

Dear Friends,

Since the beginning of July, I've been photographing at a community center called SYJAC in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas. Recently Sabás, the director of the center, decided to send me to Yajalon, a hot, sleepy, small town a few hours away, to spend some time working with a campesino organization called Yashalum de Santiago Apóstol. Yashalum was founded by an American priest, Father Loren Riebe Estrella, but since the beginning it's been run by local farmers. The organization gives grants and dormitory rooms to Mayan students from the tzeltal and ch'ol communities around Yajalon so that they can study when their families can't afford the costs. One of my colleagues from SYJAC and I spent two weeks there, getting to know the dear people that run it, recording interviews and visiting families to put together a documentary about the organization.

The lowdown on Yajalon is this: The municipal capital has potable water, electricity, schools, and a hospital. But in the small and sometimes isolated indigenous communities around it, if there's a medical clinic at all, it either has no doctors or no medicine. The lack of medical infrastructure causes a lot of tragedies in these villages. As for education, there's usually only a primary school, less often a middle school. Students have to go to the municipal capital if they want to go to high school, but it's a long walk away, anywhere from 40 minutes to five hours. If they live far, the only way is for their parents to rent them a room in the capital. Since Dad usually works in the field farming beans and corn for a wage that's an injustice in itself, that's not an option for most of these families, and indigenous students are de facto shut out of the educational system. And so Yashalum was born, the baby of this problem and the philosophy of the late Don Samuel Ruiz, the much loved Bishop of San Cristobal who spent his life defending the rights of the indigenous of Chiapas, Guatemala and beyond. It was Don Samuel who taught Father Loren about the ecclesiastical life in Chiapas and sent him to work in Yajalon.

Yashalum started out small. People from the communities wanted to study, and Father Loren let them stay at the parish, first five, then ten. The demand kept growing, and it evolved into a grassroots organization directed by the locals it affects. Today the organization has two shelter houses for students from the communities, where they stay and get meals for free while studying. It also gives grants of 1000 pesos a month to support university students (about \$100), and 300 pesos a month to middle and high school students (about \$30). The funding comes from families in the United States who sponsor the students through the non-profit organization Mission Teaching Foundation. However, the need for more support continues to grow, especially in recent years since the number of sponsors has dropped due to the US economic collapse. Out of the 110 new students that applied for a university scholarship this year, Yashalum can take on only 25.

Almost all of the students we met said if it weren't for their scholarship from Yashalum, they would be working menial jobs instead of studying and developing their potentials. They are also usually the first generation in their family to study past middle school. In the past, racism and the economic order of Yajalon made it unheard of for there to be such a thing as an indigenous professional. Slowly but surely, the society has become less exploitative and divided in recent decades, but the federal government still fails to build infrastructure in the indigenous towns. Yashalum is having a serious impact on the right to education of these communities. The most beautiful thing is that education is a right that can lead to the fulfillment of other rights; graduates from the program are doctors, human rights defenders, agronomists, engineers, and they change their communities for the better.

Emily K. Pederson



(Emily grew up in Rhode Island and studies Photography and Human Rights at NYU. She is currently working on a photography project with the indigenous communities of Chiapas, Mexico before going back to New York to finish school.)