
- *support our tutors and students.*

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Come Stay with Us!

Tourism in Oaxaca still has not recovered from last year's political disturbances. The occupancy rate for our rooms has been just 55 per cent this year. Yet the city is peaceful and the fall and winter is a wonderful time to visit. The summer rains have left the mountains to the north of the city a deep green and flowers are in bloom in parks, gardens and the city's central square, the zócalo. There is music most nights in the zócalo—whether the state brass band or its marimba ensemble. Families stroll the square, while visitors and residents sit over a beer or a soft drink in one of the restaurants bordering the square, enjoying the colorful world unfolding about them. There are art openings and music festivals, the Day of the Dead celebrations at the end of October, festivals in surrounding towns and villages and a month of activities leading up to Christmas and the New Year in Oaxaca.

Come and be part of an unforgettable experience! Staying in the pleasant, bright rooms at the Learning Center offers an experience no hotel or other bed-and-breakfast can match. It's comfortable, convenient and relaxing. Plus, if you wish, you always have a chance to practice your Spanish with a student, or enjoy a conversation with them as they practice their English.

In addition to the rooms, we have a fully equipped and furnished one-bedroom apartment on the roof above the Learning Center, which is available for rental. Here's how Norah Connolly of Boston described the experience:

"Staying at the Learning Center with Gary is an exceptional experience. You have the opportunity to see immediately how your money supports the center; in fact, you can't avoid seeing your pesos at work. Students of the center are an integral part of the environment at the B&B, providing guests with an opportunity to practice Spanish and laugh along with them as they learn their way through the day. The hammocks strung outside the downstairs rooms are incredibly inviting and the cactus garden and fountain make for a peaceful retreat. Within a few short days, the Learning Center felt like my home away from home. I hope to visit again soon."

New Staff Accountant

The Learning Center has a new accountant. In fact, we have our first, official accountant. Up to now, most of the accounting has been via Gary's cash drawer.

Lourdes Pérez López, 25, is a graduate of the Universidad Regional del sur este of Oaxaca (URSE, as it's known in Spanish) and the equivalent, in Mexico, of a certified public accountant. She began at the Center as a volunteer, but with the government grant and a desire on the part of all involved to put the Center's accounting on a more formal basis, she has been hired part-time to manage the books.

Lourdes, better known to everyone at the Learning Center as "Lulú," also works part-time at the Oaxaca Lending Library as its accountant.



For more information or reservations, contact Gary Titus at gtitus@prodigy.net.mx or (from the US) call 011-52-951-515-0122

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Meet the Learning Center's Coordinator



The Oaxaca Learning Center's coordinator is Jaasiel Quero Llaven. Jaasiel took over as coordinator last fall when Jorge Rosario, the Center's first coordinator, returned to full-time studies in languages at UABJO.

(Jorge is still very much a part of life at the Center;

he receives a stipend to support his studies, and room and board at the Center. He's always ready to practice English, or Spanish, with visitors and might even be convinced to guide them to some of the best places around the city.)

Jaasiel has known and worked with Gary Titus for more than ten years, benefiting from his career counseling and educational support. In one way or the other, he has been associated with the Center since its founding in 2005.

Jaasiel graduated from UABJO as an accountant, but soon decided he would rather teach than count beans. He taught secondary (middle) school in the remote Mixteca Alta village of Iturbide San Miguel el Grande, six hours from Oaxaca, and along the way he also earned a master's degree in education.

During 2006 Jaasiel, who has a master's degree in education, had a taste of teaching at the university level. Early this year he competed for, and won, a three-year appointment as the Academic Coordinator of the Mathematics Department at the Escuela Normal, the state teacher's college in neighboring Xoxocatlán. He combines this position with his responsibilities at the Learning Center.

"Sometimes I would wonder why I had ever studied accounting," Jaasiel said. "But now I find myself drawing on the business skills I learned then in both of these jobs—organizational skills, administrative know-how—all of that has finally proven its worth."

Jaasiel was principally responsible for writing the successful grant application to the Ministry of Social Development for the funding of the Las Lomas de San Jacinto Satellite Center. He anticipates preparing more grant applications as the Center continues to expand services to needy students.

"I want us to be able to help more students, to increase enrollment in our program," he explained. "But I also want to improve our services, to make the tutoring we provide as focused and useful as possible. I want us to be able to do more for the students."

Jaasiel pointed out that he is particularly interested in providing tutoring and career counseling services to more young women. "The two hardest populations to reach are girl students and indigenous students coming from villages to attend school in Oaxaca. Neither is used to having services targeted to them, especially services they do not have to pay for.

"The challenge is to reach out to them and bring them into the program," Jaasiel said. "That's a personal goal of mine."



The Center's computers are busy all day with everything from homework to email.

Learning Center Partner To Hold Art Auction

The Oaxaca Lending Library is sponsoring an Art Auction on Saturday, October 27, in the Museo de Pintores Oaxaqueños, starting at 6:00 pm to benefit special library projects and its outreach programs, such as Libros Para Pueblos, a new scholarship program and improving the Spanish book collection. The library works closely with the Learning Center to provide work experiences for our students, some scholarship help and in communicating our activities to its community. The library is currently working with the Center on a new work-study project for eight center students.

They will be auctioning off more than 130 pieces of art donated by some of Oaxaca's finest artists. You can view many of the artworks by checking out the Library's web site, www.oaxlibrary.com, or you can view the actual works on the day before the auction, Friday, October 26, at the Museo de Los Pintores Oaxaqueños.

The festive evening begins at 6:00 pm with a reception honoring and thanking the artists (open for all to attend), with complimentary wine and soft drinks. Between 6:00-7:00 pm there will be a silent auction with many excellent works of art available. The live auction begins at 7:30 pm.

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Making A Difference

Who are some of the students helped by the Learning Center?

Here's an example:

Wilberth Vázquez Ramírez had a dream, but neither he nor his family had the resources to make it come true. Wilberth had been coming to the Learning Center for

occasional tutoring and other help, and Gary Titus, recognizing exceptional determination and intellect, decided to put out the word, telling Wilberth's story on the Learning Center's website, on the Oaxaca Lending Library's website (which serves as a community resource for the English-speaking colony in Oaxaca) and in the library's newsletter.

The 18-year-old from the small coastal town of Bajos de Chila dreamed of studying dentistry and then returning to his hometown to establish its first real dental clinic. In June, Wilberth had the highest score of the nearly 3,000 high school graduates who took the entrance exam for the State University's Dental School. But he and his family lacked the resources to finance his education. Enter Robert Haas.

When Bob read about Wilberth's plight, he volunteered to help. "How could you not do this," he said, "when you realize what he has already accomplished?"

Wilberth and Bob Haas, a retired principal and school teacher from San Francisco, met for the first time on a recent afternoon at the Oaxaca Lending Library, where Bob volunteers every Monday morning.

In addition to paying for books and other necessary materials, Bob will be providing Wilberth with a monthly stipend of \$2,880 pesos to meet his expenses.

"Now it's up to me," Wilberth said as he stood up to shake hands with his sponsor and new friend, Bob Haas.



Wilberth and Bob



Álvaro

An Agronomist-in-the-making

Other exceptional students at the Center are still seeking sponsorship to help them continue their studies.

Álvaro Gerardo Rojas is a 25-year-old student at the Instituto Tecnológico del Valle de Oaxaca in Nazareno Xoxocatlán, one and a half years into a long steep hill toward his goal of becoming an agronomist, an *Ingeniero Agrónomo*.

Álvaro, a member of the Mixe indigenous group, has been essentially on his own since he was nine years old. For years he supported himself while going to school by working in kitchens, beginning as a dishwasher and ending up as a cook. Primary school, secondary and then high school: every step of the way has been a struggle.

"I know all about food in the kitchen, how to cook good food, and now I am learning how to grow healthy food," is how Álvaro explains his career choice. He wants to work in the agricultural industry, to help bring healthy practices to commercial activity.

But for all his steadfast work and determination, Álvaro is hanging on by his fingernails. Going to the Instituto Tecnológico is very different from secondary school or high school. He is in class most of the day, every day, with no feasible way to combine work and school.

The Instituto Tecnológico is a state-run school, mainly for the children of the countryside. Its tuition is low, just \$2,400 pesos a year. The students don't buy—usually can't afford to buy—textbooks. They pay for copies to be made of the pages they need to study. They also have to come up with the money for field trips and school projects.

Sometimes Álvaro has had to choose between food and copies of the texts he needs to study. "What do you do?" he says, "I eat one less meal and pay for the copies."

Álvaro is yet another example of the dedicated and resolute young people that is the Learning Center's reason to exist.

What is the reward for sponsoring a young student? Incalculable.



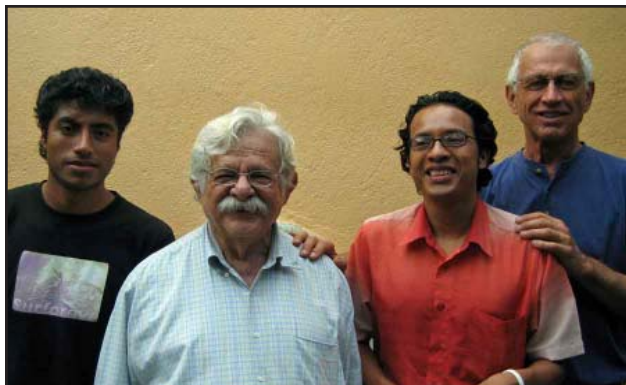
Tutor and students in a working session at the Center

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Evaluation Committee

Without feedback there is no real learning. And that also goes for organizations. The Center is expanding its evaluation process with the naming of a committee whose sole responsibility is evaluation. The committee will develop an ongoing evaluation process, including collecting feedback from students and tutors, all with the goal of improving the Center's service to students.

The committee members are Aaron Yaschine, a longtime professor at UABJO's Dental School and a key friend and supporter of the Center; Jaasiel Quero Llaven, Center Coordinator; Roberto Morales Zavaleta, a student in his final year at the National Pedagogical University, where he has focused on diagnostics and evaluation, and Gary Titus.



(left to right) Roberto Morales Zavaleta, Dr. Aaron Yaschine, Jaasiel Quero Llaven, and Gary Titus, the Center's founder

How to Contact Us

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Our Wish List

Do you have a laptop computer gathering dust in a corner of your office or at home?

Or have you recently bought a new digital camera and don't know what to do with the old one?

A video camera you are no longer using?

A copy of the software DreamWeaver?

The Oaxaca Learning Center is the answer!

We can put to good use any available laptops for our students. And a reasonably up-to-date digital camera will help us to share photos of activities at the Center with you, via newsletters and the website.

E-mail or call us, and we'll figure out how to get donated items to Oaxaca if they are out of the country.

Put the Oaxaca Learning Center on Your Holiday Gift List



We'll be sending out our annual fund-raising request the beginning of December. Please consider a generous donation. If you wish to make it in the name of someone on your gift list, we'll be happy to send them a card thanking you both for the donation. What could be a better gift this holiday season than the possibility of a brighter future for young people in Oaxaca, one of the poorest states in Mexico?

Last year, in our first fund-raising effort, 55 supporters responded with \$16,500, which went a long way in covering the Center's expenses for 2007. This year our goal is to raise \$18,000. Contribute and be a vital part of the Oaxaca Learning Center!