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Solidaridad: News from Foundation Todos Juntos and Pop Wuj

Fall/Winter 2014



Three of the Family Support Center participants, Lesly, Arturo, and Evelyn

Photo by Jeffrey Leventhal

Education and Opportunity: The Family Support Center

By Lily Bodinson

As many of you know, [Pop Wuj](#) runs various social, medical, and environmental projects in Xela and throughout the Western Highlands. Although each project varies in nature, the underlying objective is universal: education. Pop Wuj believes that the value of education is paramount in enacting long-term change.

The Family Support Center embodies this mission in all aspects. For the 40 children and youth, ages 1 to 19, the Center may seem like just a day care or after-school program where they can get homework help, read, and socialize with friends. In reality,

the project opens doors to a future of possibilities. Since the school-age children are eligible for a Pop Wuj scholarship, pursuing a higher level of education becomes an attainable goal rather than a faraway dream, especially in a country where the rate of children who complete primary education is the second lowest in Latin America.[1]

Whereas the Pop Wuj Scholarship Program works to make education affordable for children and their families, the Family Support Center reaches further. It provides a support structure where children come together with teachers and staff from the project to finish their homework and get help in areas in which they are struggling. Furthermore, the Pop Wuj staff at the Center and in Xela know the children and youth personally, their school and family problems, and work with them to develop into well-rounded young adults.

While educational support is the most obvious way the Center serves its participants, there is another basic, yet crucial, service that the project provides: nutritious meals.

Guatemala suffers the fourth highest rate of chronic malnutrition in the world (50% of children under 5 years are malnourished) and faces serious challenges to reduce chronic malnutrition.[2] The Family Support Center ensures that no child will be hungry, providing a balanced meal and two substantial snacks throughout the course of the day. This includes a snack right before the children leave for home, which in some cases is their last solid food of the day.

At a recent staff meeting, Carmen asked me if I thought the project was worthwhile. She worries that we aren't able to do enough.

"Of course it is," I replied.

"¿Por qué?"

Why is always the hardest question to answer. As the current Family Support Center Coordinator, I can attest to its profound importance. Pop Wuj strives to combat the negative statistics and devastating realities that exist in Guatemala. The mission to educate goes beyond a formal school education. Even the fun activities reflect a broader and deeper education. Whether we are picking up trash and recyclables while hiking or working in the garden that produces vegetables for the project itself, we aim to instill the values of all of Pop Wuj's projects in these young and bright minds.

Nevertheless, Carmen's concerns are legitimate. How do we turn the possibilities and opportunities afforded to the participants into concrete successes? How should we define success?

Is success having Santos and Gustavo, two former project participants, now working

as teachers at the Family Support Center? Is success seeing the first three long-term participants of the Center grow up in and graduate high school as responsible, participative members of the Center? Is success providing internships at the Pop Wuj clinic to aspiring medical students? Is success seeing Yoli, a recent high school and Family Support Center graduate succeed in her first year at university? I would argue yes. Success is subjective, but for me, opening doors is the short-term and immediate goal we need in enacting long-term change.

Our ultimate goal is not only to ensure the scholarly success of all children in the project, but for them to grow into thoughtful and responsible young adults. We want them to be proud of themselves and proud of their country. We want them to want to stay in Guatemala and make it a better place for their own children. We want them to recognize both the disadvantages and relative advantages in their lives and use that knowledge to improve themselves, their family, their community, and their country. Education is the key to this dream. It is the start, middle, and end.

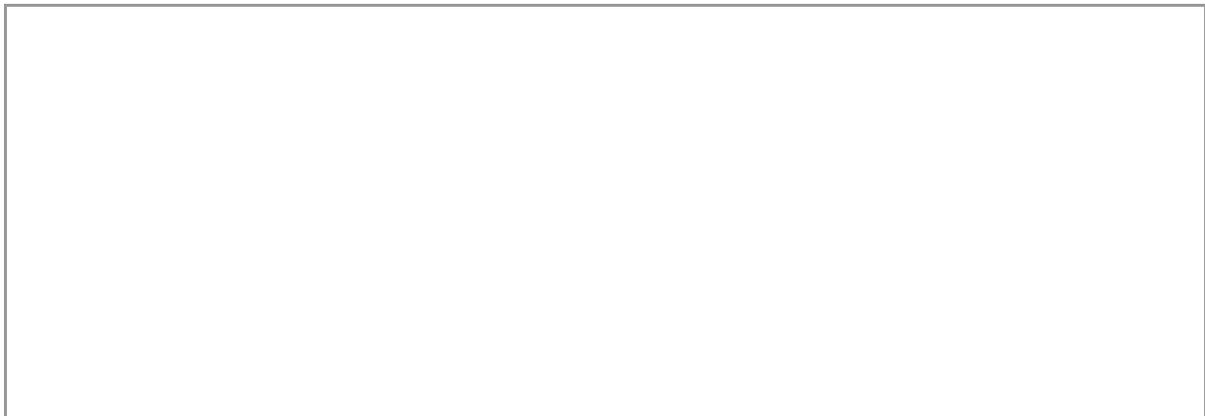
1 Center for Economic and Social Rights,

http://www.avivara.org/images/Visulaizing_Rights_Guatemala_Fact_Sheet_CESR.pdf, accessed on 11/24/14.

2 World Food Program, <https://www.wfp.org/countries/guatemala/overview>, accessed on 11/24/14.

Lily found Pop Wuj and the Family Support Center via Pop Wuj's partnership with [Entremundos](#)' Internship Program. Pop Wuj offers five distinct long-term volunteer positions: Family Support Center Coordinator, Environmental Projects Coordinator, Education and Scholarship Program Coordinator, Assistant Medical Projects Coordinator, and General Projects Coordinator. For more information and to apply, please visit [Entremundos](#).

To support the Family Support Center, please donate via [Foundation Todos Juntos](#).





Doña Sebastiana and her son, Cristofer, a 2015 Pop Wuj Scholarship recipient

Photo by Amy Scheuren

The Pop Wuj Scholarship Program: Education in Action

By Michael Bliss Jefferson

It is hard to imagine the life changing effect that a good education can have on the lives of students in Guatemala. The Pop Wuj Scholarship Program has provided this opportunity for hundreds of young people since it began nearly 23 years ago. As a social work student with [Pop Wuj](#) I've had the incredible privilege of speaking with members of the Scholarship Program and hearing firsthand how much it means to the families who participate. Although the national attendance rate of secondary school is only 40% and completion rates are a tragic 10%, rates in rural, indigenous areas—areas where Pop Wuj works—are much lower.[1]

Pop Wuj's model is simple: economic aid to families for their child's education made possible by the Guatemalan leaders of Pop Wuj and international supporters. The reach of the program spans Xela and rural villages in the Western Highlands and the Pacific Coast.

As a Pop Wuj social work student, I traveled with Pop Wuj's mobile clinic and [Timmy Global Health](#) to Xeabaj II, a Maya K'iche' community in a region known as "Alaska." It is called Alaska because of its very remote and cold location in the Guatemalan Highlands. Most community members only speak K'iche', their indigenous language. The community, which is an hour and a half from Xela, originally seemed like too far of a distance to cross to start a partnership. Then I learned that years ago community members traveled to Pop Wuj on foot because they had heard that Pop Wuj provided scholarships. Ever since, students from Xeabaj II have received scholarships thanks to the determination of their families and Pop Wuj.

When we arrived we were greeted by one of Xeabaj II's first scholarship recipients who is now a teacher and community leader. Personally seeing the long-term impact of scholarships for students was truly awesome. Xeabaj II was completely devastated in 2005 when Guatemala was hit by Hurricane Stan. The storm caused such immense damage that the families of Xeabaj II relocated their entire community to the mountains and started reaching out to world aid agencies for assistance. Former scholarship students wrote for assistance and the community was able to rebuild itself. The incredible resilience of the community is, in part, thanks to the profound impact of education and its positive ripple effect in society.

For me, seeing the long-term effects of the Scholarship Program was breathtaking, but equally moving was having the opportunity to meet families who were applying for scholarships for their children. Working with Carmencita, a Pop Wuj founder and the Director of the Social Work Program, I had the honor of interviewing families for scholarships.

One family has participated in the scholarship program for multiple generations. They made a lasting impression on me with their dedication to education despite enormous challenges. I met with Sebastiana, the mother of three, and her son Christofer, who was applying for a scholarship. They live in a home with 11 people and have very little income, making the opportunity cost of attending school extremely high compared to what could be earned by starting work at a young age. Sebastiana was a Pop Wuj scholarship student when she was younger but stopped studying after 9th grade in order to start a family. She told me she realized later how important education is and regrets her decision to stop studying. Now she teaches her children to appreciate its

importance. She told me with pride that her sister, also a scholarship student, is graduating from high school this year. She is applying so Christofer could have the same opportunity.

When I asked Sebastiana what she would use the scholarship funds for I read over the list of possible necessities: *help with rent, food, water, electricity?* She shook her head and interrupted me - "This is for him [she pointed to her son]. Whatever he needs to have a better life." She went on to say that the scholarship was an investment so her son could have a good education and a good future. Her dedication to her son's success in school was absolute and humbling. And then, as if speaking with someone so remarkable wasn't already enough of an honor, she thanked me for my help and then thanked Pop Wuj for the great difference it has made for her family.

[1] Guatemala Human Rights Commission, http://www.ghrc-usa.org/Publications/factsheet_education.pdf, accessed on 11/30/14.

Michael studied in the [Pop Wuj Social Work Spanish Program](#) this fall. He will begin a Masters of Social Work program in 2015.

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[Foundation Todos Juntos](#), a 501(c)3 non profit, was founded in 2001 by former students of the [Pop Wuj Spanish School](#) to facilitate ongoing collaboration with various projects in and around Quetzaltenango (Xela), Guatemala.

Today the Foundation supports educational, medical, social, and public health projects in the Western Highlands of Guatemala. Please visit the [projects blog](#) for regular updates on the projects.

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