

## Centro Cultural RealizArte

Rebecca Haydu

College of the Atlantic

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### Background

Yaxkukul, a rural community with a population of 2,800, is located 30 kilometers outside Yucatan's capital city of Mérida. Yucatan is home to the largest percentage of indigenous language speakers in all of Mexico,<sup>1</sup> although Yaxkukul is one of the municipalities with the lowest percentage of speakers of Yucatan's indigenous language,<sup>2</sup> Yucatec Mayan. To promote native culture, youth of the community are offered a government-sponsored intercultural education program known as *Telebachillerato Comunitario Intercultural*, which currently hosts 50 students. This program offers Mayan language instruction but often lacks support in resources and funding, specifically in arts education.

This lack of support for youth in rural communities like Yaxkukul puts adolescents at risk and severs their connections with their cultural heritage and values. Drug and alcohol abuse are on the rise among youth in Yucatán,<sup>3</sup> and young people are exposed to addiction and violence in the home. A 2011 study showed that over 47% of women in Yucatan have suffered physical, psychological, or economic violence at the hands of their most recent partner, with the vast majority of these cases associated with alcohol abuse.<sup>4</sup> We believe that the reality for these students can be different: one where they can express their thoughts, feelings, and struggles in constructive ways through revaluing their cultural heritage and themselves.

The arts are an important vehicle for this process of revaluation and empowerment. The students at the *Telebachillerato* have already demonstrated a strong passion for theater, music, and Mayan culture. During this past school year, they have performed for their community three times, which has been greatly successful and widely accepted. However, during summer vacation there are few opportunities for youth engagement in Yaxkukul. A summer program would provide the students with an outlet for their enthusiasm, a way to refine their skills, and an opportunity to work together for their community during a time of year when there are otherwise little to no other options. Additionally it would provide momentum and support for continuing arts programs throughout the school year.

### Project description

We propose a five-week summer performance arts program for the youth of Yaxkukul. The program will take place during summer vacation, from July 17-August 25. We will hold daily workshops Monday through Friday from 8 am to noon in the town's municipal building, which the mayor has enthusiastically donated for our use. This building, located in the town center, is an easily accessible location for those living in Yaxkukul and commuting from Merida. We will provide lunch for the students, teachers, and organizers daily. While the workshops will be open to all young people in Yaxkukul, we anticipate that the majority of participants will be students from the

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<sup>1</sup> INEGI. "La población hablante de lengua indígena de Yucatán." 2004

<sup>2</sup> Gobierno del estado de Yucatán. "Programa estatal del desarrollo del pueblo Maya 2001-2007."

<sup>3</sup> Grupo SIPSE. "Incrementa el consumo de alcohol y drogas en jóvenes yucatecos." Jun 2014.

<sup>4</sup> INEGI-INMUJERES. Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares 2011.

*Telebachillerato*. Based on past engagement in after-school activities, we expect this group to consist of about 25 to 30 high-school students.

The summer day camp will feature workshops within three different categories: theater, music, and Mayan culture. The workshops will be taught by experts working in these areas, the majority of whom live and work in Merida. These teachers are experts in their fields with whom we have formed close professional relationships. Multiple teachers within each area will give diverse workshops based on their area of expertise. Each week will focus on a different theme and all students will participate as a group. For example, during music week we will offer workshops in pre-Hispanic instruments, Yucatecan trova music, and lyrics in Mayan language. While the workshops will be largely hands-on, they will also be reinforced with readings and critical discussion to inform the students' work.

After four weeks of learning and honing their skills, the students will prepare for their final performance to the community. Based on the variety of skills they have gained in the program, they will choose what interests them most and design their own final performance. They may choose to work in small groups, individually, or as a whole. Possibilities for the performance include songs in Mayan, short skits, or a *jarana* choreography. The presentation will be held at the municipal building and will be an open event for the entire community including families, local authorities, and all teachers who participated in the program. This event will give the students an opportunity to share what they have learned while also engaging the adults in the community. Ultimately, our aim is for this not to be a one-time event but to stimulate a continuing interest in arts and intercultural education in Yaxkukul. An on-going arts program will provide a much-needed and consistent outlet for both personal and community development.

## **Team**

I am a third-year student at College of the Atlantic studying art, international politics, and sustainability. This project emerged from my participation in a cultural immersion program, which involved living in Yucatán for six months in both rural and urban homestays. During this time, I gained fluency in Spanish and familiarity with Yucatec Mayan. I worked in many communities throughout the state including Yaxkukul and was very impressed by the work of Gener Chan and Guadalupe Verde, two dedicated and hardworking promoters of Mayan culture who will be collaborating with me on this project.

Guadalupe Verde Ramirez is from Mérida and speaks Yucatec Mayan as a second language. She holds a Masters in Education from *Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán* and her passion in life is working with rural youth. She currently teaches reading and writing at the *Telebachillerato* in Yaxkukul and has worked with these students to spark their excitement for arts and culture. This includes facilitating extra-curricular events and performances in theater and music.

Gener Antonio Chan May is a native Yucatec Mayan speaker from Tekax, Yucatán. He holds a Masters degree in teaching from *Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán*. Gener has nearly ten years of experience working as a teacher and promoter of Mayan culture in Yucatan and throughout Mexico. A professor of Mayan language at high school and college levels, Gener is not only a certified interpreter and translator but an accomplished author whose work is published and recognized at state and national levels.