



EDUCATING CHILDREN, EMPOWERING FAMILIES

our mission: Common Hope promotes hope and opportunity in Guatemala, partnering with children, families, and communities who want to participate in a process of development to improve their lives through education, health care, and housing.

Winter 2008



COMMON HOPE NEWS

Cultivating Success

Staff address critical transition points for affiliated students

In January the schools in Guatemala re-open for the start of the 2008 school year. Common Hope supporters will enable over 2,700 children to attend school this year, taking care of school fees, supplies, and uniforms. For parents struggling to make ends meet, this support lifts a great financial burden. For 129 children at San Rafael primary school, education costs will be covered for the very first time, allowing their families to use limited resources for other family needs.

While low family income is a huge barrier to education in the developing world, it is by no means the only one. Over the past several years staff have identified several critical transition points where educational and environmental barriers put students at the highest risk of repeating a grade or dropping out of school.

One of these critical junctures comes between 1st and 2nd grade. Many children start school having received little stimulation prior to their first school year. Parents' daily struggle to provide basic needs for their children leaves little time for individualized attention and educational stimulation. Limited access to toys or books only magnifies this issue, leaving many children wholly unprepared for formal learning once school begins.

To address these issues Common Hope has created an early childhood initiative at both the New Hope

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Welcoming our new Antigua Site Director

Sandra Ortiz becomes first Guatemalan in the role

We are delighted to announce the appointment of **Sandra Magnolia Ortiz** to the position of the Antigua Site Director as of January. In her new role she will be responsible for overseeing the Health Care, Education, Housing, and Family Development programs at the Antigua site and will be a member of our leadership team.

With a graduate degree in social psychology and political violence, Sandra arrived at Common Hope in 2002 and became the Director of Psychology two years later. "It is hard to explain all the emotions I feel," says Sandra, "the excitement of being the first Guatemalan woman in charge of the Antigua programs and having the opportunity to work together with the country team, absorb the dreams of the various programs, and unite them in our vision for the future."

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TREASURED MOMENTS

AFFILIATED STUDENTS AND FAMILIES REMIND US

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This morning I spent an hour in my daughter's classroom reading individually with four of her classmates, a chance for them to have one-on-one time with a parent at school to reinforce their reading skills. It is such a treat to sit on the floor and listen to them read, sharing their thoughts about the story or little tidbits about themselves. I treasure these times.

It's during my quiet drive back to the office that my two worlds collide again, and I realize what a luxury it is to participate so freely in my children's education. I think about how different it must be for the parents we serve in Guatemala.

“
What a significant commitment it is to trust that your child's education will help them build a better life, and what a huge sacrifice to do so while worrying about having enough to eat or a safe, dry place to sleep.”

How must it feel to not understand your child's schoolwork, because you never had the opportunity to attend school or could only attend for a short time? What a significant commitment it takes to trust that your child's education will help them build a better life, and what a huge sacrifice to do so while worrying about having enough to eat or a safe, dry place to sleep.

Families we partner with earn on average less than \$5 per day. They often leave for work before dawn, returning home late at night. Most travel by bus or on foot, and to take time out of their work day means lost wages. Volunteering in a classroom isn't a possibility. Yet they are committed to education for their children and have made it a priority, many times at great personal sacrifice.

School just started in Guatemala, and this year more than 2,700 children will attend classes through their family's partnership with Common Hope. A couple of weeks ago our staff and volunteers distributed school supplies to each one of these children. The delight in their eyes was clear as they accepted the tools they would need for school, and was mirrored in the eyes of their parents.

Your gifts make it possible for these parents to imagine a future of possibilities for their children. Thank you for creating treasured moments for them to hold.

Shari Blindt
Executive Director

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Sandra Ortiz,
Antigua Site Director

For **Tamalyn Gutierrez**, Common Hope's Country Director, this is "the most exciting moment of my life working in human development in Guatemala, to watch Sandra and the whole Guatemalan management team take their place in Common Hope's history." She adds that "one of the most important statements of solidarity we can make to Guatemalans is to entrust power and decision-making to them so they

can contribute to the building of their own country and invest in their fellow Guatemalans."

With the leadership of Sandra and the other members of the Guatemala management team, we gain a perspective that will help Common Hope truly respond to needs and strategically adapt programs in a culturally appropriate way.

Sandra's experience has provided her with a keen understanding of the population served by Common Hope. "I believe I have learned many things during my time with the organization," she explains. "I have been privileged to get to know our families and learn about their lives. I've learned about their pasts and presents, the challenges they face, and the skills they possess that help them overcome such difficulties."

Yet she admits it is not without a certain sadness that she leaves her previous position. "I will miss things about being a psychologist: the one-on-one case work, the privilege of being close to families, and the collaboration

with other psychology staff from whom I've learned so much. However I am enthusiastic about the opportunity to see our work from a new angle. It's a chance to integrate my experiences and strengthen my perspective."



We would like to thank **Kaela Vronsky** for her dedicated service and contributions during her year and a half as the Interim Site Director. Kaela will continue to work at the Antigua site, where she will be responsible for the formation of our new university scholarship program. She will also continue to support our mentorship program, which she was instrumental in creating.

Antigua teens volunteer in the community



In the village of San Rafael, the school break in November and December made room for one of our first projects at the site: a school clean-up. Despite efforts by teachers and students during the school year to control the dust, the village's dirt roads caused the classrooms to deteriorate over time. Paint on the walls had faded and chipped, the windows were covered with a layer of dust, and cobwebs had gathered in the rafters.

Members of Common Hope's Youth Program volunteered to take on cleaning and maintenance, spending a week at the site. They were joined by the school's

teachers, and together they got down to work: cleaning and clearing the walls, washing the windows, and brightening up the eight classrooms with fresh paint. The school exterior and kitchen were also painted. In addition, two smokeless stoves were installed to replace the open fire.

Apart from being a chance to complete some much needed maintenance work, **Rocio Gonzalez**, San Rafael Coordinator, explained that this was a welcome opportunity to gradually introduce the community to the idea of volunteer workers. In the future we hope to carry out a variety of projects, but for a village unaccustomed to strangers it is essential to lay the foundations of trust first.

The San Rafael school clean-up project was one of many community service projects completed by the Youth Program this year. Civic responsibility has been a strong theme for the group, and the students have been busy turning words into action.

Participants have helped out in health fairs in San Juan and Santa Ines, painted a world map mural for San Pedro School, and helped with cleaning and maintenance in the villages of San Cristobal el Bajo and San Cristobal el Alto.

In addition the Youth Program's Leadership Group has prepared a number of educational presentations for local primary school children on Saturday mornings, and volunteers from the group have given their time to entertain children at a nearby project. Seeing youth so enthusiastic about giving back to their communities inspires hope in us all.



Bridging the gap

PODER provides tools graduates need to start their career



Every year our PODER employment program* holds a week-long workshop for new graduates, which teaches them how to search for jobs. Students create their résumé and cover letters, learn interview techniques, and receive guidance on the maze of paperwork required by law for jobseekers.

In November 2006, 19-year-old **Maria Del Carmen** attended this workshop. She had just graduated with a high school degree in accounting and describes herself as having felt a little overwhelmed by the prospect of finding a job. "After graduation," she explained, "it can be hard to know just where to start. The workshop was tremendously helpful."

Soon after, Maria found work in the capitol as an assistant accountant. She started a grueling schedule, leaving her village of San Juan Del Obispo at 5am to be at work by 8am and leaving work at 6pm to get home between 8 and 9pm. On top of this, Maria started her first year of university, studying business administration on weekends. "I was happy though," says Maria with a smile, "I was getting a chance to put all my studies into practice and that's what we all want, isn't it?"

However one mid-afternoon in April, her new routine was utterly disrupted. Maria was traveling to work on a city bus when it was held up by armed gunmen. The incident affected her deeply, and she decided to resign from her job in the city so she didn't have to travel the same route

every day. It was during this time that Maria returned to Common Hope to attend therapy sessions with a psychologist. "[My therapist] helped me see my fear was normal," says Maria. "It helped a lot. Because this is part of life in Guatemala. I'm still scared at times. ... but now I'm calmer."

By June, Maria had secured another job, this time in Antigua. Unfortunately after

three months she left, due to a difficult office situation. This led her to consider postponing her second year of university studies for a year. "I didn't want to," Maria said, "but after I left my job I felt quite down. My family doesn't have a big income, and I did not want to burden them with my school fees." (Families pay 35% of university fees, while Common Hope pays the balance).

However Maria's parents saw things differently. "They were determined that I should continue," says Maria. Her parents, who themselves did not have the opportunity to study further than primary school, were eager to see their daughter go further. Since then Maria has become more optimistic. "The opportunities keep coming," she says. "Last week I had an interview, and another is in the works. I can continue to work with the PODER program, too. I'm optimistic that something will come through. My university course starts again in February and I'm thinking about taking an extra English course this year as well."

Maria is a good example of all that can be achieved when enthusiasm and energy is paired with a helping hand from Common Hope. Affiliated in 1997, she describes herself as "tremendously grateful" for all the support she received from the Education, Psychology, and PODER departments, without whom "it might have been impossible to get

this far," she says. As her story proves, providing students with a certificate isn't always enough to help them beat the odds. This is why Common Hope remains a stable support as our students and families find their way.

**PODER, the Spanish acronym for the Program for Employment Opportunities and Achievement, also means empowerment.*



PODER Program Particulars

In Guatemala there are no employment centers, so people depend mainly on word of mouth, and occasionally the newspapers, when looking for work. The PODER employment program plays an important role as an information hub, where over 80 businesses can advertise, and where affiliated families and graduates can receive jobseeker training and employment information.

Last November a week-long course was attended by 32 recent high school graduates. Designed to prepare them for entry into the job market, the course covered the following topics:

- Strengthening self-esteem
- Human and labor relations
- Creating a résumé and seeking employment
- Practicing the job interview
- The employer / employee relationship

Workshops are delivered by social work staff and offered through a collaboration with the Ministry of Labor. A second week-long training will be offered this spring.

We've come a long way

New Hope Village achieves independence



The first phase of the legal process to create an independent New Hope Village has been completed, a huge step forward in the development of the community.

Since its beginnings as a relocation project for families from the ravines of Guatemala City, the site and families have come a long way. Many families no longer require the same level of support, having achieved what before would have been simply an unattainable dream: land- and homeownership.

Now the 42 families in the village have held a series of meetings along with Common Hope representatives to discuss the creation of a housing association. On September 29 a vote was held, and 35 of the 36 families in attendance voted in favor of becoming an independent association.

For the residents this marks the beginning of a new era. They have gained at once more independence and greater responsibility as community members. In December a governing committee of seven members was elected, and now the community has organized themselves in order to govern their own village.

Common Hope has provided technical assistance and training to ease this transition, and staff will continue to support and mentor the association in leadership skill-building. In addition, Common Hope will have input regarding community decisions as a voting member of the community.

These changes mean that Common Hope's energies at the site can be focused on education—at New Hope School where affiliated primary students from local villages attend, and for 150 secondary students who attend nearby schools.

The legal transfer of land title for the community should be finalized this spring, formalizing the independence that the community has worked so hard to achieve. This will mark an end to a decade of relocation, construction, and community development, and the beginning of a new independence.

Rising cost of living in Guatemala

Oil prices have made headlines as much in Guatemala as in the States

In Guatemala, the costs of basic necessities such as bread, tortillas, and propane gas rose significantly throughout 2007. Food products rose most dramatically at 12 percent, while inflation in the rest of the economy hovered around 8.75 percent. Gasoline was also affected.

Very few affiliated families own a car; most depend on bicycles or the subsidized public transport to get to work or school. For our students, who must pay for their trip twice daily, small increments in bus fares—anywhere from 25 percent or more—are a considerable burden.

For the many Guatemalans living on the minimum salary (Q1,500 or \$197 per month) or less, the struggle to make ends meet can become overwhelming. Sacrifices must be made, be they

clothing, school fees, or medicine. When the cost of food goes up, families must seek cheaper (and likely less nutritious) alternatives, or they must simply go without.

While increased expense causes stress and problems everywhere, it is worth remembering that a family's ability to absorb these changes is heavily affected by its socio-economic position. The impact of rising prices is multiplied for the poor, who have little or no disposable income.

What you can do

Become a Sponsor. A gift of \$30 or \$60/month helps a student attend school.

Supporter Profile



Gratitude flows both ways ...

by **Sylvia King**, Common Hope Sponsor

Sylvia King printed her story in the Contra Costa Times. For a full version, visit www.commonhope.org

When my oldest student, Monica, invited me to come to her high school graduation in November last year, everything came together to make it happen. Less than two weeks after receiving the invitation, I was headed to the Land of Eternal Spring. Little did I know I was about to witness a 21st century version of alchemy.

It was one thing to know intellectually that I was doing a good thing by enabling children to get an education. It's clean. It's simple. It feels good. But when I came face to face with the people I was helping, it became the most humbling experience of my life. To have "paper" (dollar bills) transform the life of a child and future generations is alchemy at its finest.

As tears streamed down her face, Monica's mother explained to me how much she had feared for her daughter's future from the time Monica was a baby. Only about a quarter of Guatemala's teenagers graduate from high school. Without that diploma, which provides specialized training during those four years, a person has next to no way out of the cycle of poverty. The gratitude of Monica and her parents was indescribable.

SYLVIA continues on page 7

HOME IMPROVEMENTS:

Two families create change through hard work



Common Hope recently enhanced our Housing Program to more purposefully target families in need, helping them set goals for improving their home. The following are two examples of families well on their way to achieving their goals:

THE TORRES FAMILY

René, Mirna and their children are another example of a family that has been very productive with this program. Originally from El Salvador, the family of six now lives in San Miguel and was affiliated with Common Hope in 2000. While René worked at a local coffee plantation, his wife Mirna worked hours cleaning at the Antigua site. After 240 community service hours, they were able to move from their *lámina* metal construction house to a prefabricated *fibrolit* room which served as the family bedroom. Later, after Mirna worked 310 hours along with her eldest son and husband, a second house was earned, enabling the parents and children to sleep separately.

The family has a way to go, of course; while they currently buy electricity and water from a neighbor, and their plot still lacks drainage. However like the González García family they have made the place a home; the house is surrounded by bright potted flowers, and the family has plans to paint their new rooms. Mirna's three youngest children are studying, and while her eldest dropped out to work, she says he's regretting the decision and currently looking into studying on weekends.

Helping families achieve basic living standards is a primary goal of our construction program, explains **Mario Ramos** at the Antigua site. Adequate living conditions are essential to preventing illness and dysfunctional family dynamics, meaning that our construction program forms a key part of our preventive support for families.

The housing department offers families the chance to work sweat-equity hours for building materials: permanent materials for land-owning families, or mobile, pre-fabricated housing for families who rent their land. "We have been working on defining our minimum standards" explains Mario. "Overcrowding, for example, is a problem for many families, so we are encouraging them to work for a two-room house. We can also help them with drainage, latrines, electricity and water connections, as well as our stove program."

THE GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA FAMILY

Standing in the spotless cement block home of the González García family it is difficult to imagine the original plywood, wire and tin construction they describe as their old dwelling. Since their affiliation in 1999 this family has gradually transformed their home in the village of San Miguel Escobar where they own a small plot of land.

While Carlos Antonio works as a decorative wood carver, Tomasa has worked sweat-equity hours at Common Hope on a number of occasions in order to earn building materials such as building blocks and cement. With these materials the family first constructed two bedrooms for the parents and three children, and later a wall to protect their property. Last year a kitchen and third bedroom were added.

For Tomasa the greatest improvement is the drainage wells dug a year ago. "We live at the bottom of a sloping dirt lane, and every winter the rainwater would come flooding into our property. It was very dirty and we had problems with mosquitoes. The drains have solved this problem; we are grateful to Mario and Common Hope for all their help with this."

"In 2008 we expect to build around thirty-six houses," says Mario, and "Vision Teams will be a part of this effort." Many of these will be two room houses, while others will be families adding onto an existing structure.

"When you are given an opportunity, it's your duty to take advantage of it," says Tomasa. It's a pleasure to see so many families putting such words into action.

What you can do

A gift of \$1,500 can pay for the materials for a two-room house.



and Antigua sites. The New Hope program will serve 90 children ages 4-6, and the Antigua program will serve 60 children of kindergarten age. Providing early stimulation through books, games, and toys, children will come to first grade more prepared for school—making them more likely to succeed and pass onto second.

Another critical juncture comes in 7th grade. Coursework becomes more difficult, and many students weren't adequately prepared by their overcrowded primary schools. What's more, they cannot expect much support from their parents, who are unlikely to have studied at this level themselves.

This year a joint effort of the primary and secondary education departments will aid this transition. Parents and students will attend orientation sessions at both Antigua and New Hope to prepare them for what to expect and how to adjust.

In addition, Common Hope will identify preferred partner schools to concentrate the number of affiliated students at a school. This will allow staff to create stronger and more in-depth relationships with preferred partners. Staff will be able to better monitor our students and provide greater technical support to these schools.

Another new initiative will provide individualized support for junior high students. Education staff at the Antigua site created a mentorship program in 2007, a largely unheard of concept in Guatemala. The program pairs junior high students especially at-risk with university students who can provide support and tutoring.

A third critical transition, for girls in particular, is from 9th to 10th grade, the jump from middle to high school. Many of the junior high transition challenges are only magnified at the high school level. The end result is that students drop out at an increasing rate, at a stage when manual work is still the only option to meet immediate, pressing needs. The extra-curricular youth program activities at both the Antigua and New Hope site provide educational support and address the social and emotional needs of teenage students.

Of course, preparing students for academic success is not limited to the critical transition points; it is a continuous process throughout each and every school year. At Antigua and New Hope, all primary and secondary students have access to tutoring. Furthermore, increased inter-departmental communications between Social Work, Psychology, Education, and the Clinic are helping to identify and support students who are struggling at any stage.



Students gather around a new world map at New Hope School

Now, an education taskforce has been launched to analyze how we can enhance these programs to most effectively empower students toward academic success. The taskforce will also address the new national curriculum created by the Ministry of Education

and will provide recommendations on how Common Hope can best integrate those curriculum components into our own creative curriculum techniques.

The good news is that we already have proof our formula is working. Despite the many



San Rafael students with their new school supplies

hurdles students face, in November 2006, 94 percent of our sixth graders and 98 percent of our high school seniors graduated or were promoted to the next grade—compared to 75 percent of students promoted on average nationwide.

Continued from page 5 **Sylvia**

As a thank-you, they asked me to sit in a special section during the graduation ceremony where Monica's mother should have been. I was asked to be the person to slip Monica's shiny new high school ring on her finger.

Their appreciation was proportional to their perspective on Monica's education, which meant they essentially treated me as one who had plucked their child from the sea and saved her life. From my vantage point, some paper mixed with Common Hope's excellent program and personnel plus hard work on the part of Monica and her family had resulted in a life-changing transformation. ...

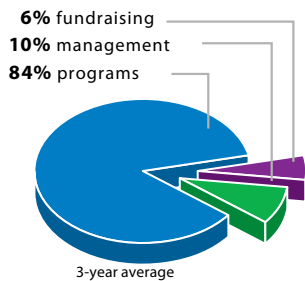
It's almost embarrassing to do so little, be blessed to be part of a miracle, and receive such tremendous thanks.

The life-changing gift I received has been a deeper commitment to the children of Guatemala and their families. It wasn't until I got home that I fully realized that the transformative power of the alchemy works both ways.

Sylvia King lives in Walnut Creek, CA.



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Hear the latest news from the field online



Jeff Barnes, Strategic Planner in Guatemala, has started a blog for Common Hope. Jeff will post weekly reflections, commentaries, and photos directly “from the field.” It’s a new way to stay in touch and hear about the latest news and happenings of Common Hope in Guatemala, through the eyes of a staff member.

Check it out at www.commonhope.org/blog



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