

Guatemala: A Brief History and Travel Journal

Keshia Atwood

Guatemala: A Brief History and Travel Journal

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Keshia Atwood

Thesis Advisor
Stephen Guy

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen W. Guy", written over a horizontal line.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

April 2007

Graduate of Spring 2007

Spokane
Thesis
LTS
2489
- 24
2007
.A29

Acknowledgements

-I would like to thank Steve Guy for his guidance and support through my research. He was an invaluable resource.

-I would also like to thank my husband, Brandon, for his encouragement and support throughout my project. Because of him, I have come to appreciate the richness in other cultures.

-I want to thank my parents for encouraging me to pursue my goals. Without their support, I would not have had the opportunities to become who I am today.

-I also want to thank Dan and Kate Kinnaird and Anton Payne for taking part in this life-changing experience with me.

Running Head: GUATEMALA: A BRIEF

Guatemala: A Brief History

Keshia Atwood

Honors Thesis

Ball State University

Spring 2007

Abstract

After a two-week expedition to Guatemala during the summer of 2006, I realized how little I knew about cultures outside of my own. I also recognized that this lack of education stemmed from an absence of curriculum in academia that intently focused on the history and traditions of places around the world. It is my personal goal to take the knowledge I have gained from my experience and to share it with others in hopes of their becoming more informed about global affairs. The following research examines the political and social history of Guatemala over the past one hundred years and how it has resulted in the makeup of the country today. Also included is a detailed journal of my experiences during the two weeks I spent in Santiago, Guatemala, as part of a ministry team.

Guatemala: A Brief History

For the past one hundred years, Guatemala has been marked by successive corrupt governments, dire poverty, and civil unrest. The country has endured a long, vicious civil war, resulting in thousands of deaths, thousands more missing, and over a million homeless. Additionally, the religious landscape in Guatemala has changed dramatically over the past century. With the influx of missionaries, thousands of Guatemalans have been baptized Christian or have converted from Catholicism to Protestantism. Today, Guatemala is going through a period of political stability and steady modernization. Despite the attempts at modernization, however, many Guatemalans continue to live in remote villages, preserving their traditions and culture.

Recent History

In 1901, Guatemala came under the power of President Justo Rufino Barrios. During his presidency, Barrios attempted to rebuild the Guatemalan economy by redistributing land among peasant farmers. The effects, however, were such that the wealthy coffee, sugar, and cotton plantation owners multiplied their wealth while the native Guatemalans sunk deeper into poverty. This relatively small group of landowners used their power to force the peasant farmers to sell their land, resulting in more resources available to the landowners. At the same time, Barrios welcomed foreign investors and gave tracts of land to European immigrants to cultivate. The largest of these investors was the United Fruit Company (UFC), backed and owned by the United States. Dominating the Guatemalan economy, the UFC was the most substantial exporter, landowner, and employer in the country. With rules being implemented by Barrios

restricting the land resources available to the native Mayans, the country was heading down a dark road of economic and social depression (History, 2003).

With financial backing from the United States, the right-wing dictator General Jorge Ubico came into power in 1931 and began an economic campaign that outlawed unions, dissolved all agrarian organizations, and put an end to all land reforms. Under Ubico's power, the UFC stockholders were becoming wealthier by the minute while many Guatemalans were enduring starvation and minimal access to health care and education. With no land to farm and no rights to ensure their access to government aid, many Guatemalans barely earned wages sufficient to support their families, let alone obtain medical treatment or send their children to school. It was necessary for men, women, and children to work from sunrise to sunset to pay for their daily needs. Enraged by their living conditions, a group of middle class Guatemalans banded together to force Ubico out of office. Many Guatemalans then lent their support to Juan José Arevalo, who repealed the vagrancy laws that had been implemented by Ubico. This released workers from a commitment to one job and allowed them to move once again from job to job in search of higher wages, resulting in increased income. Arevalo also established a minimum wage, re-legalized unions, and implemented a national healthcare system. It seemed as though Guatemala were on its way to democracy (History, 2003).

In the election of 1950, the Guatemalans put Jacobo Arbenz into power, and during his presidency, he continued the reforms that Arevalo had drafted for the country. He also enacted the Agrarian Reform Law, which required all large companies to relinquish any uncultivated land to be distributed among peasant farmers who were not currently landowners. Undoubtedly, this reform was aimed to take back a good portion of

land from the UFC, which owned most of the land in Guatemala by this time. Unsatisfied with the new reform and Arbenz's treatment of the company, the UFC convinced the American government that Guatemala was rapidly becoming communist. In reaction to the UFC's claims, the United States put together a coup to take Arbenz out of office. By installing the dictator of its choice, the United States only exacerbated the problems the Guatemalans were facing (History, 2003). The United States' CIA-engineered coup removed Arbenz from power in 1954, replacing him with right-wing dictator Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. With funds from the U.S. supporting his army, Armas began a terrible reign in Guatemala, arresting and persecuting over 9,000 Mayan peasants. He abolished the Agrarian Reform Law and outlawed unions, allowing the wealthy landowners to exploit the Guatemalans along with the natural resources. For the next 32 years, Guatemala was under the power of several dictators who virtually destroyed the economy and many Guatemalans along with it by putting all of the economic power into the hands of the landowners and restricting the economic power of the working class. Fed up with the state of the country, some left-wing military officers orchestrated a rebellion against the Armas administration in 1961. Though unsuccessful, the left-wing rebels did not give up (History, 2003).

By 1964, the United States sent weapons to the Guatemalan army, and the country was engulfed by a full-on civil war. Over the next seven years, almost 40,000 Guatemalans were slaughtered by the American-supported and-funded Guatemalan army, and by 1975, there were nearly 60,000 casualties of the civil war. In that year, with Guatemalans hoping for a change in direction, General Lucas García was elected President, but when García joined forces with President Efraín Ríos Montt in 1982, he

enacted a policy to rid the country of all communists. Under Montt's "Scorched Earth" policy, the Guatemalan army burned down villages and massacred 25,000 natives, who were shoved into mass graves at undisclosed locations. Leaving 1.5 million Guatemalans homeless, García's administration instilled helplessness in millions of natives. Furious with García's policies, a group of rebel armies formed the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG) and commenced slaughtering all citizens known to be government sympathizers. With the election of Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo in 1985, the war and massacres continued (History, 2003).

Five years later, Jorge Serrano was elected to the Guatemalan presidency, and having minor success in his peace talks with the URNG, he managed a temporary lull in the violence. But in 1992, after a rebel coup overthrew Serrano, Leon Capri came into power. By 1995, the United States had suspended all humanitarian aid to Guatemala, and the local peasants had descended deeper into poverty. When Montt was reelected the same year, he brought no change in the unstable and dangerous state of the country. But the election of 1996 brought promise to the devastated Guatemalans. Alvaro Arzu of the National Advancement Party (PAN), the leftist indigenous party, was elected president. After Arzu's administration held several peace talks with the URNG, the rebel group finally declared a cease-fire, and by December of the same year had signed three peace treaties (History, 2003).

Today, Guatemala is slowly recovering from its war-torn past. Although the Guatemalans have been rebuilding their villages and homes and have been collaborating with human rights organizations, they are still left with the devastation of one hundred years of civil unrest. At the end of a century, the country stands with 200,000 massacred

and 50,000 missing citizens, 100,000 refugees, and over 1 million homeless men, women, and children (History, 2003).

Reforms and the Constitution

In May 1985, in the midst of civil war, the National Constituent Assembly, with the purpose of decentralizing governmental power in Guatemala, drafted a new constitution. Article 119 of this new constitution declared it the obligation of the state to “promote administrative economic decentralization in a systematic manner in order to achieve adequate regional development in the country.” To complement Article 119, Article 254 established municipal autonomy, allocating several responsibilities to town councils, including electing local officials, overseeing local public services, obtaining and dispersing town resources, determining territorial boundaries, and issuing ordinances within these territories (Alcaraz & López, 2004).

Besides laws on decentralization, the new constitution established other important regulations necessary for a stable government. For one thing, the President of the Republic was given the responsibility of appointing the governors and vice-governors of the municipalities. State funds were also to be distributed equally among the municipalities to be used for preventative health programs, building infrastructure, improving education, and providing public services such as waste management and water services. Other reforms included but were not limited to a national health initiative, a literacy law, and a new program of national education (Alcaraz & López, 2004).

Since the constitution was drafted in 1985, other reforms have been implemented as well. The National Civil Police, or PNC, was established in 1997 to provide order and internal security to the state, but also, primarily, to end military control in both internal

intelligence and security. Also, in 1997 a national health care initiative brought coverage to 76.8 percent of the Guatemalan people who had not been covered previously. This new initiative has been in place three years, and its success has been attributed to its volunteer institutional facilitators, churches, and volunteer doctors. In addition, an education initiative has been implemented to bring education to more rural areas. Despite the appearance of success, however, the initiative has shown only minor results due to poor cooperation of parents with school-age children. The government has also been advocating voter participation since the constitution was drafted, but although the desire to participate has increased, actual voting has not increased significantly partly because voting precincts are located in municipal seats, a situation that often makes it difficult for citizens to vote due to the dispersal of the population (Alcaraz & López, 2004).

Despite the many developments stemming from the constitution and reforms, the government as a whole is still deeply flawed. Since 1985, people from 48 different political parties have run for office in Guatemala. But in most cases, these parties run for one election, disband, and are not seen in any later elections. Today, ten major parties exist in the Guatemalan political scene, with women and indigenous citizens still drastically underrepresented. Furthermore, numerous cases of lynching have been reported since 1996. The lynchings, which are executions of prisoners or suspects without due process, are a direct result of the major lack of confidence that Guatemalan citizens have in the current judicial system. The lynchings normally occur in isolated or rural communities and are increasingly led or planned by local authorities. These occurrences are an obvious example of the lack of provisions by the State to secure the fundamental rights of its citizens (Alcaraz & López, 2004).

Free Labor

Throughout the history of Guatemala, there have been both great concern over and great need for major labor reforms, especially in the coffee-growing industry. Although the debate over such reforms has waxed and waned over time, it became a serious matter of business again in 1928 and 1929 when the first signs of depression were appearing in the United States. With no hope of getting through a depression with the coerced labor of unwilling workers, in the 1930's the Guatemalan government revised many of the labor laws that affected most rural workers. The changes that took place with the revision of these laws uncovered the harsh working conditions that Guatemalans were facing and eventually led to free labor in 1944 and 1945 (McCreery, 1995).

Since its inception, Guatemala's agricultural economy has relied on slavery and coerced labor for its production needs. When a shift occurred from the production of cochineal to coffee, the country's exports dramatically increased, leading to a greater need for workers on the *fincas*, or plantations. Because of a general labor law created in 1894 that required all Indians to work off a 15-peso labor debt, the Indians of Guatemala were forced to live and work on the *fincas* for a period of two years, leaving behind their villages and their families. After an export peak in 1906, coffee production and demand leveled off and the prices of coffee worldwide fluctuated unpredictably. During this time, the worth of Guatemalan money declined, decreasing production costs while increasing the wealth of the plantation owners. With their standards of living quickly diminishing, many Indians escaped to Mexico and Belize to avoid working on the *fincas* and to earn higher wages (McCreery, 1995).

In 1919, a price collapse in cash crops, particularly coffee, triggered the necessity for more efficient production, which led economists and plantation owners alike to focus on their labor methods. Over the next several years, many proposed solutions to Guatemala's economic problems called for a change to free labor—that is, labor in which the worker is free to quit at any time for any reason. However, many government officials and plantation owners argued that the Indians lacked the “civilized needs” necessary to compel them to join the wage labor market. The Indians controlled their own production and had reasonable access to land, which meant they would feel no necessity to enter the wage labor market. Regardless, the Indian communities benefited the plantations' profits by providing cheap labor, resources and food. But when Guatemala saw political instability once again in the early 1920's, Indian resistance to *finquero* (plantation owner) exploitation surfaced (McCreery, 1995).

Facing strong resistance from the Indians, the Guatemalan government drafted a law giving them the right to choose between two forms of labor: required work, which consisted of public works or the military, or *trabajo libre* (free labor), which was working on the *fincas*. This “free labor,” however, was just a new name for the old face of coerced labor. Unsatisfied with their options, the Indians and the government debated over dissolving the required 15 peso debt owed to the *finqueros*. While the Indians wanted permission to pay their debts with money, the government and plantation owners refused, wanting their labor instead. When coffee prices recovered in 1924, the debate was dropped and no new labor law was developed. The Guatemalan labor force still lacked unions and stable employment (McCreery, 1995).

In the 1930's, when monopolized labor threatened to undermine the Guatemalan economy, the debate over free labor resurfaced, but this time with some resolution. Because of a spike in population growth, the depression, and new needs among the population, Indians were allowed to choose how they wanted to allot their labor for the first time in the country's history. With this long-awaited change in the labor force, the coffee growers of Guatemala made it through the depression exceedingly well and stabilized the market after a brief period of frantic *finca* selling in the 1930's. In 1934, new labor laws put into effect under the presidency of Jorge Ubico ended long-term debt servitude, organized cheap labor, permitted Indians to work off their debt in two years (aiding the profits from exports during the depression), and strengthened vagrancy laws so that more Guatemalans had to become wage earners (McCreery, 1995).

Although not all Indians submitted to the new labor laws set forth by the government, the majority accepted the new terms and became increasingly independent once again. As time passed, coerced labor became not only less economical, but also less necessary. The export market was stable and the Indians were entering the wage labor market willingly. Since May of 1945, Guatemala has had a truly free labor economy (McCreery, 1995).

The Indigenous Mayans

The organization of Mayan communities has been historically classified into one of two distinct periods: the classic period or the post-classic period. In the classic period, the Mayan settlements were positioned on the valley floors of the Guatemalan landscape. The villages were organized around a central ceremonial temple, hierarchically arranged to show the political power of the dominant sites. The post-classic period, in contrast,

was marked by average households positioned on mountain slopes, with a small ceremonial temple on a nearby mountaintop. This new arrangement stressed a transition from a hierarchical political organization to a more unified organization, which was structured around ethnic and cultural characteristics of the community (Borgstede, n.d.). But what caused this reorganization of Mayan communities? Several theories have been proposed, including environmental factors, population increases, political instability, an increase in militarism and warfare, and natural disasters. However, theorists now believe that the reorganization had more to do with practical issues such as finding the best usable land (Borgstede, n.d.).

The typical Mayan community now can be found situated in the steep Guatemalan mountains or on the rocky landscapes of its ancient volcanoes. Within the community itself, one will find rows of cinderblock houses surrounding a centrally located church. Despite the prevalence of coffee plantations and plots of farmland, almost all of the Mayan villages are deficient in road systems and electricity (Borgstede, n.d.). The villages are primitive at best and are generally lacking in modern conveniences. When it comes to the household, the Mayans distinguish clear labor divisions according to sex and age. Men are primarily in charge of working on the milpas (farms), which entails planting, overseeing the harvest, and weeding. During the dry season, however, the men are responsible for building and repairing houses and cutting wood. The main priority of the women is to maintain the household and take care of the children. In addition to household chores, such as washing clothes, hauling water, gathering kindling for the fire, and preparing meals, women are also responsible for gathering fodder for the livestock and collecting plants for use in cooking and medicines. Still, when the men are short on

labor in the fields, women will sometimes help with planting, though they never participate in the planting of maize because of the extensive manual labor required for this particular crop. Children are mostly excused from doing any labor that the adults are responsible for. With only a few chores such as gathering berries and mushrooms, the children are generally allowed to play for most of the day. Interestingly, the chores that the children are responsible for are not differentiated by gender. Such differentiation does not occur until adolescence (Garrard-Burnett, 2000).

One intriguing aspect of traditional Mayan culture is the system by which they manage land inheritance, a very sensitive subject not often spoken of within the Mayan culture. In most villages, it is customary for the patriarch of the family to partition the land he owns when most of his children have either married or left the household. Usually, only the males of the family are given the divided land. Still, daughters may inherit land if their fathers choose to leave it to them, though they are almost always given smaller portions than are given to the male heirs (Garrard-Burnett, 2000).

Today, the largest indigenous group inhabiting Guatemala is the Quiche, a subdivision of the Mayan people. Settled mostly in rural areas, the Quiche are subsistence farmers, practicing what is commonly referred to as milpa agriculture. Although their main income derives from growing maize, squash, and beans, Quiche families also supplement their income by raising pigs, turkeys, and chickens. Still, the families may suffer from a lack of resources, which requires them to obtain day labor or seasonal work. The typical Quiche home, built with adobe brick, is situated in the middle of the family's cornfield, a central location that allows for more efficient overseeing of the land. The house, although fairly small, usually consists of two rooms: the main living space, which

doubles as sleeping quarters, and a kitchen. The houses also tend to have a small porch on which the family gathers for meals on hot evenings. As one might expect, traditional Quiche settlements are normally secluded, allowing for the preservation of their culture and the retention of family milpas (Borgstede, n.d.).

The Indigenous Mayan Religion

Typically, the Mayans incorporated key Catholic beliefs with their indigenous religious beliefs. Out of this combination of religious beliefs, a new Mayan religion has emerged over the past century. One of the foundational beliefs of the indigenous Mayan religion is the idea that everything God has created, such as the trees, the mountains, and maize, has a spirit inside it. This idea can be understood more clearly as a variation of animism. These spirits are often applied to in times of drought, famine, or crisis. Clearly, the situation the community is in determines which spirits are applied to, such as the rain in a time of drought. Another foundational principle of the religion is the strong belief in spiritual continuation. The Mayans believe that after a person dies, his or her spirit continues to live in a spirit world that mirrors life lived on Earth. In times of need, the Mayans will often seek advice from their deceased family members at midnight, a time when the spirits of the dead are thought to walk among the living. Again, the appeal to their relative at midnight, which would be lunchtime in the spirit world, reiterates the belief that the spirit world mirrors the living world. Perhaps the most important Mayan belief linking Catholicism and indigenous beliefs is that of the separation of space into four components. The sky, the upper-most area of space, is referred to as the seven stars; this is where Jesus and his family reside. Humans, it is believed, can never enter this domain. The second area is the Earth's surface, known as *bendesi*, where the clouds

travel. The next area, known as *mundo*, Spanish for “earth,” is where the Mayans believe their deceased ancestors continue to live in their spirit world. Last is an area referred to as *xibalbaj*, the lowest area of the earth where evil saints, the devil and all other souls of the most detestable beings reside. Obviously, this place is comparable to Christian conceptions of hell (Garrard-Burnett, 2000). Clearly, the Mayans have drawn from traditional Catholic beliefs to create a religion that is more parallel with the indigenous beliefs they have held for centuries.

Traditional Religion

Guatemala’s religious past has been marked by hundreds of years of waxing and waning opposition between the Catholic Church and the government. Since the Conquest and until the reformation of the Church, the royalty in power had appointed the clergy of the Catholic Church. If the appointed clergy posed any opposition to the political party in power, he would be moved to a less desirable parish where he would be less of a threat against the state. In contrast, the clergy who were favorites among the men holding political power, mostly Europeans, especially Spaniards, were given special privileges, such as their choice of parish. This blatant favoritism caused a great threat to job security and consequently ruined the attractiveness of becoming a priest. Because of the blemished interactions between the church and state, very few men were becoming ordained during this time of political rule of the Church, and the Church was deteriorating. In the mid to late 1800’s, however, the Catholic Church underwent a revival. During Carrera’s military rule (1840-1865), state sanctions were lifted on secular priests and those in regular orders that had restricted their choices of parishes as well as the length of time they worked in those parishes. In addition, a state-sponsored tithe that

had been abolished during the Conquest was reinstated (Garrard-Burnett, 2000). With the major shift in the Catholic Church from being state-run to becoming again independent, a new form of Catholicism, commonly referred to as “folk Catholicism,” emerged that eventually replaced Orthodox Catholicism. This new branch of Catholicism was used by the indigenous Mayans to incorporate their Catholic beliefs with their pre-existing indigenous beliefs, which were specific to individual communities (Borgstede, n.d.). For many years, Guatemalans used the transformation taking place in the Catholic Church as an opportunity to create a form of religion that would best suit their needs and beliefs.

The Emergence of Protestantism and Modern Catholicism

Guatemalans make clear distinctions between Protestants and Catholics. On one hand, Protestants are associated with the “anti-milpa” movement, a movement that includes mainly families who do not own family farms and therefore lack funds from surplus products to invest. These weak finances result in a lack of opportunities to make significant economic gains, and this lack of opportunity, in turn, alienates the families from their communal village because they are unable to help support the village financially. Catholics, on the other hand, are classified as “milpa promoting,” which means that these families maintain milpas as their source of income. They then use the economic gains from surplus products to invest in their villages, reinforcing communalism. Their investments in the community insure a stable cultural system, but limit their use of their economic power outside their village. Clearly, the Guatemalans’ distinctions between Protestants and Catholics are closely tied to their economic ideas of the two groups (Garrard-Burnett, 2000).

The most influential factor in the continued growth of Christianity in Guatemala has been and continues to be the work of missionaries. Starting in 1882, four groups of missionaries, including Presbyterians, Central American Missions, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Friends Mission, came into Guatemala over a 20-year period. This influx of missions was due to President Justo Rufino Barrios's movement to weaken the Catholic Church's political power at the time. By allowing missionaries into the country, Barrios believed that loose followers of Catholicism would convert, resulting in a weaker Catholic influence. After their admittance into the country, the four main missions groups began to divide up the indigenous Indian territories by language and culture. In doing so, the missionaries were able to learn about a distinct group more thoroughly and therefore to serve that group more effectively. Despite their efforts, very few converted over the first 50 years. Many Guatemalans were either suspicious of the missionaries' motives or of Protestantism in and of itself. Still, the missionaries continued to "plant" churches in almost every village they visited, starting with churches in private homes and eventually rustic churches. By 1967, nearly two percent of Guatemala's population had been baptized into the Protestant faith (Garrard-Burnett, 2000).

In addition to salvation, one of the missionaries' main focuses was on keeping new believers spiritually fueled. Ultimately their desire was for the Guatemalan converts to replace the missionaries and become the pastors of the congregations. Once this desire was realized, the missionaries no longer had to occupy their time with setting up and running churches. Subsequent to their replacement as pastors, they began to set up Bible-training programs, Christian retreats and revivals, theological seminaries, and other programs to continue the spread of Protestantism. The secret to their success, ironically,

was not through any of the aforementioned programs. Instead, the missionaries' success came from the Wycliffe/Summer Institute of Linguistics' translation of the Bible into nearly every Indian language and major dialect found in Guatemala. Now, the new Christians had another means by which they could maintain their faith and spread their message to others (Garrard-Burnett, 2000).

In 1944, Protestantism experienced an unprecedented growth because of the overthrow of President Ubico and the following separation of civil and religious offices. It was now more socially accepted as well as safer to be a proclaimed Protestant. Aware of and confused by this almost instantaneous cultural change, many anthropologists began to examine why the Indian culture in particular was so responsive to the Christian message. While no one factor seemed to explain the phenomenon in its entirety, the anthropologists adopted several theories. One way to explain Indians' responsiveness is their unbiased acceptance of any individual, regardless of social status or economic means. Another factor influencing their responsiveness may lie in their need for help in dealing with the heavy social isolation that came with mass urbanization. The movement from small Mayan villages to larger cities caused severe emotional and economic stress for many individuals. Because of this, many Mayans lacked a sense of stability and security. Religion was something that provided a solid foundation on which they could build their new lives. Whichever the case, the total Christian population had risen to 4.5 percent of the total Guatemalan population and 3.7 percent of the Indian population by 1976 and was growing almost 6 percent every year. During the late 70s and early 80s, Protestantism again experienced a rapid increase in the rate of conversion. Like the rise in conversion in 1944, the growth during this period is attributed to several factors. An

earthquake in 1976 killed 20,000 Guatemalans and injured nearly 100,000. Also, the escalation of the war was causing dislocation from familiar villages and families. Major life crises were creating a need for comfort and answers (Garrard-Burnett, 2000).

Aside from the history, it is important to note the foundational ideas that mark the Guatemalans' interpretation of Christian principles. For one thing, the Guatemalans do not think it necessary to make doctrinal distinctions among sects of Christianity as Christians in the United States do, although nearly one half of Guatemalan Christians are Pentecostal. Most important to their faith is their focus on Christ as the Savior, especially Christ as a personal savior. Also, Guatemalan Christians believe that an individual may obtain salvation only through Christ, who is the "son of God who died and rose from dead for remission of sin." They stress God as the only god and creator of all things, pinpointing the death and resurrection of Jesus as the divine resolution to man's sin. Their Christian practices are centrally based on prayer and personal testimony. The Christians of Guatemala consider their salvation to be followed by years of continuous struggle filled with temptations, backsliding, and rededication. In short, the Guatemalans practice fundamentalist Christianity (Gerrard-Burnett, 2000).

Modern Catholicism or Catholic action

In addition to the drastic growth of Christianity in Guatemala, the Catholic Church has undergone changes that have stemmed from movements of reform within the church body. Modern Catholicism, or Catholic Action, has evolved from traditional Catholicism. As they did with Catholic and indigenous Mayan beliefs a few hundred years ago, the Guatemalans have eliminated several traditional Catholic values and have

incorporated many Protestant ideas into their traditional Catholic beliefs, creating a modern Catholicism (Garrard-Burnett, 2000).

Guatemala Today

Guatemala is a region marked by volcanic mountain ranges, abundant vegetation, and extensive valleys on its western highlands; deserts decorate its eastern highlands; sizable sugar plantations dominate the southern coast; and rainforests and cattle ranches command its northern region (Borgstede, n.d.). Mostly inhabited by Mestizos (55%) and Amerindians (43%), Guatemala's population is just over 12 million, with 3 million residing in the country's capital, Guatemala City. Although Spanish is the official language of the country, more than 20 Amerindian languages are spoken throughout the region. Guatemala's major religions are Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, both often mixed with indigenous Mayan beliefs. Currently, Guatemala is a republic run by head of state Alfonso Portillo Cabrera. Rich in its chief crops of sugarcane, corn, bananas, coffee, and beans, Guatemala also has copious natural resources such as oil, nickel, fish, and chicle. Although more Guatemalans are pursuing an education than ever before, only 5-to 15-year-olds are required by law to attend school (Guatemala, 2004).

Clearly, Guatemala's history has been filled with corrupt government, coerced labor, poverty, and civil unrest, including war. Nevertheless, the country is exceedingly rich in its natural resources, religion, and culture. Although the country has been moving through a period of modernization, many indigenous citizens continue to live in remote villages that separate them from the modern world but enable the preservation of their cherished culture. In addition, widespread poverty still exists throughout the majority of the country. Although initiatives are being taken to provide its citizens with better

education, medical care, and government aide, Guatemala continues to lack sufficient means to satisfy the country's basic needs.

References

- Alcaraz, J. P., & López, L. F. L. (2004). A general view of the institutional state of decentralization in Guatemala. In J. S. Tulchin & A. Selee (Eds.), *Decentralization and democratic governance in Latin America* (231-274). Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
- Borgstede, Greg (n.d.). Exploring the western highlands of Guatemala: New perspectives on the ancient Maya. *Expedition*, 47, 10-17.
- Garrard-Burnett, V. (Ed.). (2000). *On Earth as it is in Heaven*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc.
- Guatemala. (2004). *World Almanac & Book of Facts*. New York, NY: World Almanac Education Group, Inc.
- History (2003). *Guatemala Adventure Guide*. West Palm Beach, FL: Hunter Publishing, Inc.
- McCreery, D. (1995). Wage labor, free labor, and vagrancy laws: The transition to capitalism in Guatemala. In W. Roseberry, L. Gudmundson, & M. S. Kutschbach (Eds.), *Coffee, society, and power in Latin America* (206-231). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Experiencing Guatemala

July/August 2006

Keshia Atwood

THURSDAY, JULY 27, 2006: LEAVING MY SENSE OF SELF



Figure 1- A volcano situated right outside of Santiago

There is no sense in describing the details of the trip to Guatemala City, Guatemala. Like every other travel experience, the trip was jam-packed with strangers, annoying airport security, newsstands, and luggage being carted every which way. There was a lot of running to make it to the plane on time, followed by a lot of waiting once we realized the plane hadn't even started boarding. The only thing different on this particular trip was that I was among five adults leading a group of eighteen teenagers to a foreign country. Did I mention that we embarked on this adventurous journey at three in the morning? With a headache from the boisterous teenagers and a desperate need for a cup of coffee, I began what would turn out to be one of the most eye-opening and transforming experiences of my life.

After a longer than desired flight and some snoozing induced by Dramamine, we finally set foot in Guatemala City, Guatemala. To say that I experienced confusion and culture shock upon arrival would be perhaps the grossest understatement I have chanced to make. Nearly everything I experienced was drastically different from my everyday life. Going through customs, being greeted by a Mariachi band, and having everyone stare intently at us "gringos" were novel, anxiety-provoking events. I longed for the familiar,

but I could find solace only in the twenty-two white faces surrounding me. Even most of those faces were just recently familiar. Running through my mind during our short stint at the airport was the question, “What are we supposed to do now?”

We had planned to meet our host missionaries outside the airport as soon as we had collected our baggage, the only possessions that connected us with our homes. Though it sounds like a simple task, it was nothing less than a fight-to-the-finish to get to where our hosts were. All along the exit families were lined up, waiting to catch a glimpse of their loved ones and to welcome them home from whatever they had been doing, wherever they had gone. It wasn't much different from U.S. airports, but the feelings I had while standing among those strangers in that strange town indicated that I was out of place. And as soon as we stepped into the Guatemalan sunshine, I knew I wasn't home anymore.

Everywhere I looked there were crazy-colored buses ready to take their passengers to undisclosed locations. Men in trousers, light-colored shirts, and a wide variety of hats unloaded luggage off motorized carts and tossed it into the sand-colored dirt. Dust swirled through the air; only by squinting my eyes to dime-thick slits could I see what was taking place all around me. Almost immediately, a woman with a Mona Lisa smile and long, coal-colored hair approached us. She wore a long, tattered blue skirt and a blouse that hadn't seen a chest of drawers for weeks. Accompanying her was a small boy about six. He had dark, tar-colored hair like his mother and strong features that starkly contrasted his unkempt clothes. His big, black eyes could penetrate your soul, leaving you with a feeling of pity, of sorrow.

Soon, when the woman began to speak, we realized she had come to ask for money from the rich white gringos. Her family needed a new roof on their house, and like most Guatemalans, they lacked the necessary funds to make the simple repairs. With shame and self-loathing, we quickly turned her away, claiming we had no money to spare. I couldn't help thinking of the three-bedroom house and two cars waiting for me at home, a thousand miles away. Anger and sadness roared inside me. Why did I have so much and the people of this country have so little? I wouldn't be able to shake that feeling for the rest of the trip, and out of it came a lesson that God would use to alter my white, middle-class perspective on the world.



Figure 2- Our transportation for the week

After the bus was loaded and we had met Mike and Pat, our missionary hosts, we boarded the bus and headed for Santiago, the village where we would be staying for the next eight days. Although it was only a forty-five minute bus ride, our fatigue from traveling and our disorientation from being in a strange place made the trip feel like a day or more. As in the United States, vehicles travel on the right side of the road, which, oddly, came as quite a surprise to me. In a place so different from my home, I didn't

expect to find many similarities. And the similarities didn't end there. All along the highway were Pizza Huts, Taco Bells, and McDonalds. Despite the seeming insignificance of this particular similarity, the familiarity of the fast-food restaurants was a comfort. As soon as we left the city, however, the comfort of familiarity was washed away and replaced simultaneously by the mystique and fear of all things unknown.



Figure 3- Narrow streets prohibit driving to the top of the hill where the retreat center is situated

The buildings and highways disappeared. Our bus was traveling down a dirt road barely wide enough for a small car to pass through. The small buildings crammed close together on either side of us were crumbling, littering the streets with pieces of old painted adobe. Faces, mostly of women and children, peered at us from the dark recesses of desolate doorways. From their stares I could tell that we were a novel sight, unwelcome by many and admired by more. I wondered at what I perceived to be their deference to us. But before I could entertain these thoughts any longer, our bus slammed to a halt and we were told that it could take us no farther since the road wasn't fit for an automobile. We would be walking the rest of the way to the retreat center.



Figure 4- The retreat center in Santiago

After a brief introduction to our hosts and the staff of the retreat, and a quick bite to eat, we were shown around the place we were to call home for the next week. The compound consisted of a large building containing the kitchen, sleeping quarters and a small sitting room, and another building containing the restrooms, showers, mess hall, and meeting room; it was surrounded by a tall, thick cement wall and an iron gate that was to be kept locked at all times, both of which were to protect us from the potential dangers that lay on the other side. When we were shown to our sleeping quarters, I was relieved to find that I would actually have a bed to sleep in for the rest of the week. It might appear an unwarranted fear to some, but my foreign ministry training had prepared me to expect and be prepared for the worst. The room was fairly large, with blue metal bunk beds lining each wall and a rough-looking table sitting unused by the door. Although this room would be my refuge from the long, hard days ahead, I spent many restless nights lying under my musty, damp sheets.

I was also grateful to learn that the retreat center had plumbing. I was half expecting to be using an outhouse for the biggest part of our trip. My appreciation for the

plumbing didn't last for long, however, when we were informed that the three toilets on the compound were to accommodate nearly thirty of us. Although I looked on the existence of bathrooms as a promising luxury, I quickly discovered that the showers we were to use were only pipes dangling above each toilet. To describe the facilities as modern conveniences was to give them too much credit. Our hygiene would be a repulsive issue to be reckoned with for the duration of the trip. In addition to my disgust with the bathroom situation, more repugnant feelings soon overtook me. Our hosts informed us that the city pumped approximately one hour's worth of flowing water to our compound source every night, which was to be divided among cooking, cleaning, showering, and flushing toilets. Need I again mention that there were about thirty of us on the compound? The aggravation of the situation isn't hard to understand. With some time to think on this novel situation, I resolved to make the best of my trip, even if it meant not showering for a week and avoiding the vile restrooms as much as humanly possible.



Figure 5- Walking through the village of Santiago

Once we had all rested a bit from traveling, our hosts decided to take us on a walking tour of, Santiago, Guatemala, our hometown for the next eight days. When we stepped outside the gate of the compound, it was as if I had had my eyes shut the entire ride through Santiago just hours earlier. The air was thick with dust, and it had a pungent, stale odor that I can only describe as “Guatemalan air.” Candy wrappers, snack packages, and other unidentifiable litter blanketed the pitiful excuses for streets. Scrap-metal shacks and garishly painted cement buildings closed in the already claustrophobia-inducing town. Everywhere I looked was dirty and putrid smelling; Santiago was vastly different from anything I had ever seen. How could people live this way? How could they survive in such an insupportable environment?

As we walked, flies buzzed all around us, clinging to the trash that lay beneath our feet and to the animal carcasses that hung just through the doorways of many of the dwellings we were passing. All of a sudden I was awakened to the activity taking place directly around me. Men were glaring at us with strong disapprobation, as if they didn't approve of our being there or of our being who we were. The women were a little less unwelcoming. They briefly abandoned their work to come to their windows and doorways to see the rich, white-skinned people, the gringos. But without exception, it was the children who were the most interested in our leisurely stroll through the town. They stared at us with wonder and admiration in their eyes. Their smiles seemed to take up the greater part of their faces, and their expressions displayed the perfect essence of childhood. We handed them candy, and they gave us a look of thanks that made the inequality of the exchange clear: They were giving us much more than we were giving

them. They left an indescribable warmth in our hearts, while we left their mouths with only a taste of what we usually took for granted.

I went to bed that night with a fire burning inside me, a fire of the anger and resentment that come with the knowledge of unfairness and injustice, but it was also a fire of inspiration and passion that those children had lighted in me that afternoon.

FRIDAY, JULY 28, 2006: UNFAMILIAR VIEWS



Figure 6- The view of Santiago from the mess hall, the highest point of the retreat center

I woke up this morning to unfamiliar sounds and smells, temporarily forgetting where I was. Outside I heard cows bellowing and roosters delivering their morning wake-up calls. The air around me smelled stale and dirty. My blankets were cold and damp from the humid morning air. I suddenly recalled where I was and yearned for my warm, comfortable bed back home. Not knowing what else to do with everyone still sleeping soundly all around me, I quietly slid down from my bunk bed and grabbed my Bible for a little time with my god. I went up into the mess hall to be sure I wouldn't be interrupted, but before I could begin, I couldn't help but sit and take in the beauty all around me.

From the elevation of the retreat center, I could see all of Santiago below me. Though I had just walked its streets yesterday, it was as if I were really seeing it for the first time. Despite the scrap-metal lean-tos and the trash-littered streets, there was beauty in the simplicity of it all. It was primitive, undisturbed by busy city streets and disconnected businessmen. Nowhere in my hometown—a medium-sized town in Indiana—could I sit on a Friday morning and hear nothing but the sound of animals rising and wind rustling through the trees.

Directly surrounding Santiago below me were rolling hills of green and plots of farmland as far as my view would allow, and rising up from the land was a massive, domineering volcano that the clouds appeared to be using for a game of hide-and-seek. It was the most beautiful natural place I had ever seen. Even with the poverty-stricken town in its midst, the land still seemed somehow unblemished, untainted. I cherished my view that morning, knowing that I might never again know the feeling of such a simple world.



Figure 7- Painting the youth area in the Cristiana Centro de Avivamiento

After spending the morning on the compound, we painted all day at Iglesia Cristiana Centro de Avivamiento, or the Christian Church Center of Strength, where our

host missionaries were church leaders. The building, which was in Guatemala City, was nothing more than cement blocks and a cement floor, a little paint, and a few chairs. But the love of the church members for one another and for God was intense, like nothing I had ever come across before. You could see it in their worship, in their singing and praise of their Lord. They were unconditionally accepting and loving, showing favoritism to none. We were welcomed as family with kisses and hugs, not as visitors or strangers with handshakes and disinterested conversations. Though we spent the bulk of the day endlessly painting circles on the youth area walls, it was nothing short of a life-changing experience. The fellowship and bonding that took place between the seven of us Americans who were there painting and our two fearless Guatemalan leaders were indescribable. Although we could communicate very little with one another, we helped each other complete our assigned responsibilities with servants' hearts. With compassion for one another and our mission, dedication to the task at hand and an open mind, not even the language barrier could stop us from leaving a lasting impact on one another's lives that day.

SATURDAY, JULY 29, 2006: HOPE THROUGH SHOES



Figure 8- Fitting new shoes for the children of Santiago

I never knew that hope and happiness could be given through an article of clothing. In fact, I have been taught all my life that you can't buy happiness. But today, in a town devoid of the material goods that I thoughtlessly discard almost every day, we brought opportunity, happiness, and hope to children through a five-dollar pair of Wal-Mart shoes. When we opened the gate to the retreat center, a great mass of children holding blue tickets flooded the dirt path like a powerful, boisterous wave. The blue ticket they held did more than simply permit them to get a new pair of shoes; it symbolized the granting of a long-desired prize: something new that would be their own.

I can't quite put into words what I was thinking and feeling throughout the day. As I took the children's old, battered shoes off and slipped on their bright, clean new ones, their eyes expressed a gratitude that could never be expressed through language. What they felt, what I felt seemed to exist only in a feeling in our hearts and a shy, timid smile. I knew that what I was doing for those children was greatly appreciated, but I also knew how little it really was. That day, with the children, I experienced true hope, happiness, and gratitude. They taught me a lesson that had escaped me until then—that a simple act of genuine, whole-hearted kindness can genuinely have an impact on someone's life.



Figure 9- A leader of our mission team, Kate Kinnaird, speaks at our combined worship service

After that afternoon spent with the children, it was hard to believe that I could find any more emotion in my day. I felt completely spent, yet full of such gratitude for the lesson on serving with a humble heart. But the evening worship service at the church in Guatemala City proved to be yet another step along the road to a new understanding of life.

We traveled the 45 minutes to la Iglesia de Cristiana in the old bus we had taken from the airport to Santiago. The bus ride in and of itself proved an adventure. To put it succinctly, the style of driving in Guatemala is crazy—bumper to bumper, 60 miles per hour, no turn signals, no slowing down for passers, and absolutely no yielding to other drivers. At one point our bus was so close to a semi-trailer in the “lane” next to us that I could have reached my hand out the window and scraped its side. I was petrified. Never had I been as scared for my life as I was that evening. I closed my eyes until we reached the church. My appreciation for life had increased, if only slightly.

The church service during the evening was perhaps the most spiritual experience I have ever had. We were welcomed with hugs and smiles by the twenty or more young Guatemalans who had come to worship with us that night. Most of them had never met us, and more had never been in contact with “rich Americans.” But their eyes and souls were afire with Christ’s love, and it reflected onto us. The worship was in both Spanish and English, and in our respective languages we gave praise to the One who had brought us all together. In that short time, neither language nor race nor status stood in the way of our love for humanity or for our Lord.

SUNDAY, JULY 30, 2006: THE SILLINESS OF CHILDREN

Figure 10- A school-age boy in Santiago

We went to church at la Iglesia Cristiana this morning for worship. Since it started at ten, we punctual Americans made sure to get there early. We soon found out that Guatemalan time is quite different from the time back home. Though it is marked by the same increments, time speeds up or slows down depending on the mood of the Guatemalans. We waited, sometimes a little impatiently, for nearly an hour before the service actually began.

That morning's church service was distinctly different from the one we had experienced just the evening before. All of the members were in attendance, not just the youth. But that was perhaps the smallest difference of all. The whole service was conducted in Spanish without a translator, which left a lot of our group clueless and wanting to be anywhere but there. As for me, I followed along for a while since I was nearly fluent in the native language, but my mind soon tired of translating and I became mentally fatigued. Feeling guilty for being so near falling asleep during a worship service, I looked to those around me for entertainment. Unfortunately, most of them were

on the brink of losing consciousness or had already succumbed to the sweet comfort of dreaming.

Only the music kept our attention during those three drawn-out hours. The band, consisting of drums, a keyboard, and an electric guitar, played contemporary worship songs that we could sing along to in English. This part of worship seemed to bring out the brilliance of Guatemalan culture. The Guatemalans danced exuberantly and waved flags as if their burdens had been lifted and they had nothing but great joy in their souls. I wondered to myself how they could be so satisfied, so on fire for life and for God when their lives were so obviously difficult. This thought would stick with me for the rest of the trip as I saw more and more how truly rich the Guatemalans were.



Figure 11- Children from Santiago arrive for the children's campaign

After church we went back to the retreat center for a children's campaign. A couple of hundred children came to the compound for singing, crafts, and a snack. Though I was worn out from the past several days, the children awakened in me a new energy. We sang and danced and played, throwing all our cares to the wind. I even taught some of the little ones the names of the colors in English. I would say the color in Spanish, then in English, and they would excitedly shout the color back to me with

giggles and grins and bursts of laughter. They told me I talked funny, and I made silly faces for their amusement. The innocent laughter of children breaks through all barriers.

MONDAY & TUESDAY, JULY 31 AND AUGUST 1, 2006: SLAVE LABOR



Figure 12- The elementary school in Santiago

We painted at the elementary school in Santiago all day today and yesterday. After being handed brushes and huge buckets of paint, we were instructed simply to “get started.” Little did we know we would be painting the entire building, inside and out. It was dreadful, laborious work. The bland brown and cream paints stuck to our hands and arms, seeming to never come off. After a while, the brown paint became so thick that it began to look like brownie batter. By that time, I was desperately hoping that it was. I felt like a prisoner, doomed to carry out tasks all day long, knowing that I wasn’t able to just stop if I got tired or wanted to quit. It was a trying two days, and I, like many others, was at my snapping point. I felt like I could scream at the top of my lungs at any moment. My patience was wearing thin as my paint grew thicker.



Figure 13- A group of elementary school children in Santiago

But no matter how bad the painting got, we could always trust the Guatemalan children to lighten the mood. They came to the windows of their classrooms, staring out at the white people, smiling and pointing with curiosity, and they made a mad rush towards us at the sound of the bell, stroking our hair and faces. They had never seen skin so white, so clean; nor had they seen hair so completely different from their own. They adored us. They called us beautiful and asked us if they were beautiful too. No one had ever told them they were. They were so innocent and unknowing, asking us to teach them English words and clinging to us as if we might disappear if we left their sight. Their adoration was humbling, and we deeply felt their love for us.

I went to bed thinking about the children and their simple request to touch our hair, to feel our skin, or just to be near us. So much could be learned from their simple perspectives on life. The little, seemingly unimportant acts of generosity and love are what make life so meaningful.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 2, 2006: MORE SILLINESS AND SHOWERS

After a night of restless sleep in my musty, damp bed, I woke up to a familiar smell that I couldn't quite place. After I got dressed and went with a few other girls up to

the mess hall, I identified that appealingly familiar smell: French toast for breakfast. Nothing could have gotten my day off to a better start. Though I was lacking sufficient sleep, my stomach was filled with enough warmth and goodness to get me through the day.



Figure 14- Niños para Cristo campaign at the school in Santiago

We went back to the school in Santiago today, though not to paint, thank goodness. We had painted the school, in fact, to earn permission from the superintendent to hold a Niños para Cristo (Kids for Christ) campaign. We were the first group ever to gain admittance to hold a Christian campaign. It was an exciting time with the kids and an exciting step in our missionaries' ministry. With over one thousand children, it was an incredible opportunity to share the love of Christ.



Figure 15- My husband, Brandon, and I dressing up for the children

To add to the amusement of the kids, we were instructed to dress up as clowns. For some reason, the kids in Guatemala are fascinated with clowns. I, feeling reserved and a little awkward around so many people, was reluctant to act so silly. Nevertheless, I donned the costume and danced along with everyone else to the children's delight. The kids clung to our arms and legs, hugged us, and stroked our faces and hair as they had done the couple of days before. Undeniably, it was a little uncomfortable at first, but their adoration for us soon overwhelmed any sense of strangeness. We spent those few hours at the school smiling, laughing, and doing anything necessary to please our dark-headed admirers, and when it was time to leave, we left them with joy in our eyes and theirs, knowing that none of us would forget the time we had just spent together.

Nothing was more welcome that night than a shower. With our system of turning on the water, rinsing as quickly as possible, and turning it back off, there was little chance for anything but cold water. That night was my first hot shower since being in Guatemala. I can't describe just how much I appreciated those two warm and soothing minutes. I felt as if my heart, as well as my body, had been deeply cleansed.

THURSDAY & FRIDAY, AUGUST 3RD & 4TH, 2006: VOLCANOES & BEACHES

Figure 16- Lake Panajachel, surrounded by mountains and volcanoes

We had known all week that Thursday and Friday were going to be the leisure days that always come along with the mission trip package. You work hard for most of the week, and then you get to spend time being a tourist and hanging out with your group. Before arriving in Guatemala, we had voted on what we wanted to do on our days off. The missionaries had given us two options: travel to see some Mayan ruins or hike a volcano. The vote was unnecessary. Who wants to see some boring ruins when you can climb up the side of an active volcano?! Despite the fact that a couple of people in our group were a little less than athletic, we decided to challenge ourselves and attempt the over seven-hour hike.

Wednesday night, after we had all had dinner and cleaned up the mess hall, our host missionaries called us together to talk about our trip to the volcano. It would be highly difficult, exhausting, and a little dangerous. We were instructed what to wear and worried a little that we didn't have the right apparel for the journey. As it turned out, we didn't have to worry too long. One of the staff members of the retreat center interrupted our meeting to share some urgent news: The volcano we were to climb the next day was

erupting. The city was being evacuated, and no one was to be let in. We had to come up with a plan B. After much discussion among the leaders and unwanted input from the teenagers, we decided to take the two-hour drive to Panajachel, a nearby town, and spend a night and two days. Though we were bummed out about not climbing the volcano, Panajachel turned out to be the perfect way to spend our last two days.

After a long drive in two small vans packed with luggage and anxious spirits, we arrived at our bungalows in Panajachel. We were to stay four to a cabin, which consisted of a bedroom, a small dining room, and a living area. For the first time in almost eight days, we were allowed to flush the toilets every time we used them, take long, hot showers, and sleep in dry, comfortable beds. I especially appreciated the sleeping arrangements. Since we had been in Guatemala, my husband of two months and I had been sleeping in separate rooms. But in Panajachel, we were once again allowed to sleep in the quiet comfort of each other's breathing. It would be a two-day trip of amazement and appreciation.

During our two days in Panajachel, we took in as much culture as we possibly could. We spent one of the days shopping in the street market, bartering to lower prices that already paled in comparison to American prices. The other day we spent taking a small boat across the lake to more traditional towns where the locals sold their handmade goods to us eager Americans.

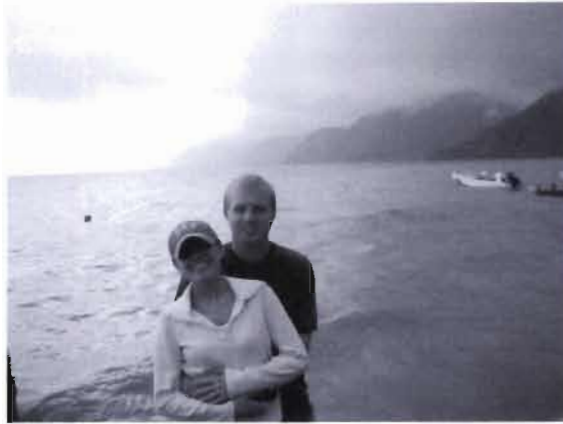


Figure 17- My husband and I enjoying our vacation in Panajachel

Though it was a new and interesting experience to shop and barter in the market, it was my experience of the land itself that has left me with such an appreciation of the life and beauty of the Guatemalan culture. The view from the beach a short walk from our bungalows was one of the most incredible sights I have ever come across. Like huge silent protectors of the way the Guatemalans lived, mountains and volcanoes completely surrounded lake Panajachel. What lay beyond those gigantic mounds of rock was anyone's guess, but on that almost untouched piece of land, all time ceased to exist. Nothing mattered. All disagreements were laid to rest; all burdens were dropped at the shore. In that place, surrounded by God's most wondrous gifts, life made a little more sense, love seemed more abundant, and an understanding of human nature came a little more easily. Perhaps for the first time, I understood what it meant to be alive. There, standing on the beach with my husband and two of my closest friends, I gained a new appreciation of, and perhaps a new perspective on, our world. All at once, the world seemed so big, yet so small. The Guatemalans were so different from me, and yet we shared so much in common. We wanted more than to live. We wanted to be truly *alive*. We wanted to see beauty in nature and in all people. We wanted to know just a little more

of the meaning of life. But more than anything, we wanted to be who we are and to share our lives with the ones we loved.



Figure 18- Me and a few children from Santiago, the village we stayed in

Throughout my trip I have learned many lessons. Some have been as trivial as how to deal with sleeping in a damp bed or how to shower using as little water as possible. But most important are the lessons that have changed my life. I found beauty in a poverty-stricken town, hope in shoes, and a new appreciation for life in a third-world country.



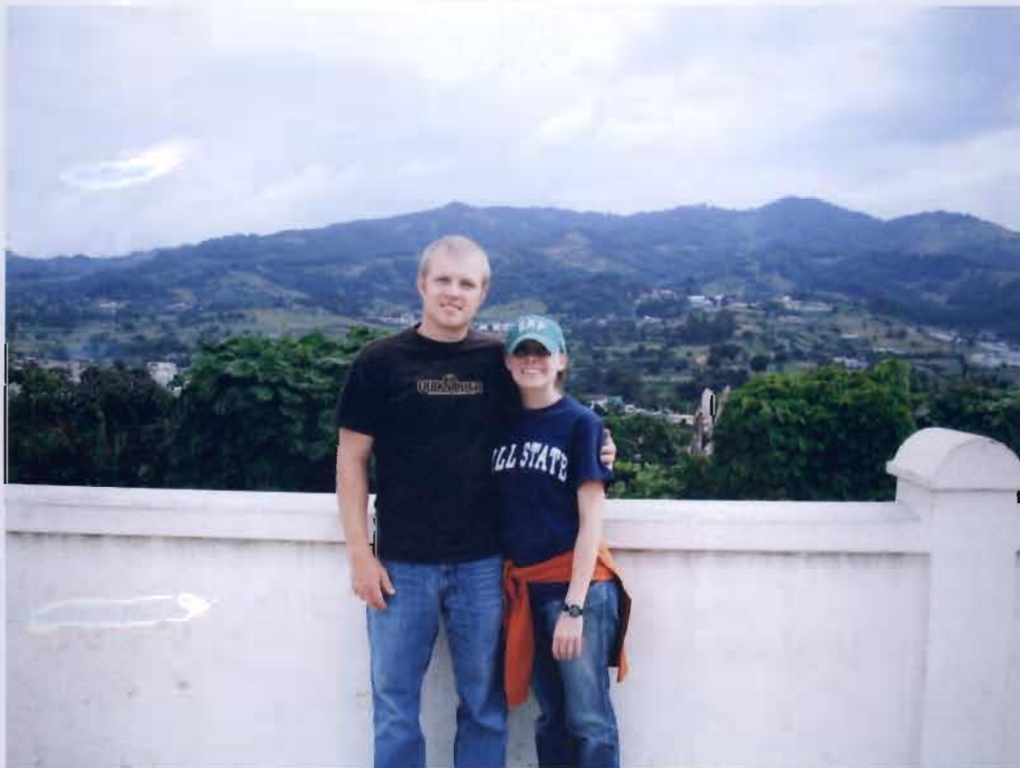
The water trough in Santiago where the villagers wash dishes and clothing.



The town square in Santiago.



A view of Santiago from the missionary retreat center.



My husband, Brandon, and I in front of the Santiago landscape.



Burial tombs in Santiago.



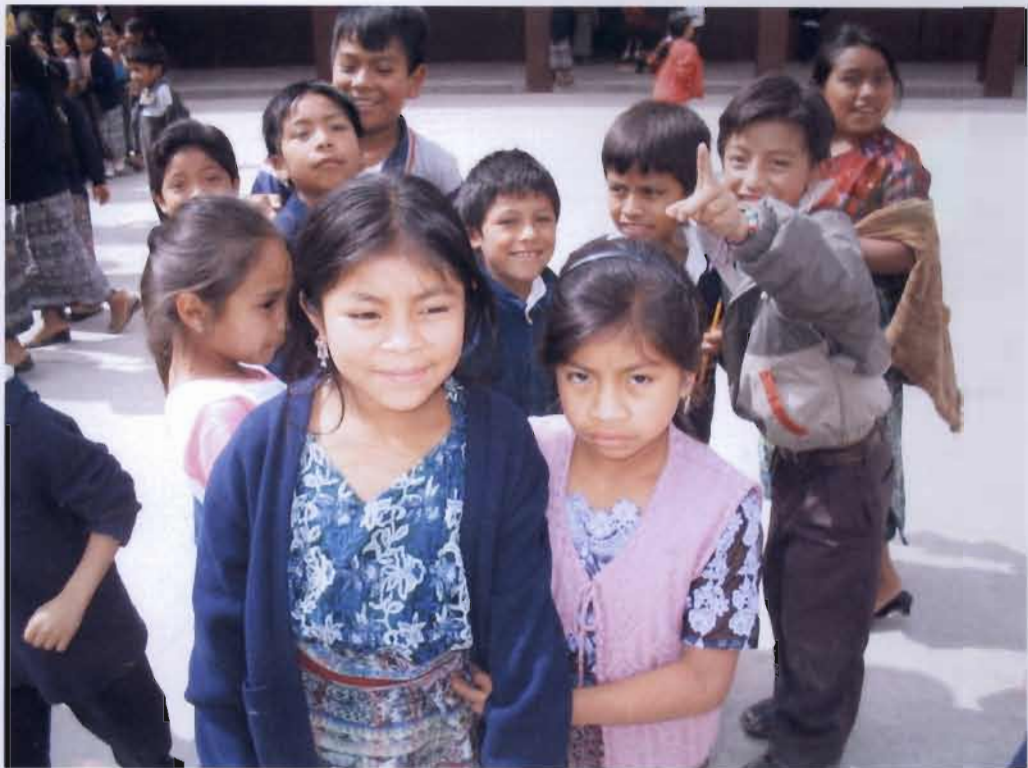
Another view of the burial tombs situated on a hill just outside of the village.



A few of the Guatemalans who worked with us throughout our mission trip: Fernando, Porfirio, and Gary (left to right).



A small portion of the donated shoes that we took with us to Guatemala and distributed to the children of Santiago.



A few children from the elementary school in Santiago.



A group of boys and a member of our ministry team, Zed, during the Niños para Cristo campaign at the elementary school in Santiago.



Elementary school children gather around our ministry team members to learn a new game during our campaign.



Another group of children at the Niños para Cristo campaign.



The children sang and danced along with our ministry team members during our campaign at the elementary school in Santiago.



A little boy poses with a clown nose of one of the ministry team members.



A little boy at the school candidly poses for a photograph.



A breathtaking waterfall on the side of the road en route to Panajachel.



A distant volcano can be seen from the shore of Lake Panajachel.



A view of the mountains and volcanoes surrounding Lake Panajachel.



Traditional Mayan women walk along the shore selling handmade crafts.



The typical mode of transportation in Panajachel, the tuk-tuk.