

PARTNER NOTICIAS

Partners for Arlington and Guatemala (PAG) Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington (UUCA)

Issue 7, Summer 2014

What Is PAG?

PAG (Partners for Arlington and Guatemala) is a project of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, VA (UUCA) with the mission to foster human rights and justice in Guatemala and dignity and self-sufficiency for local immigrants here in Arlington. By supporting and participating in PAG, you can engage in social justice work that nurtures spiritual growth and creative expression, supports education and advocacy, and builds strong personal and community relationships. Here are some numbers that help capture the work of PAG in the past year:

- 2 accompaniers to promote human rights in Guatemala, bringing total to 12
- 12 travelers to Guatemala in December; making 36 in all
- 4th UUCA experiential/witness learning delegation to Guatemala
- 20 Mayan secondary students receiving scholarships this year
- 8th Buckingham/UUCA annual potluck fiesta celebration
- 150 job matches through UUCA/Buckingham Jobs Bank
- 40 warm coats collected to meet winter needs at Buckingham
- 30 families received Secret Santa gifts
- More than 200 project volunteers and donors

But, of course, numbers alone can't come close to telling the story of the relationships at the heart of UUCA's connection to individuals and communities in Guatemala and here in Arlington. As the 'P' in PAG's name implies, UUCA collaborates with established Partners to realize the mutually important goals stated in the introductory sentence.

For this, the 7th issue of Partner Noticias, you will hear from 3 individuals who are important to their respective partner organizations and to deepening their relationship with PAG and UUCA:

Juan de Dios Garcia, Director of ADIVIMA – a Mayan grassroots organization that works with survivors of the genocide in Guatemala.

Courtney Martinez, former accompanier, UUCA delegation leader in 2013, and former Communications Director for NISGUA – Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala, the organization that recruits, trains and supports Accompaniers in Guatemala.

Ramiro Cristian Torres, an immigrant from Argentina who has long been an active participant and volunteer at the Buckingham Outreach Center near UUCA and in activities at the church.



Community Members resist Tahoe Resources' Silver Mine in their town of Nueva Santa Rosa Las Flores'

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A Message From Courtney Martinez at NISGUA

Last December, the **Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA)** had the distinct honor of organizing and hosting a 10-day delegation with UUCA/PAG. Since 2007, our relationship with the Partners for Arlington and Guatemala and UUCA has flourished, and UUCA's most recent delegation to Guatemala is a true testament to the congregation's bond with Guatemala and NISGUA's work.

At NISGUA, we've witnessed UUCA/PAG excel as a sponsoring community, consistently going above and beyond to provide the best support to our international human rights accompaniers and to NISGUA itself. PAG began their role as a Sponsoring Community in 2007 by sponsoring one accompanier jointly with the Santa Elena Project of Accompaniment (SEPA), based in Oberlin, OH. UUCA/PAG now independently sponsors two human rights accompaniers *annually*.

I can personally speak to PAG's generosity and commitment as I received direct support from PAG when I served as a NISGUA accompanier in 2011-12. As I accompanied some 12 communities in Rabinal, over the course of six months, I truly felt as though PAG was present alongside me every step of the way. From arriving in Guatemala to returning back home, I knew my sponsors at UUCA were reading and sharing my newsletters, making my message go *that* much farther than it would with my friends and family alone. Other NISGUA accompaniers sponsored by PAG have echoed my experience.



However, what I have since grown to appreciate since joining the NISGUA staff in 2012, is the asset that PAG is to NISGUA's work, thanks to their unrelenting dedication and connection to our core mission and to our partners on the ground. Accompaniment philosophy in a nutshell is that one person on the ground provides a dissuasive presence to any threats presented to human rights defenders; it is effective only if that accompanier has a strong network back home, ready to take action. UUCA, through PAG, has

shown that they are not only willing to act when called upon, but they are proactive in their own advocacy.

PAG leaders recognized that a delegation to Guatemala, organized directly by NISGUA with our closest partners, would greatly benefit the UUCA congregation and deepen its commitment to Guatemala. The 2013 delegation gave twelve members of UUCA, the majority of whom had never been to Guatemala, the chance to see the concrete impacts of PAG's support in Guatemala up close and inspired their continued investment in PAG's work. Rev. Linda, UUCA's Minister of Faith in Action, was a member of that delegation and has taken on a strong role in promoting the congregation's commitment to human rights in Guatemala through its partnership with NISGUA.

What delegates and NISGUA had *not* anticipated was the profound impact the delegation had on those people we visited. Time and again, our partners warmly received the UUCA delegates in meetings, and even in their homes. Faces lit up as the delegates introduced themselves and explained that they've been following the partners' work for years.

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Delegates visit the family of a scholarship student near Rabinal.

PAG AND NISGUA

While Arlington is some 3,000 miles away, it maintains a constant presence in Guatemala - through the work of PAG and the NISGUA human rights accompaniers, but also through the lasting impact that the UUCA delegation made on the people they visited.



Tahoe Resources Escobal Silver Mine in southeastern Guatemala

A Message From Courtney Martinez Continued...

In one particularly moving meeting, the UUCA travelers exchanged stories with the Catholic Diocesan Committee in Defense of Nature (CODIDENA) located in Nueva Santa Rosa, Guatemala. CODIDENA, is a key player in The active resistance against the Escobal Silver Mine in southeastern Guatemala (See photo at above). Since initiating the first community consultations in opposition to the mine in July 2011, CODIDENA has engaged in the grassroots organizing fundamental to sustained movement building, inspiring and educating nearby municipalities to join in on the consultation process.

UUCA bonded with CODIDENA through their shared sense of faith and commitment to justice. Delegates had the unique opportunity to share their own motivations for social justice work and also hear what inspires CODIDENA's ongoing struggle in defense of territory. The meeting further served to assure members of the resistance that their struggle is valid and important, not just in Guatemala but also in our own communities back home.

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Emily (center) and Courtney (right) join NISGUA Director Bridget Brehen (left) and two other U.S. Accompaniers in saying, "We love UUCA!"

In her spring letter, UUCA's current Accompanier, Emily Rhyne says:

Hi Everyone!

Hope you are all doing well. I'm writing from the ACOGUATE house in Guatemala City, where things are busy as usual, but going well. (The house is where the Accompaniers from all of the 10 sponsoring countries stay when they are in the City). The project's seen a lot of new faces in the last couple of months, with 7 new people arriving (from different countries). The entire mobile team has changed since I first got here, but luckily everyone who's arrived is wonderful to live and work with. The house culture is really supportive even when work gets stressful, with lots of communal dinners and quality time spent together.

I came to Guatemala with the (personal) intention to gain new perspectives on political organizing from the human rights defenders that we accompany, a goal which is definitely being realized through the rich variety of cases we cover and inspiring people we meet. Each month spent here, I learn more about the Guatemalan context, myself, and living, working and organizing collectively.

The time so far has been incredibly intense in many aspects. The design of the project is such that one never really "leaves" work—no matter where I go or what I'm doing, even in my free time, I am always conscious of the fact that I represent ACOGUATE. **Witnessing and accompanying human rights defenders who risk their lives for the betterment of their society is, while emotionally intense, extremely rewarding.** Though it's hard to tell at the moment, I feel that the work's intensity has compelled me to grow a lot in the time I've been here. Though I'm missing everyone back home, I'm finding my time here to be incredible and transformative.

Sending Love,
Emily

For details of a few cases she has been accompanying, observations and pieces of news, read her complete letter on the PAG web page at www.uucava.org/page/partners-for-accompaniers-in . She has loved all of the responses she got from the last letter and invites your thoughts and question; you can reach her at emily@niscgua.org.

Human Rights In Guatemala Today

“What is remarkable in light of all of this is the persistence of grassroots rights defenders in speaking out for justice. Even though their resistance is dangerous, they refuse to be silenced.”

2013 saw some landmark breakthroughs in justice and human rights in Guatemala. The historic genocide trial of former military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt ended in a guilty verdict and sentence of 80 years in prison. Guatemalan Attorney General, Dr. Claudia Paz y Paz, was instrumental in bringing Ríos Montt to trial in his home country and has generally been credited with reducing overall judicial impunity in Guatemala by 25% (It has long been at a staggering 98%.)

What was considered a major triumph in seeing justice rendered for massacres that killed some 250,000 people in the 1980's was short-lived. The verdict was overturned by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court on a technicality and the trial ordered back to court, with a retrial date tentatively set for January 2015. In the meantime, in a country where the justice system fails to address impunity in the vast majority of cases, there have been several setbacks:

- Attorney General Paz y Paz, was forced, by a Constitutional Court decision, to leave her position 7 months before her term was set to expire.
- President Otto Pérez Molina, himself implicated in war crimes, appointed Thelma Aldana as the next Attorney General. Aldana describes herself as ‘right wing’, and has ties with both Pérez Molina’s Patriot Party and the FRG, the political party founded by Ríos Montt. Both groups opposed trying military commanders.
- On May 13th, the Guatemalan Congress passed a shocking resolution categorically denying that genocide occurred in Guatemala. The resolution states that the “so-called ‘trial of the century’” threatens “National Reconciliation”.

So the current state of human rights progress is always murky. It is often a case of two steps forward, one step back; or sometimes, one step forward and two, back. What is remarkable in light of all this is the persistence of grassroots rights defenders in speaking out for justice. Even though their resistance is dangerous, they refuse to be silenced, and there are those, such as our Partners NISGUA and ADIVIMA who are present with them.

For current analysis of issues related to human rights in Guatemala, visit the websites of PAG’s partner grassroots organizations: **NISGUA**, www.nisgua.org and **GHRC**, www.ghrc-usa.org



Ramiro Cristian Torres, Buckingham participant, computer technician and videographer . This is Cristian's conversation with Barbara Johnson, UUCA member and volunteer videography instructor at Buckingham

A Conversation With Cristian Torres of the Buckingham Center

I came to live in Arlington by accident. I had a ticket to J F Kennedy Airport, in NY. I had a connection with someone living in Arlington who was the only one I knew. I stayed 1 day in the airport in NY and the next day I took a bus to Arlington and called this man, Juan Carlos. He came to where I was in the bus station. That's how I started my life here in Arlington. To be honest, I got here by accident. Maybe it was destiny.

When I first arrived in Arlington I was looking for some direction. I heard about the Buckingham Community Center (now Gates of Ballston Community Outreach Center). I heard that the Center helped people, especially from the Hispanic community. The Community Center became like my 2nd family. They provided information about living in the U.S., including immigration issues. Volunteer lawyers came to the Center to answer our questions. They had English classes, computer classes and citizenship classes, and most of them were free. I started to attend English and computer classes, and used the Center's computers to connect to the internet. I got very interested in computers, and started doing computer maintenance and repair.

In 2005 I started to volunteer at the Center, running the computer lab 3 days a week in two-hour blocks. I monitored the lab's 10 computers and assisted people with online job applications, maps, email accounts, transferring pictures to the internet and much more. Now I have other work, but I make a regular commitment to be at the Center on Thursday nights.

I started hearing about UUCA at the Community Center. People from the church come to the Center, and our people go to the church for multiple events each year. The Community Center has a strong relationship with UUCA. I started meeting people from the church, including **Barbara Johnson**, who I consider one of my best friends. We started talking about our interest in film and stories we would like to document in our community. We started going to the marches for immigration reform about 5 years ago. That's when I started a new career as a videographer.

“I am most proud of the work I continue to do documenting the movement for immigration reform, and people’s individual stories about their experiences as immigrants in this country. “



Cristian puts his skills to work.

Cristian Torres Continued...

Since then I have shot video at many festivals, talent shows, and special events at UUCA and at the Community Center. I am most proud of the work I continue to do documenting the movement for immigration reform, and people’s individual stories about their experiences as immigrants in this country.

I’ve always liked technology, and now I’ve had a lot of practice shooting video. We created the Buckingham Media Group, and our YouTube channel now has 70 or 80 videos. We have experimented with live streaming. We have worked together to teach “introduction to video editing and production” classes at UUCA and the Community Center. I had the idea that the Buckingham Media Group could get paid work shooting and editing events like celebrations of a girl’s 15th birthday, or quinceañera. We have created flyers and business cards and we get hired!

I have learned a lot from events I’ve attended at UUCA; they’ve helped me get more involved in the culture here. What I like the most is the solidarity and inclusion by members of UUCA of immigrant people, no matter where they come from. Most of the people involved in the Community Center are Hispanic, and in the church most people are “Yankees”. It is a good thing to combine different groups, to make a connection between the cultures and races. That’s something I like about Arlington.

Connie Freeman on the Buckingham Partnership

“Our participants enjoy being at the church for movie discussions, and they look forward to performing in two yearly talent shows...(Your volunteers) are giving people the tools they need; UUCA has helped our community immensely.”



Buckingham Community Mother's Day Celebration at UUCA

Our Partners at the Buckingham Outreach Center

The Buckingham Outreach Center is part of a network of centers established by Arlington County. It provides a variety of services to families and is staffed by two Outreach Specialists: **Connie Freeman** and **Yolanda Sharifi**. UUCA began its most recent partnership with the Buckingham Community in 2007 when several recent immigrants participated in an adult education series entitled “Who are our Central American Neighbors”. They shared their personal stories in small groups, planting the seeds of relationships that have grown and deepened over the years. Currently the residents and staff collaborate with UUCA’s Buckingham Outreach Committee and a group of volunteers who have dubbed themselves the Friends of Buckingham. The Outreach Committee is co-chaired by **Nancy Hall** and **Sue Randall**.

In a previous issue of *Partner Noticias*, Connie had these words about the partnership: “Your church...really goes above and beyond expectations. You partner with us by staffing our computer lab, and providing a jobs bank where your members hire students in our program...Another connection is the scholarships UUCA provides for some of our youth to attend Peace Camp. The church has sent mentors to help our afterschool program and provides a place at the VOICE table, fostering leadership opportunities for our volunteers. Our participants enjoy being at the church for movie discussions, and they look forward to performing in two yearly talent shows...(Your volunteers) are giving people the tools they need; UUCA has helped our community immensely.”



Juan de Dios Garcia , Director of ADIVIMA and the Mayan Scholarship Program

GREETINGS FROM JUAN DE DIOS GARCIA,

ADIVIMA is a grassroots Maya Achi organization dedicated to helping the victims of the massacres that occurred during the 1980's in the Guatemalan Department of Baja Verapaz. Juan de Dios has graciously received delegation travelers on their visits to Rabinal, Guatemala, and has visited UUCA on several occasions as well. In 2007, ADIVIMA started a scholarship program for Mayan secondary students.

“During the internal armed conflict (in Guatemala), thousands of orphaned children remained without the protection of parents. No one taught them job skills, much less gave them the opportunity to study. Today these orphans are parents themselves, often with very few economic resources. Even though they see the importance of an education, they cannot afford the costs necessary to ensure that their children continue with their studies. We also have determined that there are other parents that do not understand the importance of an education (for their children) since they never had an education themselves.

“These circumstances inspired ADIVIMA to search for financial resources so that our youth can have the opportunity to continue their studies and become professionals. Once they have a profession, they can help their families better their economic and social lives. Even beyond their immediate family, they can contribute enormously to the well-being of the community in solving problems and demanding that government authorities address their primary concerns. For ADIVIMA, it is with tremendous satisfaction that we have seen 11 students graduate with professional training in 2012-2013. We hope to have 5 more graduates in 2014. We are profoundly grateful to UUCA for collaborating with ADIVIMA and contributing financial resources to ensure that students in the Scholarship Program can achieve their dream of becoming professionals who contribute to society.”

Background Note: This past December, the 12 UUCA travelers spent a very inspirational and moving few days in Rabinal with Juan de Dios and the families of scholarship recipients. One day, the group visited the homes of 5 of the students and learned firsthand of the challenges they face in continuing their studies. Many live far from their secondary schools in Rabinal, and the time devoted to school is time that they cannot help their families with work at home. Attending school is a sacrifice and commitment that the entire family makes when they accept a scholarship.

In 2009, UUCA joined with Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, CO in supporting ADIVIMA's scholarship program for secondary students who could not otherwise afford to continue once their free elementary education ends after 6th grade. At an average annual scholarship cost of \$750/student, UUCA sponsored 13 students in 2013, and has provided funds for 20 in 2014. Of the 40 students receiving scholarships from the two churches in 2013, 60% are girls.



“During the internal armed conflict (in Guatemala), thousands of orphaned children remained without the protection of parents. No one taught them job skills, much less gave them the opportunity to study. Today these orphans are parents themselves, often with very few economic resources.

“

Our Accompaniers: What Are They Up to Now?

Since 2007, UUCA, through Partners for Arlington and Guatemala (PAG), has sponsored a total of 12 human rights monitors (known as Accompaniers) in Guatemala. Here's an update from several of them. The 12 are a remarkable group of young people who are dedicated to promoting human rights and justice in through many avenues. Bravo to all of them!



Jeff Matus (2008-09) just finished his second year of law school at American University and hopes to be a public defender when he graduates next year.

Carrie Comer was an accompanier in the Ixan region for 6 months before UUCA sponsored her as a member of the Guatemala City-based team in 2009. Earlier this year, she moved to The Hague, Netherlands, and began working at the International Criminal Court as a part of their Outreach Unit. She says, "I am still getting used to more of a 'desk job', but it is fascinating to be a part of such a novel international justice mechanism. I am also about to complete a Masters in International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford, and just submitted my Master's thesis on the need for accountability in the case of Jose Mauricio Rodriguez Sanchez, the head of military intelligence under Rios Montt, who was acquitted last year in the genocide trial before the verdict was overturned.



Tracey Begley (2009) is back in DC, working for the International Committee of the Red Cross on issues related to international humanitarian law. She graduated from law school in 2012, went to Geneva for a year to work for the ICRC at its headquarters there. Since coming back to D.C. 6 months ago, she is spending a lot of time biking and gardening and is going to train for a fall marathon. (Can you guess which one is Tracey?)

Accompaniers Continued...



Laura Von Dohlen (NISGUA Accompanier in 2011-12) just celebrated 2 years of living in the lovely Sonoran desert in Tucson, Arizona. Laura works as an early childhood development educator and is involved in a variety of political and community projects surrounding border and deportation issues and supporting political prisoners. When not working, napping or organizing, Laura can be found biking around in the evenings searching for the best burritos, hanging out with her desert tortoise, re-learning the clarinet or preparing for the 2014 NISGUA Gathering in Virginia in August.

In April, **Erik Woodward** (2014 with UUCA) completed nearly 2 years as an Accompanier. From May-August, he'll continue with NISGUA as Communications Director. He's excited to have the opportunity to continue working on human rights in Guatemala, and to approach the work from a different perspective. In his new role, he writes material for NISGUA's blog and facilitates their contact with outside organizations. In the fall, he hopes to become a human rights accompanier with Peace Brigades International in Colombia.



Emily Rhyne (2013-14) completes 9 months as an Accompanier at the end of August. She is excited about the possibilities of what comes next but finds it difficult to say goodbye to all the incredible people she's met through accompaniment. Her future plan is to focus on studying graphic design and communications while looking for a job promoting human rights here in Guatemala, the U.S. and other countries. She is already putting together a presentation for UUCA in the fall about NISGUA and the people they accompany.

Thank you to all for your ongoing support
and participation in PAG!

Be Part of PAG

You can

Contribute to support Accompaniers (all donations are tax-deductible; contact fredcorgi1@verizon.net)

Follow the Accompaniers' activities on the PAG page at www.uucava.org/page/partners-for-accompaniers-in

Volunteer at the Buckingham Center (contact nancyrh-all@hotmail.com)

Sponsor a Mayan student scholarship (contact erin.lynn.fitzgerald@comcast.net)

Join a PAG interest group on environmental justice, advocacy, communications, scholarships, delegation planning (contact chrishpete44@verizon.net)

Help at one of many special events at UUCA or Buckingham (contact chrishpete44@verizon.net)

Be a member of the project listserve to receive updates and urgent action advocacy requests (contact jds42cps44@verizon.net)

Be part of the next UUCA delegation to Guatemala in 2015 (contact rev.linda.peebles@uucava.org)

Contact Us

Please contact any of the PAG volunteers listed or visit www.uucava.org

PAG (Partners for Arlington and Guatemala) a Project of UUCA

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