

# The Oaxaca Learning Center



Making a difference, one young person at a time!

Tutoring | Women's Group | English & Computer Skills | Counseling  
Work/Study Sponsorships

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## Spring 2011 Newsletter

### Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center

We are pleased to announce the creation of a new entity, the "Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center" (FOLC), to provide financial support for "The Oaxaca Learning Center." FOLC is a U.S. corporation seeking 501(c)(3) status that will allow tax deductible donations from our U.S. supporters to be given directly to the Learning Center.

As you know, there are ever-increasing demands for the services of The Oaxaca Learning Center, based on its strong reputation for effective academic and financial support for highly motivated, low-income students. Gary Titus, founder of The Learning Center, has worked tirelessly the past six years to fund the Center and keep it running. He has now asked other committed volunteers and friends of the Center to shoulder the fund-raising responsibilities.

As many of you have experienced first hand, the Center's programs have offered new hope of completing high school to over 1400 participants during the last six years. There is now a waiting list of students eager to take advantage of the Center's services. To meet that demand, the Center needs to rent additional space for our activities. That, in turn, will require an increase in the number of tutors and management staff, and expanded training in computer and English language skills. We also want to further enhance our gender equity activities and those of the women's group. The new Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center will seek donations to assure that the Center can reach these goals.

A five-member board will initially direct the Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center. They are: Fay Henderson de Diaz, president; Maria X. Martinez, secretary; Nicholas Sichterman, treasurer; and Jaasiel Quero and Gary Titus, members. You will be hearing more about the Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center through fund-raising activities slated to begin in the fall of this year.



*Jack Nyhan and Fay Henderson review the legal documents establishing the "Friends of the Learning Center" as our new non-profit corporation.*

### B&B Commendation

"This is a great place!  
Very clean, safe and  
centrally located. It's wonderful  
being a part of the change  
happening with the young  
people of Oaxaca!"

- Karla B.

### Changes At The Center's Newsletter

You may have noticed the Newsletter has a new look. It also has a new editor. Larry Ginzkey, who recently retired from Denver and arrived in Oaxaca earlier this year, has agreed to take that job. He will be ably assisted by Barry Head and Ralph Meyers, our excellent writers of recent years. Denise Galipeau, who served so eloquently and effectively as editor the past five years, will move on to other volunteer assignments serving the Center. We thank Denise for the dedication she showed and the good work she produced while editing the newsletter!

## Programs At The Oaxaca Learning Center

There's plenty to keep track of these days at the Learning Center! The program coordinators are kept constantly busy managing and improving their areas of responsibility, and the Center's director, Sonia Bautista, has her work cut out for her keeping an eye on the whole operation. One of the most gratifying aspects of the Center nowadays is the way the administrative staff has made the place "their own" -- how, with pride and dedication, they make the important decisions and chart the Center's future. Here's what's going on:

### **English Language & Culture Program**

The program to help students get a very basic grasp of English continues much as before. As many a foreigner has found out while struggling with Spanish, it is constant usage that makes all the difference in the end! That's something the Center, of course, can't provide; the students' lives have to continue outside the Center's doors in their native tongue.

However, what the Center can do has proven valuable time and again, according to Lorenzo Bazán, who coordinates this language initiative: Giving students even the rudiments of English grammar and pronunciation provides them with foundation blocks they can build on as they get chances to do so.

The English-language sessions, each restricted to a maximum of eight participants, also introduce elements of the *real* cultural differences that exist between Mexico and that great landmass up north that appears constantly - and so often in fallacious fantasies - on television. There's no better way to separate fact from fiction than one-to-one encounters that encourage frank questions about life down here and up there—and vice-versa. The Center has sought to increase the number of such *intercambios* and is pleased to report that they're presently at an all-time high.



*Here's an enthusiastic "thumbs up!" for the Saturday tutoring program from Eduardo and Luis Porras, two of the seven students in their class who gladly receive intensive weekly instruction at the Center.*



*An intercambio dinner. Aome and Karla, visiting from California, stayed for a time at our B&B. There they met Fer and began an ongoing language intercambio. They have become enthusiastic boosters of the Center's work with young people in Oaxaca.*

### **Work/Study Program**

Certainly one of the Center's most invaluable and ground-breaking creations, the work/study program, coordinated by Mirell Duarte, provides grants whereby a student can afford not to work long hours outside the Center and use that time for study. These grants mean money in the pocket, and those funds come thanks to the Center's generous supporters and the income from the bed-and-breakfast facilities in the building. These sources of income have made it possible this past year to increase the number of fortunate beneficiaries from 13 to 17—all chosen based on their capacity and motivation to make the most of this extraordinary opportunity.

The work/study recipients necessarily remain few, but the number of lives they, in their turn, will benefit later on makes each grant a sure-fire investment with incalculable returns for the future.

### **Counseling Program**

The shift to city life and study from radically different origins remains a huge challenge for many of the Center's students. Suddenly separated from their families and familiar lives in the quest for advancement, they can find themselves disoriented, intimidated, insecure and lonely. Was their choice a mistake, after all?

For many, the collegial atmosphere at the Center among their peers has proven an important source of reassurance, but it's a hit-or-miss blessing. What Edith López, the counseling program's coordinator, offers is a knowledgeable, trustworthy, and reliably available place where students can turn for advice.

Apart from help with life-style adjustments, Center students often need guidance on what options they have for applying their learning in the post-scholastic arena. What are their druthers? What might they be best suited for? Which doors should they try to open? How to go about it? Here, too, Edith can be of substantial help.

### **Tutoring Program**

In the beginning, tutoring was the sole resource The Oaxaca Learn-Center offered. In the very, very beginning, the Center's founder, Gary, offered this assistance to one single student. In 2010, the Center offered tutoring help to 111. Under Armando Carmona's coordination, changes are taking place. Armando, himself once a student at the Center and now one of its mainstays, has taken on a commitment to tighten the parameters of the tutoring program in an effort to upgrade its consistency and quality.

"In the past, we tried to stay as open and flexible as possible, to be available to as many would-be students as we could. Lots of kids would come and go, drop in and drop out. As we've grown, we've come up against the hard reality of limited resources—tutors, space [see accompanying article] and, of course, money. It's become both sensible and necessary to concentrate on serving a smaller number of applicants, but serving them better."

There are presently about 55 students in the program—still a daunting number for the Center's capacity—and they represent a group of young people (about 70% women) who have shown an ongoing ability to turn up, study, learn and move ahead. Armando, with his own long experience at the Center as both student and administrator, is adamant about how the Center should function as a whole.

"Here we are, trying to provide free help to kids who need it, and I think that the kids who use our programs should meet us half way—not only in their application and study habits, but also in their general behavior.

As for those who can't or won't, they're wasting the precious resources someone else could use. I also believe the kids who are with us have an obligation to assist the Center in its work however they can, as a way to show their appreciation for the boost they're getting here and wouldn't have found anywhere else."

The striving for quality tutoring is ongoing. The tutors meet weekly to discuss their work, identify problems and propose solutions. And even the program coordinators themselves are not exempt from self-improvement: As a group, they recently completed an eight-week course to polish their writing skills, taught by noted artist and writer Susanna Wald, author of "Spanish for Dummies."



*Study time on the Center's patio for Lilitiana Martinez.*



*An equation for success: Erendira and Miroslava Lopez take notes during a math lesson.*

## Women's Group Is "Designing the Future"

Although academic tutoring is the core mission of the Oaxaca Learning Center, its activities have expanded over the past few years to encompass other student needs. And certainly one of the primary expansion areas has been the Women's Group. Or better said, the *Young Women's Group*, currently comprising 15 students from middle school to university, from 14 years old to 21.

Under the leadership of Betsaida (Betsy) Arango, 19, the group has grown in membership and ambition, with a new vision for further expansion. Betsy was initially attracted to the Learning Center for its English program, and then took advantage of tutoring in mathematics. She joined the Women's Group in January 2010, during her last semester of high school, and became its leader in October 2010.

"Just last month we named our group *Designing the Future (Diseñando el Futuro)* because that's what we feel like we're doing," Betsy said, "for ourselves and for others. We want a future of greater equality in every way possible."

*Designing the Future* is both a self-help/self-information group and a source of information for others. The group relies upon the expertise and support of three leading Oaxacan women's organizations: Casa de la Mujer, Instituto de la Mujer Oaxaqueña and Muger.

In its own work among members and in programs for others, *Designing the Future* focuses on:

- Sexual education and reproductive rights
- Relationship violence
- Gender equality
- Nondiscrimination
- Economic equality, and
- Inclusive language.

The group covers methods of birth control and disease prevention to overcome myths, half-truths and misinformation that may be circulating among their peers. As Betsy points out, "Lots of young people think that if it's the first time, they're okay; they don't need protection. That's why there are a lot of young girls with babies in Oaxaca."

The Women's Group meets every two weeks for approximately two hours and explores in depth, either among themselves or with an expert from one of their support organizations, areas of concern. For example, relationship violence concentrates on the *noviazgo* -- going steady with someone. It covers not only the possibility of physical violence but also verbal and psychological intimidation.

The group also presents programs on a periodic basis to the rest of the Learning Center's students, both female and male, and to staff members, including all the tutors.

For the fourth meeting of each two-month cycle, the group usually goes to a park or another pleasant environment for a chance to explore feelings, problems and concerns among themselves. "In the beginning," Betsy said, "it was hard for some of the participants to open up. But now everybody talks, we all share."

Under the heading of "Nondiscrimination," members focus on the cliques and subgroups that are so much a part of Oaxacan youth culture—from darketos (Goths) to emos, hippies and gay youth—delivering a message of respect, tolerance and inclusion.

*Designing the Future* is also preparing to reach out beyond its own members and the Learning Center. "Our big plan is to bring our knowledge to others. We want each of us to be trained as an educator, so that we can go into schools and other organizations, both here in Oaxaca and in nearby villages, to help young people," Betsy said.

She pointed out that there is sex education in Oaxaca schools, but many students don't pay attention, or are too embarrassed to ask questions. The commitment of the Women's Group to peer learning will be an ambitious step forward in its goals of fostering greater knowledge in sexual and reproductive areas, reducing relationship violence and building equality.



*"Betsy" Arango is the energetic leader of the Women's Group at the Center.*

### **Bed and Breakfast**

*The bed and breakfast facility at the Center -- two comfortable rooms with private baths downstairs and an apartment upstairs -- is a major source of income for the Center. Space is available for the summer and fall. If you know anyone planning to visit Oaxaca, please let them know about us! Information about and reservations for the B&B can be had at [www.tolc.org.mx](http://www.tolc.org.mx).*



*Pablo Ruiz explains the finer points of making compost to Emanuel Nolasco and Abisai Salgado, students at the Learning Center, on a field trip to the "Tierra del Sol," permaculture farm near Tlacoahuaya.*

### **Donations Gratefully Accepted**

*The great work of The Oaxaca Learning Center is entirely dependent on the gracious support of our guests and patrons.*

*We are always happy to put donations to immediate and very good use.*

*Until our new corporation becomes operational this summer, you can make a contribution by contacting Gary Titus at [gary@tolc.org.mx](mailto:gary@tolc.org.mx).*

*Please help if you can. Gracias!*

### **Learning Center Needs Expansion Space**

When The Oaxaca Learning Center moved into the newly remodeled building at Murguía 703 just before Christmas 2004, everything was in place: home, B&B and school. The tutoring center had a nice big classroom, plus the garage space at the entrance where people could meet. Gradually, tables and chairs became scattered in the shade of the garden. It seemed a roomy place, and the Learning Center, with one tutor, was just beginning. Bit by bit, students trickled in, especially young people from rural areas who were having a hard time with academic subjects because of poor schooling in their villages. After a year or two, it was no longer necessary to pass out flyers and make presentations. Students referred other students and the Oaxaca Learning Center became a lively, crowded place of multiple classes and varied activities.

And now, *too* crowded! Especially since expanded offerings, such as the English program - now with 46 students enrolled - make a lot of noise and conflict with academic tutoring. Or take a meeting of the Women's Group and, say, a counseling session: one makes noise, one needs quiet. And that one classroom has become so tightly scheduled that no one activity can run even a few minutes late.

The Oaxaca Learning Center has outgrown its original building! So, with financial support from the newly organized Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center (see the article on page 1), the Center is looking for a new facility. It might be a house or an apartment, but it has to be a space adaptable to the Center's needs and at a location that is convenient to the current facility—and one whose neighbors will tolerate boisterous young people and their comings and goings.

"The tutors and coordinators, we're all looking," said Sonia Bautista, the Center's director. "We hope to have something in place for our summer session." According to Sonia, the new space will be used for English classes, counseling, work/study and the women's group. All academic tutoring will remain at the original location. This will create a more quiet atmosphere both for the tutoring and for visitors to the bed and breakfast.

"The new facility is going to free up space for more students who need tutoring," Gary Titus pointed out. "We're currently full-up, with a waiting list. And let me tell you, I'm really enthusiastic about the role the Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center is taking on. Their commitment to support the expansion is crucial. Plus, their focus on fundraising will allow me to concentrate on overall strategy development and on individual consultations with students. So everyone benefits."

## Cookbook From The Oaxaca Learning Center

In the autumn you will be in store for a very special treat. The Oaxaca Learning Center will publish a compilation of Andres Cruz' recipes. Andres has been the cook at the Center for eleven years. His skill in the kitchen comes from his mother, from his wife, from watching Gary's previous cook at work, and from sharing ideas with guests who take his cooking class. It all came naturally to him. From the start, he found feeding others was both a satisfaction and a joy. Over the years, he has experimented and has given a number of traditional recipes his own special variation. Anyone who has eaten at the Center has left the table with a smile on their face.

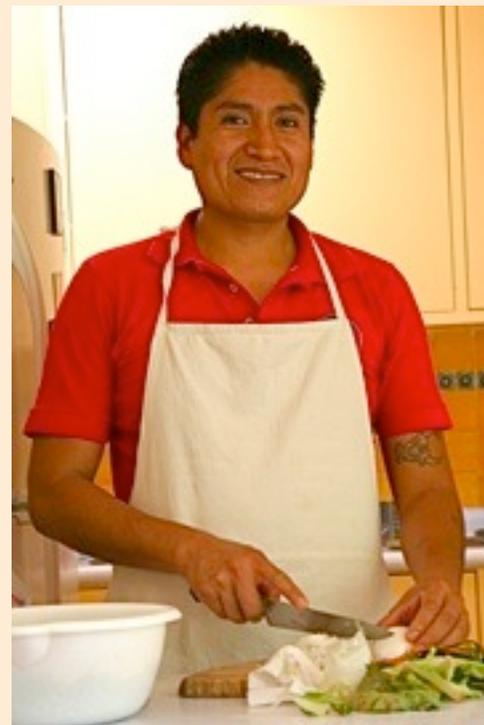
So stay tuned for the unveiling of "¡Salud! Good Health and Good Eats." To give you a taste of what's in store in this unique vegetarian cookbook, try the following recipe.

### **Lentil Soup With Vegetables**

- 2 cups water
- 1/2 cup lentils, cleaned
- 1 carrot, peeled and chopped
- 1 potato, peeled and chopped
- 3 leaves of Swiss chard, chopped
- 1/2 onion, chopped
- 1/4 cup vegetarian bacon
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 3 tomatoes, pureed
- 3 teaspoons chipotle chili sauce
- 2-3 cups vegetable broth

**Preparation:** In a small sauce pan, put lentils in water and boil until soft. In a frying pan, sauté all vegetables for 7 minutes. Add the tomato puree and continue to cook until thickened. Add the lentils and broth, then simmer for 15 minutes, or until vegetables are done. Add more broth, if required.

"I always liked this soup because when I was a child my mother made it for me and my brothers. Hers was simpler -- only onions and garlic. I eat it all the time -- not only when the weather is cold." - Andres



*Andres' excellent home cooking will put a smile on your face, too!*



*Tutors at the Learning Center: Back row - César Ruiz, Miguel Sánchez, Armando Carmona (coordinator), and Ramiro García. Front row: Gabriel Avendaño, Yelene Franco, Karen García and Renatta Alatríste*

### **Changing Of The Guard**

The tutors who work at the Learning Center are a very talented and cohesive group who are completely dedicated to their task. Most were once students at the Center themselves, and have returned the gift of learning they received by sharing it with the current crop of students. But, in time, they must move on with their lives, going on to university studies, pursuing new careers, or moving to some different part of the world. This summer three of our tutors will be leaving our family. We offer our thanks and best wishes to Cesar Ruiz, Gabriel Avendaño and Renatta Alatríste! Come July, several new tutors will join our teaching corps here at the Learning Center.