

UUCA's Scholarships to Guatemala

On December 29, as a part of our church service looking forward to the New Year, Erin FitzGerald gave a powerful reflection about UUCA's initiative to give scholarships to Mayan Guatemalan youth. For those of you who couldn't be there, below are her words. They inspire me!

■ Linda OP

Hope for the New Year

Good morning. My name is Erin FitzGerald. I was part of the delegation that traveled to Guatemala earlier this month.

Rev. Linda asked me to speak this morning about the hopes of the students we met, and how their hopes have influenced my hope for the New Year.

Before I left, I was aware that there is a scholarship component to our Guatemala program, and I happily contributed a few dollars, or maybe a few more depending on my mood when Share-the-Plate went to PAG – our Guatemala program.

However, it never really connected with me on the gut level that children need our scholarships to go to sixth grade. When we say scholarships, we're not talking about giving someone the opportunity to get ahead with a university education -- we're talking about giving a child the opportunity to get a basic education through middle school and high school. Something I not only took for granted, but took as my right.

I never really imagined the pain of parents who are unable to even write their own name, who can't find work, and know education is the only hope for a better future for their children. The cost of middle and high school is beyond their ability to pay, so they have to pin their hopes on the kindness of strangers they have never met or even hope to meet. I never imagined how they feel knowing that they cannot help their children go to school and cannot even help them with elementary level homework. The depth of the pain the parents feel never even occurred to me until I went there.

When I saw peoples' faces, and heard their stories and their deep appreciation for our help, it sank in what an incredible difference the scholarship program makes in their life, and I felt humbled by what a small thing it is for me to throw \$20 into the plate, how casually and without thought I do it, yet something so simple something I take for granted, can change their lives.

I want to particularly tell you about a girl we met named Mirabel. She stood out as a leader among the kids we met. On the first day we were in Rabinal, we went to an assembly of all the students and families. On the second day, we went to the homes of 5 students, including hers.

At the assembly Mirabel stood up and grabbed the microphone and told us how excited and amazed she was that we had really come all the way to Rabinal to see them in person. She spoke of her studies -- she is 17 years old and about to start her last year of high school with a focus on business. She spoke for the community and presented Rev. Linda with a gift for the church, and she was the first to try to talk with us after the assembly. Through it all she just shined with energy and enthusiasm and hope and potential. If you met her, you would love her, too.

The next day, we went to her house and she proudly greeted us. As we assembled in front of her house to talk to her, she was overcome with emotion. She couldn't believe we were really there. The fact that we had taken the time and made the effort to travel all the way there to see her in person and visit her house meant so much to her. And I think in that moment, I felt something inside me change.

Mirabel told us she hopes to one day find a way to go to University, but to remain in her community and use her education to help other members of her community. She said, "I want to help other people the way all of you help other people."

Despite the fact that she is obviously bright and energetic and determined, and despite the help she has already received from us -- the challenges are stacked against her.

The reality is that despite the fact that getting a high school education is a major achievement, there are not many jobs in the local economy for Mirabel with only a high school certificate. Getting into a University will be difficult due to the prevalence of racism. Only a few Universities accept indigenous students at all.

We heard stories of the racism indigenous students face once they are accepted to University -- students have been told that they cannot sit for exams if they have even a scrap of traditional fabric on them because they are not "appropriately dressed." Mirabel will continue to face racism all her life and getting a good job in her local community that puts her in a position to help other people will be a challenge even with a University degree.

However, despite all the challenges, I believe in her. After meeting her, I had one thought -- that this child must have the opportunity to go to University, and I am personally committed to trying to figure out a way for it to happen.

The scholarship program is no longer impersonal for me -- it is very, very personal. My hope for the New Year is that I can get involved with our scholarship program and help provide opportunities for more children -- because there are many more Mirabels out there who need access to opportunity. I also hope to find a way to connect with Mirabel this year and to find a way to get her to college.

I realize that contributing money in the past has made me feel like I did something good for a moment, but it doesn't really feed my spirit. I see now that getting personally involved with the program and really connecting with the students and applying my skills has the potential to be far more spiritually and emotionally satisfying than I imagined.

■ Erin FitzGerald