

Honoring the Past for a Peaceful Future – Building and Educating in Post-War Guatemala Guatemala

Eliza Ramos, United States, Columbia University, International House New York

- a. The Project for Peace has two main goals. First, to help victimized indigenous families achieve closure and inner peace from their traumatic experiences of the recent Guatemalan Civil War. This was achieved through the inhumations and dignified burials of 50 victims in 5 communities in the Mayan communities near Huehuetenango. The second goal was to ensure that the next generation of Guatemalans critically understand the root causes of the conflict in order to promote a new future of harmony. This was achieved through the development of a youth history and peace curriculum, executed in 5 schools in 3 communities.
- b. My two partners, Joey Orton and Benjamin Rose, fund-raised from family and friends in order to allow them to volunteer with the youth curriculum portion of the project. Their voluntary time and funding allowed the youth curriculum to come to fruition.
- c. The multiple parts of the project took place in various times and capacities throughout the summer. The dignified burials and peace curriculum were the most successful components. We learned after meeting the Committee of Victims in Santa Ana Huista, Huehuetenango, that the adult support group was less culturally appropriate for this indigenous community, and that the culminating memorial event would function better as smaller memorial events whenever a set of inhumations occurred. We therefore adjusted the project to include smaller memorial events rather than a culminating memorial event, and strayed from the idea of a formal support group, focusing instead of the other areas of the project. This however allowed us to delineate more of the funds towards inhumation costs for families.

Along with those adjustments, the dignified burial process was much more complex and lengthy than originally anticipated. The partner organization works alongside the Red Cross and KAFKA to bring the remains to a forensic lab in another part of the country to be identified, then to work with families to ensure a proper burial and death certificate process. Because the process often incurs delays, only one set of 11 remains were identified and buried during the summer. The other remaining 39 remains are in the process of being identified, and we have worked out a plan with the partner organization for the dignified burials to occur before the end October, 2011. The funds will be sent to the partner organization at the end of the planning process for each set of inhumations, and documentation of funds used will be required from the partner organization before the next set of inhumation planning begins. After the project is complete, 50 indigenous families from 5 Mayan communities will benefit from the project – families whose loved ones died from the struggle and who will now be able to find inner peace through their dignified burials. In addition, their children will have gone through a peace curriculum that allowed them to understand and critically analyze why the civil war occurred, and how to achieve peace in the future. We hope these small steps will continue to heal wounds and spread peace in Santa Ana Huista and into other areas of Guatemala.

The youth curriculum portion was very successful and well received by both the teachers and children. It was executed in five schools, and 15 classrooms in total. During the curriculum, the students were first taught a simplified version of the civil war history, through story-telling,

theater, and music. The students were then split into groups and asked to analyze the complex issues and causes of the war through role-plays of the multiple stakeholders. After a discussion of the causes and effects of the conflict, the groups discussed current social issues in Guatemala and potential solutions. The students had to critically think and problem solve issues very real to their everyday lives.

For the future, we have passed along curriculum materials to interested schools for them to continue to discuss peace, the recent history, and current social problems that the children face. We hope that these schools will continue to discuss these issues with their students and that the students will continue to think critically about how they want to improve their country in the future. In addition, our partner organization will continue to work alongside the Committee of Victims to identify victims and continue the inhumation and dignified burial process. Although the process of healing is slow, the effects are profound in regaining peace throughout these communities, and sustaining it into the future.

Section II

- a. Peace is achieved by both external harmonious relations and inner serenity. When conflict occurs, both are disrupted. Achieving a true state of peace requires addressing both the external and internal root causes of conflict. The Project for Peace will be a step in the reconciliation process towards alleviating oppression, increasing understanding, and working towards a peaceful future in a country haunted by war.

Short-term, the success of the project can be determined by the completion of 50 dignified burials and construction of a public monument, community investment throughout the inhumation process, and the completion of the youth curriculum by 100 youth. Long-term, the project's success can be defined by increased closure and inner peace from the conflict through the long-standing public monument and mausoleums, and continued youth initiatives surrounding the civil war, through use of the continuing curriculum. An educated youth generation that will remember and learn from the past conflict, will create a more peaceful generation of the future.

This project has changed the way I think about peace and conflict. We often overlook the immense effect that the *healing* process has on the future. New conflicts often arise because old conflicts have not been processed and closure has not been achieved. This project allowed me to see the power of healing. In order to prevent future conflict, communities must be allowed to heal from the past. It has changed my idea of peace, and in the future I will always consider the past, when working towards peace initiatives for the future.

- b. "In order to achieve peace in present day, we must learn from the past. Current conflicts are often caused by unhealed wounds of the past. In order to truly achieve peace, old scars may need to be re-opened to fully be healed. It is only through this healing process that we can then look to a brighter future." (Eliza Ramos)

"This project provided a unique platform to educate Guatemalan children about the basis of the Guatemalan Civil War as well as ways in which they, as future leaders of Guatemala, can instill effective change to counter the current challenges facing their country. Furthermore, the Davis Projects for Peace funds allowed dozens of families to heal by providing proper burial services for their lost loved ones during the civil war, especially for indigenous families who could not afford the costs of inhumations on their own." (Benjamin Rose)

Honoring the Past for a Peaceful Future – Building and Educating in Post-War Guatemala
Eliza Ramos, United States, Columbia University, International House New York

