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## Solidaridad: News from Foundation Todos Juntos and Pop Wuj

Summer 2014



Adam and the kiddos following a yoga class with Lauren, another volunteer

### Transforming the Futures of Participants and Volunteers Alike: The Family Support Center

By Adam Kinross

On April 13 of last year I arrived in Guatemala by pure chance. When I arrived I had never heard of Xela, let alone Pop Wuj. But it turned out that I was going to spend the better part of the next year and a half working with the amazing people of this organization, who do so much for others. I am not only speaking of the people directly affected by their projects in the Western Highlands, rather I speak of everyone that comes into contact with them, and above all myself.

I first started at Pop Wuj as the Family Support Center Coordinator in the beginning of May 2013. My very first day was the Mother's Day celebration in Llanos del Pinal. To say I was nervous to meet the kids and their mothers is an understatement. However the moment I walked through the door, I knew right away I had made a very wise

decision.

Over the following three months I got to know and shared so much with the kids and staff at the Center—and very quickly I fell in love with them all.

My role as the coordinator was to help with homework, organize activities, and coordinate special events. Most importantly, I felt my role was to support the staff in supporting the kids. With limited resources, the staff provides exceptional educational support, as well as support of their general growth and welfare. Each year the number of participants grows, yet the budget remains the same.

Despite it occasionally being stressful, a little frustrating, and extremely draining, I loved every minute I spent with the kids; their smiles, their laughs, their games, their jokes. Therefore when it came time for me to leave in August, 2013, it was an extremely difficult thing to do, with many a tear shed.

Thus I could not have been happier when I was able to come back to Xela in late March of this year. Not only was I ecstatic to see the kids again, but returning enabled me to see firsthand the true benefit of the work being done at the Family Support Center.

It gave me so much joy to see Roxana, Brandon, and Cristobal attending 'Basico' (middle school) in Xela; to see Veronica in high school in Xela; and Eric Santos and Yolanda having graduated. This is the ultimate objective of the Center: to give the kids the best opportunity to continue studying and to succeed in school.

The story of Carmencita is one that truly highlights this objective of the Family Support Center. Carmencita is the oldest of her four siblings. More often than not, their upbringing and care is left to her. Despite being 14 years old and only in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, she is one of our brightest and most dedicated students. Given the cultural context and her age, another girl in her situation would likely stop going to school after graduating primary school. However this will not be Carmencita's fate. Instead she has just taken exams to attend a middle school in Xela next year—something that would be unthinkable if not for the support of the Family Support Center and the Pop Wuj Scholarship Program.

In addition to better job opportunities and an increased level of education, continued education:

- Substantially decreases the likelihood of teen pregnancies, a very serious and common problem in Guatemala;
- Helps empower women to avoid and/or leave abusive relationships;

- Decreases the likelihood of gang activity; and
- Enables women to better care for their own children, avoiding problems of malnutrition and neglect due to ignorance.

The short-term benefits of the Family Support Center, including nutritious meals, homework help, development of social and personal skills, a head start for the younger kids, and attention they often do not receive at home (the things I reveled in each day with the kids), are only the tools that enable the long-term success. This is why I am so proud to be part of Pop Wuj and the Family Support Center

Although it is not over, my time at Pop Wuj and the Family Support Center has changed the course of my life immensely. I used to be an accountant and this experience has shaped my decision to return to school for a master's degree in international development. With this, I hope to one day contribute even a fraction of what Pop Wuj does for and with others.

*Adam 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 (internships): 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](#).

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Maria Estela and her daughter, two of the participants in the Pop Wuj Nutrition Program and the Safe Stove Project, with their old stove/open fire cooking space.

## The Importance of Safe Stoves

By Ashley Aue and Amy Scheuren

Many families in rural Guatemala prepare their meals over an open fire inside their homes. Oftentimes families live in a one-room house, meaning that this fire is next to the sleeping area, play, and study space for children and all other general activity in the home.

Common health hazards resulting from the use of open fires are eye problems, respiratory illnesses due to smoke inhalation, and accidental burns. These health problems are seen most commonly in women and children, those who spend the most time in the kitchens. Many women have serious vision problems such as cataracts. Small children are typically carried on their mothers' backs throughout the day and as a result are constantly inhaling smoke and potentially toxic fumes from the fire. Homes generally have minimal ventilation, therefore families who live with their cooking space and sleeping space in the same room are at an even greater risk for respiratory illness.

The safe stoves that Pop Wuj builds are designed to eliminate exposure to smoke and open flames, as the fire is contained and smoke exits via a chimney through the roof of the home.

In addition to reducing health hazards, safe stoves have considerable economic benefits for the families as well. When a family uses an open fire to cook, they either spend a significant amount of time searching for and carrying firewood – thus losing potential work time – or spend up to 50% of their household income on fuel for cooking. Often children miss school in order to search for firewood. The safe stoves are very fuel efficient, using approximately 70% less fuel than an open fire, so families are able to greatly reduce fuel costs.

Finally, safe stoves promote a healthy environment. When cooking over an open fire, families have a couple of options – utilizing significant amounts of firewood, or utilizing long-burning materials like trash and plastic to keep the flames going as they prepare their food. Both of these options are damaging to the environment, as they contribute to chemical air pollution and deforestation. A safe stove greatly reduces the amount of firewood needed and discourages the burning of dangerous, non-wood materials. Pop Wuj has combined its Safe Stove Project with recycling and reforestation projects, reinforcing the focus on protecting the environment and preserving natural resources.

### **Safe Stoves and Malnutrition**

Childhood malnutrition is endemic in Guatemala – especially in the Western Highlands, where Pop Wuj's projects are focused. The rate of malnutrition for children under 5 years of age in Guatemala is one of the highest in the world. The [Pop Wuj - Timmy Global Health](#) Nutrition Program expanded in 2013 and is currently treating approximately 75 babies between 6 and 24 months of age in three rural communities near Xela. A number of the babies in the program struggle with malnutrition due to continual respiratory illness and weakened immune systems. In Llanos del Pinal we have incorporated some of these families into the Safe Stove Project, providing hope for a healthier, stronger future for these babies. Improving the living conditions for small children will have long-lasting effects on their health and development.

### **How to Help**

Pop Wuj has been building safe stoves in the Western Highlands for over 20 years. Many Pop Wuj Spanish students volunteer in the construction of safe stoves. Other students have provided health and environmental education to the stove families. To support the Pop Wuj Safe Stove Project from afar and contribute to the health and development of children, please visit [Foundation Todos Juntos](#) and donate today!

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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 blog for regular updates on the projects.

Tax-deductible donations may be sent

via check to:

Foundation Todos Juntos  
3142 NE 45th Avenue  
Portland, OR 97213

Online donations are accepted via PayPal.

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