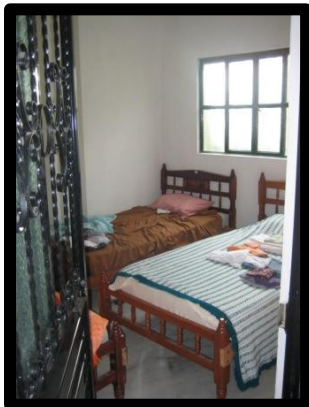


A Letter from our Mission in Chiapas

Last summer my family and I had the unique opportunity to visit Yajalón, Chiapas and observe first-hand how effective and life changing the Mission Teaching Foundation scholarship program is there. We were part of a group of six who ventured down to southern Mexico to, as Fr. Loren simply put it, get to know the local people and let them get to know us. A tropical tempest greeted us on arrival at the airport in Tuxtla Gutierrez, where we were welcomed warmly by the locals. Somehow we managed to cram the six of us, our baggage, Sabás Cruz (our host) and another driver into two small cars and navigate our way through falling and running water up the mountain to San Cristóbal de las Casas, the renowned gem-like colonial capital of Chiapas.



In San Cristóbal, Sabás introduced us to a new perspective on the history Mexico: exploitation and oppression of the indigenous Mayan people by the Spanish, their conquerors and overlords for the last 500 years. Our visit included a high school graduation in nearby San Antonio, an autonomous community still co-governed by Zapatista rebels since the uprising of 1994. After this, a stop at a community center in San Cristóbal run by Sabás and associates threw a light on the struggles of indigenous people who have migrated into the city from the countryside and must support themselves in an often unfriendly and exploitative environment. This is especially difficult for the young women, many of whom are effectively single mothers.



We then made the 5 hour drive from San Cristóbal to Yajalón, where we were comfortably accommodated in the guest house at the Casa Santa Maria, the hostel for indigenous girls attending secondary school in Yajalón. Our quarters were up the hill, behind the main building where the girls eat and sleep. It is simple but adequate, with plenty of beds and warm showers. We ate our meals in the same dining hall as the girls, generally with members of the Yashalúm Civil Association ...*always* accompanied by plenty of hot coffee.

Our hosts set up a full program of visits to becado's (scholarship recipients) homes both in town and in the surrounding communities, designed to both encourage the students and to give us a clear idea of the circumstances of their lives, and the challenges they have to overcome. The indigenous communities are located in the hill-country surrounding the town of Yajalón, often nestled in lush green valleys hosting remnants of the original tropical forest still intact. Most of the woods have been cleared to plant either coffee bushes, the producer of the main cash-crop in the region, or "milpas": small fields of corn grown mostly for subsistence and animal feed.

The villages are collections of one or two room cement block dwellings with galvanized roofs, often with an outbuilding used for the kitchen. Our guides from the Association led us to the homes of the becados, often on foot for the last few hundred meters. Without exception, we were warmly welcomed and often invited to share whatever food or drink they had



on hand. It was particularly touching when we visited the student sponsored by Sia, a member of our group. The mutual joy, the gratitude and the love were palpable in the small hut when sponsor and becada recognized each other. Many of the becados and former becados stories are remarkable and inspirational: graduates of the program have become doctors, agronomists, veterinarians, teachers... and some are returning to the community to share their success and give back as they can to the community that fostered them.



One of the most inspiring events occurred when we went to visit the home of a student my husband and I are sponsoring. Though she was not at home, still being in classes at nursing school in Morelia, Michoacán, we were able to meet the rest of her family (her widowed mother, and her older and younger brothers) and to visit her humble dwelling. They were very hospitable and so grateful for all the support we've provided. The señora was disappointed not to have been able to thank my husband directly (he was resting back at Casa Santa Maria

after suffering a bout of Montezuma's revenge). Later that evening, not withstanding a torrential rainfall, she walked several miles into town to meet and thank my husband and present us with some handmade crafts.

While in Yajalón, we also visited the boy's residence, Rancho Santiago Apostle, which lies on a ridge overlooking town. While beautifully located with spectacular views of the valley below, the place is in definite need of "the women's touch". Mattresses are strewn on the floors with no means to hang clothing nor tables for books and study space. It is at the Ranch that the association is involved in cultivating and testing many helpful and potentially lucrative ideas such as eco stoves and earthworm fertilizer.



At the end of our visit, our guides graciously led us on a few days of tourism after our "working" stay in Yajalón. We visited the cascades at Agua Azul and the spectacular falls of Misolja en route to Palenque. We had a full day touring the justly famous Mayan ruins there, and left amazed at the dizzying heights that had been achieved in architecture, astronomy, mathematics and art by the ancestors of our guides. We parted with the Association members at Palenque and made our way to Villahermosa, from where we flew back to Phoenix via Mexico City.

The trip to Chiapas was a beautiful and enlightening experience that demonstrated to us the value of the Foundation's work. The accomplishments and on-going programs are very impressive. However, we also came away with an appreciation of the reality of life in Indigenous Chiapas and the many challenges yet to be overcome. Our family is proud to be associated with MTF and look forward to working with the organization to see how else we can support their efforts.

God Bless You