

The Oaxaca Learning Center



Making a difference, one young person at a time!

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Spring 2013 Newsletter

One Volunteer's Viewpoint

Ruth Price is an accomplished writer and a big fan of The Oaxaca Learning Center. Here she shares a recent experience she had with the young woman whose education she sponsors.

One Saturday morning a few weeks ago, I joined nearly 120 students from The Oaxaca Learning Center on a field trip to La Salle University. Betsaida Arango, a coordinator at TOLC and the young woman whom I sponsor, is one of the Center's students who has a scholarship to pursue a bachelor's degree there. She would be leading a workshop on Sexual and Reproductive Rights. On the way, the students, who ranged in age from 13 through their early 20's, were laughing, munching sandwiches from their backpacks, or gazing sleepily out the windows. No one seemed to notice I was the only gringa in attendance.

I had never participated in one of TOLC's student trips before. I was there only because Betsaida had invited me and I had, on impulse, accepted. My husband and I have been sponsoring Betsaida for over a year and a half, but my personal involvement had so far been limited to an occasional restaurant meal or coffee when I visited Oaxaca. I didn't feel like I knew her particularly well. The few times I saw her, she was quiet and shy, though her eyes twinkled with a lively spirit.

In the school auditorium, the students were first asked to draw their dream house. Then Betsaida delivered a PowerPoint presentation on sexual and reproductive rights. My feelings for her shifted from affection to admiration and awe as Betsaida advised her young listeners on their right to privacy, to their freely chosen sexual preferences, to decide whether and

when to engage in sexual relations or have children, to be informed about contraception and to live free of violence and intimidation. She never spoke down to them; she was still One of them. But her conviction



Ruth Price and Betsaida Arango share breakfast on the patio at Ruth's home in Oaxaca.

about the importance of her subject and her passion gave her voice authority. You might have expected a mixed-sex audience of teens to engage in a good deal of smirking and whispering, joking and poking during the presentation, but the room was still.

A short animated film for teens followed, which exhorted them to think through - before becoming sexually active - the issue of contraception, and the consequences if they did not. Aided by a staffer from the Casa de Mujeres, who stressed their need for education on this subject, Betsaida then discussed how important it was for this type of conversation to take place beginning in elementary school; that the

taboo on discussing sex and sexuality be broken; and that students share this information with others.

The houses they had drawn, Betsy now explained, were symbols of what the students had inside them. What they dreamed, they could have. But they needed to learn to care for their lives. If they became sexually active without taking that care, then their dreams might not survive.

At the program's end, I watched several students spontaneously hug one another. My eyes leaked a little - I was so impressed!

Some days later, over French toast and coffee at my apartment, I asked Betsy to explain what had brought about her transformation from the shy, quiet girl I had met not so long ago to the poised and confident young woman now before me.

"Yes," she agreed, "I talk a lot more now. That is because of the Centro. I learned to talk there - how to try and reach people, how to be more sociable. The Centro is marvelous! It changed me 180 degrees -- or more. My way of thinking, feeling, behaving - my way of looking at the world - is very different now. I am learning to think of the future. I am making decisions and taking respon-

sibility in my life. All of that I learned at the Centro.

"The Centro is a different world. In my home, at my school, it was very traditional - rigid. People talk but they don't listen. They don't smile. It's very rare that someone wants to help you change. At the Centro - my second home - people are without fear. They are confident. They smile. They are not critical. And they worry for me - how I'm feeling and how I'm doing. In the past, I would think a lot about my problems. At the Centro, I forget them. The atmosphere is so different! They understand; they give you space."

"When people first come here, they don't believe it's free. They don't have confidence, generally. The ones that enter discover there are many opportunities for them. They are encouraged to dream big, to have aspirations. For example, if someone at school said, 'I want to become a doctor,' the others would just say, 'yeah, right.' At the Centro, if you say something like that, people will try to help you figure out how you could do that."

As spring approaches, I am once again leaving Oaxaca. This time, I will be leaving behind a friend of whom I am very proud. I, too, am grateful to the Center for the ways it changes me.



Isaac Cruz Cano presents a Sunday afternoon workshop on leadership to the Center's college scholarship students.

demands the Center makes on its students and to their commitment to succeed. An example of these programs was a five-hour leadership training conducted on Sunday, April 14 by Isaac Cruz, a professor of psychology at the Autonomous University of Benito Juarez. Through a combination of lecture, audio-visuals and group discussion, the workshop participants gained insight and practical knowledge about how to direct their own lives and lead others. It's all part of the Center's holistic approach, which is having a huge impact on young people's lives.

Leadership Training

The Learning Center's work in tutoring students in various academic subjects is well known. Just as important are the workshops that focus on different elements necessary to build character and leadership. For the Center's goal is not just to help students master their classwork, but to provide them with the skills and knowledge to take charge of their lives and be creative agents of change among their peers and in society.

Because our students are all busy at school during the week, the special workshops take place on weekends -- testimony to the

Overcoming Barriers To Success

Everyone who participates in the Learning Center -- our senior staff, coordinators, tutors and students -- has overcome significant, often daunting, odds to reach their levels of achievement. The possibility for an indigenous child from a poor family in the state of Oaxaca to be an honor student in high school and in undergraduate studies, and to now be enrolled in a graduate program in mathematics at the country's most prestigious public university (The National Autonomous University of Mexico) is one in a million. Yet students from very poor families who seek a brighter future for their children can sometimes find their way. These children need to be bright and highly motivated and also often have a measure of good luck along the way. This is the story of Ramiro, one of our most committed tutors. Ramiro is a role model and allows our students to see the levels of attainment that are possible.



Ramiro García Bautista

Ramiro García Bautista

Ramiro is 26 years old and was born in a small Mixteco village about a six hour drive from the capital city. He speaks Mixteco and Spanish, but did not learn to speak Spanish until he entered primary school. His parents are small farmers—coffee growers -- a crop whose price varies dramatically and makes the economic situation of the family always precarious.

The parents' vision of a better life for their children has resulted in six of the seven children having completed, studying in or planning to enter the university. The older brother has now completed his law degree and works for the state government. Recently, he purchased a small apartment where Ramiro and three other siblings (one in high school and two others who are studying at the State University of Oaxaca) live together with four other school mates. They all share in the household responsibilities. Those who have income - like Ramiro and his oldest brother - help maintain the group. Ramiro's parents and his only brother who did not go on to university also contribute to the financial needs of family members who are still students.

Ramiro migrated to the capital after high school and graduated with honors from the State University with a degree in mathematics. He is presently enrolled in a master's program in math offered by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Oaxaca. He was awarded a full scholarship by Mexico's National Science Foundation (CONACYT) based on his academic record. Unfortunately, in 2011 he was diagnosed with a degenerative eye disease, but he hopes to be able to complete the master's degree and to go on for a doctorate before losing his sight.

"I studied in a one-room primary school and was very timid initially because I did not speak Spanish and we were very poor. I got my first pair of shoes when I graduated from sixth grade. My junior high school program was a classroom with satellite television and a teacher. Over the years I gained confidence and I finished high school with honors. Math and science have been my main interest, since I see them as the basis for human improvement. In fact, the laser surgery that has helped me retain my sight is the result of math innovation and its application to technology."

"I first came to the Learning Center in 2005 and began to study English. As a result, I can read math and science textbooks in English with 100% comprehension. This is important, since almost all of the texts in my graduate program are in English. I came back to the Center in 2008 when I was invited by Jaasiel Quero to be a member of the tutoring team. The stipend I received for tutoring was crucial for my support and that of my siblings -- and I fell in love with the project!

"My goal as a tutor is to prepare conscientious students who can meet the academic challenges they confront. I am especially interested in helping students in need to understand math and use it to their benefit. A lot of math teachers instill fear of the subject in their students rather than show them how basic it is to human needs and their own success in school. Because of the supportive environment at the Center, I myself have learned to be more self-assured, more of a participant and team player."

A Path To Sustainability

As we announced in 2012, The Oaxaca Learning Center is seeking to become a sustainable organization through strengthening and expanding its programs and developing a funding strategy that enhances its long-term financial viability and potential. To that end, a strategic plan was developed by the Learning Center's Mexican core directors. It proposes that within the next five years Center funding will be equally shared: 50% of funding will come from the traditional sources (Bed and Breakfast 10% + Friends of the Oaxaca Learning Center 40%) and the other 50% will be generated by the Mexican NGO. The projected new revenues will come from the Mexican government and other national sources (15%) and through social business activities which the Center will design and implement (35%).

The development of the social business plan will be one of the major strategies to assure the Center's sustainability. The initial social business we are now developing and plan to implement as a pilot project in the spring and summer quarters of 2013 will offer our tutoring services to students who have the ability to pay. This project has the Mexican acronym CAS. The social business will be conducted in a separate physical space. The proceeds from this activity will be added to the donations that presently support the Center's free tutoring services to low income and rural indigenous students.

The Center's core staff -- Jaasiel Quero, Sonia Bautista, Mirell Duarte and Armando Cruz -- has been developing the Five Year Plan. There are three phases: conceptualizing the plan, long term planning goals, and tactical strategies. The first two activities have been completed and the third is now being addressed. The social business initiative and others in the future will utilize the professional and proven expertise of the Center.

We call our plan, "A Path to Sustainability," because the staff understands it is just that -- a path we are creating, not one that already exists. We have been fortunate in undertaking this. We know we are not alone. We appreciate the ongoing support and encouragement given by all the friends and supporters of The Oaxaca Learning Center! We are confident that your contributions of time, talent and financial resources will back us as we branch out into new territory.



*Key personnel of The Oaxaca Learning Center:
Jaasiel Quero, Sonia Bautista, Mirell Duarte
and Armando Carmona.*

Used Laptop Computers Needed

With over 100 students receiving academic help, the Learning Center has great need of used computers. If you have a laptop in good working condition that you are no longer using, please consider donating it to one of our students.

Share Our Story!

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. Then how many words are conveyed by moving pictures -- especially when the pictures are not only in motion themselves, but have the power to move people, as well?

It has been our experience that when folks get to know the Learning Center, they want to become involved in the magical work accomplished here. You can introduce people to TOLC by letting them see the short video Sylvia Hines produced. Forward a copy of this newsletter or include the link below in an e-mail to your acquaintances.

To view Sylvia's video, click on this link
<http://vimeo.com/40553509>

Spreading The Word

Friends and supporters of The Oaxaca Learning Center are absolutely crucial to the success of the enterprise! Monetary donations are by far the biggest revenue source that keeps the Center in operation and growing year after year. A surprising number of people, though, find other ways to assist in the marvelous, magical work accomplished here. This article is one of a continuing series highlighting how different people take a personal interest in and make a unique contribution to the Center.



“There are any number of worthy causes in Oaxaca,” observes Larry Ginzkey, “but few that inspire the enthusiasm and dedication found at The Learning Center.” Larry, in fact, found himself so inspired that he volunteered to be the editor and producer of the Center’s quarterly newsletter which you’re reading now.

Larry, who retired from a transportation and delivery company in Denver in 2010 and moved to Oaxaca, had no direct professional experience in electronic publishing. But he is an ardent outdoorsman with a particular passion for cycling and ended up producing a newsletter for a cycling club in Denver as well as for other social groups. “That’s the experience I had when I volunteered for the job,”



An avid mountain biker, Larry (insert, left, and in the center of the pack of riders above) combines his love of cycling with a talent for wordsmithing to benefit the Learning Center. Many of the young men at the Center enjoy riding, but do not own a bike. About once a month Larry rounds up a collection of bicycles and gets a group together for a ride in the country. It’s a “win-win” situation for all!

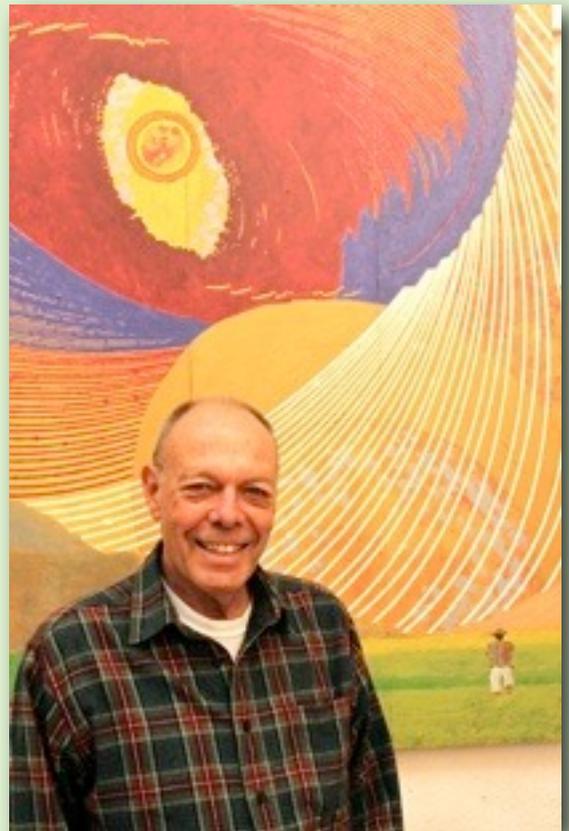
Larry explains, adding that he originally got in touch with the Center to set up an *intercambio* in an effort to “dust off my college Spanish after forty-some years of disuse.” He admits that his language progress has been slow, but the *intercambio* experience was a highly positive one that brought him into close contact with Center students and their needs. Aware of how critical financial support is for both tutors and students to be able to continue their work, Larry has sponsored one of each and has been providing room and board for one of the Center’s scholarship students who will graduate from university next year with a bachelor’s degree in Civil Engineering.

“Now that I’m a ‘gentleman of leisure’ with a little financial security,” Larry says with a laugh, “I have the time and the means to be philanthropic. But I think I’m getting at least as much in return as I give. It is a delight to play a supportive role in the Center’s work. The place is truly contagious, and I feel younger and more alive for being part of it.”

“I wholeheartedly second what Larry has to say,” says Barry Head, who volunteers his services as a writer for the newsletter, “especially the part about the spirit of the Center being contagious. Watch out when you go there, or you’ll find yourself offering to make yourself useful any way you can.”

Barry came to Oaxaca after a long career as a “writer and editor for hire.” He worked in newspaper and magazine journalism, advertising, public relations, corporate publications and television. These days he only writes fiction.

“Except for what I write for the newsletter,” Barry quickly adds. “There’s nothing fictional about what goes on in The Learning Center. The hard-luck stories of bright kids dealing with tough childhoods, often up against dysfunctional families and with no hope of getting ahead because of meager resources . . . those stories are real as can be! But just as real are the many, many stories at the Center of the triumph of the human spirit, thanks to the dedication of peers willing to help one another and the generosity of outside donors of time, talent and money. What goes on there is sheer alchemy, turning dead ends into opportunities and failures into successes.”



Barry Head wields a brush as competently as a pen, and has found a new career as a successful painter in addition to crafting articles which appear in this newsletter.

You Can Help!

The Oaxaca Learning Center depends upon the generosity of our friends and supporters to carry out our mission. Every cent that is donated will be used to help our students.

Tax-deductible donations may be sent to:

FOLC

P.O. Box 926

Blue Hill, Maine 04614

Please be sure to include your e-mail address on your check!

You may also make an instant donation (which will incur a slight service charge) using PayPal by clicking on this button:

Donate Now!



Jorge Luis Mateos, Sr. and Jr. perform a father & son duet at a Saturday family event hosted by the Learning Center.