



Mission Teaching Foundation

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Dear Friends,

Thank you for your wonderful response to the Christmas newsletter. The Yashalum Chiapas education program celebrated 20 years of service to the community last December. The result has been renewed enthusiasm to work ever harder for a better future for the Mayan people.

It is almost time for graduations. It is that special time when your sacrifices, support and prayers are multiplied by the Mayan youth as they take one more step forward in the journey of education to be better prepared to serve their communities and make a positive difference in the world. It is a happy time - the time of harvest. This July, sixteen students will graduate from high school; 12 from university: three men (agriculture, sustainable development and veterinary medicine) and nine women (4 nurses, 3 teachers, one in psychology and one in business administration.)

Yashalum was accepting applications for university students through May 16. In a very short time, 100 *new* applications were submitted, once again highlighting the enthusiasm of the students (many women) who want to study and the need for more sponsors. Counting again on your generosity, MTF hopes to be able to offer 150 high school and 125 university scholarships for the upcoming school year.

Progress is being made on the new program to expand the boys' ranch as a center for learning for the adult Mayan campesinos from the mountain villages. The plan is to partner with the two state universities that are building campuses in Yajalon and take advantage of their teachers to offer workshops to the indigenous in organic agriculture; technical trades such as electrical installation, carpentry and baking; music, art, etc. A group of the university students is in the process of doing a questionnaire in several key villages, to discover the needs and wants of the people.

Thank you for your continued support of the Mission Teaching Foundation in its partnership with the education program in Chiapas. We hope that the dedication of our Mayan students is as much of an inspiration to you as it is to us.



A Visitor's Reflection

My parents became a part of the Yashalum (the civil association in Mexico partnered with Mission Teaching Foundation) family almost a decade ago after hearing an emotional account at Mass one Sunday morning by Fr. Loren Riebe. I was fascinated by his lecture on the culture but disturbed by the human rights abuses that the indigenous face in Chiapas, México.

In January and February of 2011, I had the honor of becoming familiar with the indigenous Mayans that make up the organization first hand. I was able to sit in on council meetings and view the democratic process with which decisions were made for the greater good of the organization. The advancement of the community was always a priority with the board members.

I was surprised to learn that the students work for their scholarships by performing daily chores around both dormitories and (continued on back)

- The Volunteers of MTF

had to fulfill a quota of service hours each week. It was a time of reflection when the students touched my hands and told me that I did not work as they did. They described that my hands were soft and flaccid and theirs were rough and built up with muscle from the demanding work they do as part of their culture.

Staying in the guest house behind the girls' dormitory, I had the opportunity to eat, talk, and share stories with each one of the young women residents that are given a unique opportunity to continue their studies. I was a witness as night after night they stayed up until the midnight hours doing chemistry, geometry, history, and English homework. I have seen how they have the opportunity to live in a safe environment and focus on their studies through the Yashalum dormitories. I am proud to have spent two months teaching English to the students. Since they were all familiar with English grammar from their studies in the public schools, I had the opportunity to help them improve their pronunciation. During this time, I was able to see their intelligence as they quickly were able to communicate with me in English.

It brought me great joy and laughter to have the students show me pictures of their sponsors, asking me if I knew them. I enjoyed pulling out the atlas and pointing to the state in which their sponsors lived. It was a very powerful class when I had the opportunity to translate a letter a student had received from a sponsor. The woman wrote to these young women about the power of education and that each one of them contained the ability to succeed and graduate from the university with a career. The students were filled with excitement to hear the encouraging words that each one of them had the ability to pursue and obtain a degree in higher education.



Along with four committee members, I was able to visit the community of Emiliano Zapata. After sliding along a muddy one lane highway located on the side of a cliff, we arrived in the community. We were served tortillas, free-range chicken, and rice. The parents talked about how grateful they were that their daughters have the opportunity to continue their education through the scholarships they receive. They wish their daughters would not forget the humble ways of village life, but also that they take advantage of their ability to continue their education. The parents themselves were not able to receive an education and they say this is why their lives are very difficult.

Why would parents send their sons and daughters to live two hours away from home in a large, unknown city? Because the community only has a school which goes up to the sixth grade. This was only one of my observations as I had the opportunity to glimpse the struggles that these strong people face. Yashalum helps provide access to the basic human right of education that these communities in the mountains of Chiapas are denied by their own government who, until only recently, has paid very little attention.

I have seen with my own two eyes the many opportunities Yashalum provides these indigenous students. Meeting with the current director who is a graduate of the program, I was told about the fears he had coming to the city from an indigenous community. He said he was able to grow by living at the boys' dormitory and to successfully transition into life in the city, perfecting his Spanish and receiving a diploma from the university.

One of the most important factors that I was able to witness was how college graduates must return to complete a year of service within the organization after they graduate. This enables the programs current students to be surrounded by positive role models that have made it through the university level. Sadly, I also encountered a lot of students who said they would not be attending the university for a lack of money. Even though a college education is free in México the burden of living costs are too much for many families to bear.

Every family, community, and person I spoke with sends their thanks to all the sponsors that help their children study through scholarships and Fr. Loren Riebe for his commitment to the community. I hope I can be a testament of the productivity and positive impact Yashalum has made and will continue to make in the city of Yajalón, Chiapas. I will always feel connected to these strong and proud people with their important view on life.

Sincerely,

David Paul Ramírez Douglass
(David is a 21 year old from Santa Rosa, CA)

Wish List Item: With the two universities opening campuses about a mile up the road from the boys' ranch, several students who are not in the scholarship program have asked Yashalum for a place to live at the ranch. To accommodate them, Yashalum will need to spend about \$6,000 in remodeling an older dorm, installing beds and desks, and making computers available.