

**My trip to Guatemala**  
**Respectfully Submitted by Sharon Hobenshield**  
**Director of Aboriginal Education at Vancouver Island University**  
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To Darrel Mansbridge:

First of all, let me start off by extending my sincere appreciation to you and International Education for the support in the way of a supporting my time away and travel to Guatemala in June. The duration of my trip was brief but fully occupied with rich experiences connecting and learning from local Indigenous people.

I became a board member of Alianza, a non-profit, rural community health project in Comitancillo Guatemala, in November of 2008 and had no idea at this time that I would actually be travelling to Comitancillo a mere 6 months later to meet with the staff, participants of the program and the families in the community to develop a 5 year strategic plan. As a First Nations person and professional, I am embarrassed to admit that I have done very little travel outside of B.C. to visit other Indigenous communities. My experience was eye-opening, humbling, and rewarding.

**Facts about Comitancillo**

Comitancillo is the poorest province in Guatemala with multiple health problems and an extreme scarcity of medical services and information. There are high rates of malnutrition, infant mortality, alcoholism, and soaring unemployment. Comitancillo is one of 29 municipalities in the province of San Marcos, located in the highlands of northwestern Guatemala

- Situated at 2,280 metres, the municipal center (*Santa Cruz Comitancillo*) is surrounded by 54 villages.
- Comitancillo is 283 kilometers from the capital Guatemala City, and 34 kilometers from the nearest sizable city, San Marcos.
- It is accessible via a combination of paved and gravel roads through steep mountain passes. The municipality of Comitancillo covers an area of 113 square kilometers.

**Alianza programs and people visited:**

As a board we were fortunate to visit 4 of the health prevention and education programs that we support: Pre-Natal Group, Women's Health Program, The Grandmother's Group as well as a visit to Tuixoquel School that Alianza has contributed a small amount of funding and logistical support to the community-run school. For each of these visits, the people

greeted us with a traditional Mayan greeting that involved touching the very tips of our fingers together (similar to a handshake) and then moving the same hand to their forehead with a slight bow. Depending on the time of day they would verbally add, *Buenos dias, Buenos tardes or Buenos noches*. While the Indigenous language is Mam, the majority of the people do speak Spanish. But for some groups, such as the grandmother's group, Alianza staff interpreted from Mam to Spanish and then our Board members who spoke fluent Spanish, translated to English. The process was slow but created an opportunity to observe and witness. Each of the visits with the various groups offered unique experiences with the People of Comitancillo that expanded 3 generations.

At the visit to the Tuixoquel School, we observed pre-school children, learning and singing both in Mam and Spanish, Grade 1 to 3 children learning math and Grades 4 to 6 reading from the local newspaper. In addition we were treated to a performance of traditional singing and dancing and a game of basketball that left me very winded at an elevation of 8,000 feet.

The pre-natal group provided us with the chance to see and hold healthy chubby babies whose mothers had access to pre-natal education as well as food and vitamin supplements.

The Grandmother's group had the most impact on me personally and emotionally as I heard the stories of women who were in their 50's and 60's, but who appeared much older from over-exposure to nature's harsh elements and a life of hard work. They reminded me of my own grandmother who led a very similar life in Northern B.C. Many of them were alone, outliving their husbands and many of their children. When asked what Alianza might do to continue to support them as a group, their simple request was for 4 chickens each. This Grandmother's group was one that I felt compelled to communicate with aside from my awkward attempts at Spanish pleasantries. I told them how my observations of hearing their stories demonstrated to me that women, especially grandmothers, are the heart and strength of any society.

In addition to visiting programs, we were honored to be welcomed into the homes of various families from different villages in the area. At each visit, we were fed and treated like royalty. It is very humbling to be welcomed into a family home that obviously has very little in the way of material wealth and to have a meal prepared and served to you as family members watch with hopeful expressions on their faces – pleased to give and share what they do have.

## **Personal Observations**

As I continue to reflect and process on my short time in Guatemala, I maintain an image of courage, dignity and independence that appears to be a constant among the people of Comitancillo. Despite the fact that the people live in extreme poverty, there is no relief in the form of social welfare, access to basic health care is virtually nonexistent, and education is free only to grade 6, there is a persistent honest daily effort that is very admirable and hopeful in the face of such uncertainty. Here in Canada we have so much and even the most vulnerable have free access and opportunities for health care, education, food share programs, etc. But what we also have from my perspective is the overwhelming obstacle of forced dependency. The reality of the situation has me pondering the questions; at what cost does one provide assistance to a group of people in need? Furthermore, how do we ensure our western worldview does not dominate a worldview that is so very distinct and unique yet optimistic for change?

## **Connections and Possibilities for Vancouver Island University**

Although I was unable to attend, Alianza board members did have the opportunity to visit the Collegio in Comitancillo as well as a Distance Education nursing program in Coban. While these were preliminary information sharing visits, Alianza board members were encouraged by the interest both groups demonstrated in looking at possibilities for future partnership programs between Alianza and VIU. Alianza will explore these possibilities within the development of our 5 year strategic plan.

Overall, the benefit to me as an Administrator at VIU was significant, as I had the opportunity to see education and resiliency within a different yet similar Indigenous context and environment. I feel that I can share the strengths of the people with students, faculty and First Nations communities here in B.C. to assist us with our work in creating opportunities for Indigenous students/communities incorporating a global context for supporting capacity building and Indigenous peoples right to self-determination.

Sincerely,

Sharon Hobenshield

cc

Audrey Hansen, Study Abroad Manager  
Graham Pike, Dean of International Education