



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 2009



The Hernández Chacón family, page 6.

# COMMON HOPE NEWS

## Getting by with less

Inside the number crunching of two families

This past year was a challenging one for families around the world—poor families in particular. As prices rose, families needed to make cuts, often where there was little room for economizing. This article will take a look at the economic challenges facing two affiliated families.

### The de León Family

The past few months have been turbulent for **Natalia de León**. Late in 2008 she was widowed when her husband Elpidio was killed in a violent assault. Prior to this, the combined income of Natalia and her husband just about made ends meet.

Now, Natalia struggles to provide for her two sons and daughter. Having completed a mere two years of elementary school, her job choices are limited, however she works as a domestic laborer—cleaning houses or washing laundry whenever work becomes available.

For people like Natalia working low paying jobs, there is little economic security. Workers often face spontaneous dismissal, with no recourse for compensation. There is no such thing as life insurance or unemployment benefits. Families must live with uncertainty as to whether their basic needs will be covered from one month to the next. No matter how hard they work, families have little success changing their standard of living on their own.

Natalia and her husband were able to improve their housing situation several years ago, through their partnership with Common Hope. They obtained their land title

**GETTING BY continues on page 4**

## Building success within New Hope School

Over the years we have focused considerable attention on the construction of the New Hope School campus. What's happening now inside the walls is an even greater achievement.

In early 2008, we partnered with the local Del Valle University to conduct standardized testing in mathematics and language among New Hope School's students in grades 1, 3, and 6. Through pre- and post-tests, we were able to measure student progress during the academic year. We could also ensure that students had met national standards, and see how they performed compared to district and national levels.

The results were extremely encouraging, demonstrating not only dramatic improvement among individual students but also that New Hope students outperformed all other schools assessed at district and national levels for reading and math in grades 1, 3, and 6.

**RESULTS continues on page 5**

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# PULLING TOGETHER

Today I am simply grateful for the work we **can** do.

Common Hope ended 2008 in a better place financially than we had expected, given the economy and what we were hearing from other groups doing good work around the world. We didn't reach our revenue goal, but it was close enough to make sure the children attending school through Common Hope can all continue to do so this year.

The hardest part comes in knowing that there are so many more parents that would jump at the chance to make school a reality, to provide health care, to build a home for their family.

When a family becomes affiliated with Common Hope we form a long term partnership – one that may last more than a decade. That partnership is often the only resource a family can count on when times get tough, as is certainly the case for Natalia's and Nereyda's families, who you met in our cover story.

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## "There are no safety nets in Guatemala"

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We don't know how long it will take for the economy to correct itself, so we need to be more careful than ever with how we use your gifts. We have a commitment to fulfill with 2,600 children and their families. ... They need to be our top priority.

So this year we had to make the difficult decision to proactively reduce our expenses. We reduced staff resources in areas that didn't directly impact our programs. We held back on new long-term commitments to 100 children from families who had asked to partner with us. For now, it's what we must do.

In a nearby village, 1,000 kids were attending school with the help of an organization that had to close its doors. Thousands more aren't in school in villages across the country. There are no safety nets in Guatemala, but these families will continue to strive to feed their children and send some of them to school. We will continue to be frugal with our spending, with a goal of including more children and families next school year.

In difficult times, people tend to pull together and think even more about others – your generosity this past holiday season certainly demonstrated that. We are so thankful for your support – you are the reason we are able to follow through on our commitments to the families we serve.

Please give what you can during these challenging times – every gift helps. Be assured that by doing so you are making life better every day for people like Natalia and Nereyda.

Gratefully,

Shari Blindt  
Executive Director

*Common Hope is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation founded in 1986 and is audited annually. Contributions are 100% tax deductible as allowed by law.*

# Three agents of change

In December we proudly announced the winners of the 2008 university scholarship competition. Thirty students were awarded scholarships for their academic excellence and exemplary service to their communities. Along with their application, students were required to present an essay explaining their choice of university degree. Students demonstrated dedication, determination, and big plans for the future. The following are excerpts from three students' essays:



**NAME:** *Irma Anabella Garcia Zuleta, Age 20*  
**EDUCATION:** Graduated from high school in 2007 as a primary school teacher  
**VOLUNTEERING:** Teacher training with Common Hope's partner Let's Be Ready and tutoring for affiliated elementary school children  
**FUTURE PLANS:** Pedagogy and school administration

**THOUGHTS ON VOLUNTEERING:** *"I've learned many new things, such as techniques to assist the children with the subjects that they are struggling with, including ways of doing homework in a more dynamic way, so that the children learn through play."*

**ON HER WISH TO CONTINUE HER EDUCATION:** *"I will be able to help my community and also my country to develop in the area of education, and by this means I will become an agent of change."*



**NAME:** *César Estuardo Chávez Mijangos, Age 20*  
**EDUCATION:** Graduated from high school in 2007 as a primary school teacher  
**VOLUNTEERING:** Hospital Las Obras Sociales del Hermano Pedro (a charitable hospital)  
**FUTURE PLANS:** IT and business administration, with a focus on tourism

**THOUGHTS ON VOLUNTEERING:** *"Humanity needs generous hearts that donate a part of their time and happiness. This activity helped me realize that human beings only realize themselves fully if they love and give to others."*

**ON HIS REASONS FOR WANTING TO CONTINUE HIS EDUCATION:** *"My dream is to form and direct my own company. ... This would be a way of contributing to our nation ... by providing work opportunities for people."*



**NAME:** *Nancy Paola Juarez Batz, Age 18*  
**EDUCATION:** Graduated as a bilingual secretary in 2008  
**VOLUNTEERING:** Hogar de Ancianos Fray Rodrigo (Friar Rodrigo's Nursing Home)  
**FUTURE PLANS:** Social work

**THOUGHTS ON VOLUNTEERING:** *"I had the opportunity to connect with elderly people and it was an enriching experience. ... It has helped me affirm what I have imagined for my future. My greatest desire is to be able to help other families as mine was helped."*

**NANCY'S REASONS FOR WISHING TO STUDY SOCIAL WORK:** *"I want to work with people and help them move ahead and change the mentality of accepting fate. For me, fate doesn't exist. ... I want people to stop thinking 'If I was born poor I will die poor,' because we all have a purpose in this world."*

To see more graduates talking about their future, check out a video clip on our homepage at [www.commonhope.org](http://www.commonhope.org).



Natalia with daughter Thelma and youngest son Victor.

and worked sweat-equity hours to earn a one-room house, which they now share with Natalia's mother. These achievements have become more important than ever. Without Elpidio, paying rent would be impossible.

In the meantime, Natalia struggles to keep all other costs to a minimum. The family's diet is simple, reduced to the cheapest products, such as tortillas, beans, rice, and noodles. Natalia laments that she can no longer afford clothing for her children.

Despite these tremendous obstacles, Natalia insists that her children continue to study, working only during their school breaks. Both of her sons are affiliated, and the oldest is studying in junior high. There is a great temptation for eldest children to drop out of school to help ease the immediate economic pressures facing the family. Yet the de León family knows the children will be able to double their earning potential with their high school degree, an achievement they are willing to sacrifice for in the short term.

## The Hernández Chacón Family

**Nereyda Hernández Chacón** lives in the village of Santa Inés with her husband José, parents, two daughters, and son. José, who was able to study a few years in high

school, works as a driver for a construction company. Nereyda only studied to 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but with her hardworking nature and talent for cooking, she earns a living by preparing food that she sells in her neighborhood.

The combined incomes of Nereyda and José make them slightly better off than some affiliated families. Unfortunately, however, Nereyda's husband struggles with alcoholism, and at times Nereyda feels very alone in the world. When she talks about it, her characteristic smile vanishes temporarily, and her eyes fill with tears.

With José's monthly salary, the family can cover many of their basic expenses, such as food, firewood, water connection, and electricity. They live on Nereyda's parents' plot of land and earned a home through Common Hope, meaning they do not have to pay rent.

However, there are many additional costs for the family. Nereyda's eldest daughter attends a private high school, and the family pays 20 percent of the tuition. Her son is in public school, yet they need to pay a fee for English and computer classes. There are also investments in Nereyda's business, including ingredients for the food she sells, propane for the stove, and bus fare to transport the food to her stall.

An average Common Hope family in Antigua earns just over **\$180** a month, and this must be stretched to support as many as **7** people.

# Creating a health

## Two San Rafael families make

Following our plan for San Rafael, we are bringing our housing program to the community. One great need that our social workers have identified is better sanitation. In December, we launched a pilot project which will help us tailor services to the particular needs of this community.

Living conditions in San Rafael are extremely basic. Many families lack essentials such as running water or sanitation services, which can lead to serious health problems. **Josefina Cuc Suruy** knows this only too well, having suffered the loss of two babies to intestinal infections and diarrhea. Josefina lives with her husband, three sons, and two daughters in a small house built of corn stalks.

Before the family became involved with Common Hope, they had no running water or latrine, so were forced to go outdoors or to the fields. Josefina and her children suffered constantly from diarrhea and sickness. Their community doctor urged



Nereyda with daughters Kandy and Heidi.

Nereyda has been able to accumulate savings and put it to good use in the past. She points to a tiny wooden table: "Imagine! This used to be my only work space," then turns to a long, new wooden table, which barely fits into the crowded kitchen. "I saved my earnings to buy this one," she says smiling. "Now I can prepare the food so much more easily, and we can sit down to eat together as a family."

With steeply rising prices, however, Nereyda has found that the family's income

# hiever home

## ake a major housing improvement

them to improve the sanitation conditions of their home by building a latrine, to avoid continued contamination of their living space.

Luis did what he could, digging a hole for a latrine and trenches for water tubes, but he could not afford the materials. Desperately wanting to improve their living conditions but unable to do so on their own, the family talked with their Common Hope social worker to figure out how they could solve the problem.

At the same time, **María Senovia Grande** had also hit a roadblock. A single mother with four sons, María struggled to make ends meet by selling *tusca*, or corn husks, in Guatemala City. She and her sons also needed a latrine for their home. While María had managed to save enough to buy a unit, she simply could not cover the cost of having it transported to the village from the city.

Impressed by the initiative of these families,

our Common Hope social worker explained our sweat-equity system. The families were assigned a number of hours to complete in exchange for the materials they needed. Josefina and María readily agreed to this arrangement; Josefina cleaned classrooms while María helped out in the school kitchen.

In December the families received the promised materials, earning a latrine each, with wooden posts for the walls and a covered steel roof. Josefina and Luis were finally connected to water as well, and both families were given a water filter as a pilot initiative. Our hope is that if the filters prove useful and practical for the initial families, they can later be distributed more widely in the community.



María Senovia with the base of her new latrine.

For these families, gaining these services is a great milestone. Luis says he's saving up to hold a small celebration of their achievements. Hopefully with improved health, the children of these families will not only be happier but also better able to

is buying less and less. "I have had to start substituting ingredients in the food I prepare to sell," she confides. "It's all different now. Before I would look for quality products. ... Now I just look for the cheapest."

Nereyda says they have also cut down on meat—she only cooks it once or twice a week. She used to buy 5 lb. bags of the powdered variety, but now she only sometimes gets a 4 oz. bag for them to share.

Both of Nereyda's school-age children are currently studying through Common Hope. However it is clear that without such support, ensuring their education would be a much greater challenge.

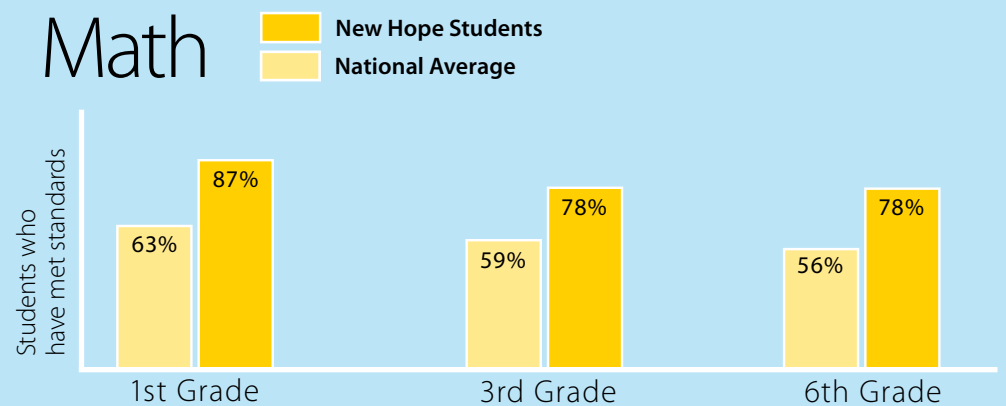
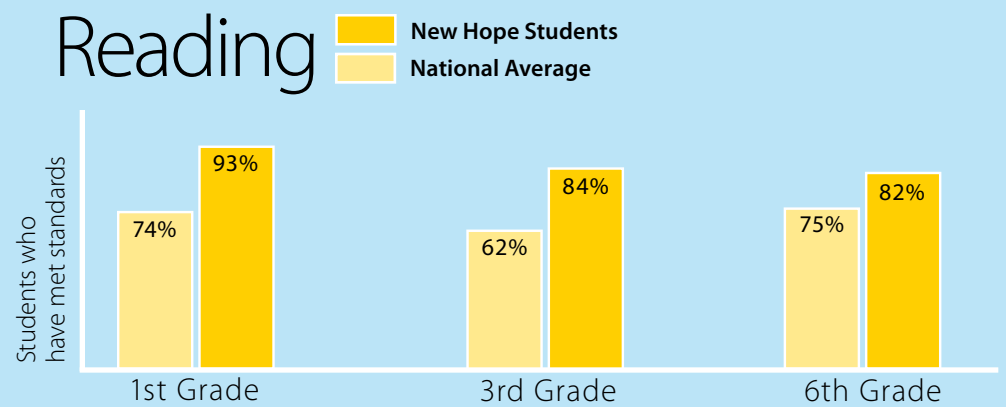
### What you can do

Give a gift to the Emergency Fund to help provide the resources families need to get through a challenging time.

## The results are in

continued from page 1

### New Hope students outperform national averages



# Supporter Profile



## Steve Humbert

Steve Humbert is a quiet guy until you get to know him. Vision Team coordinator Kristin Hunter remembers having a low-key planning meeting with him in his dental office. But when she asked about his sponsored students, Steve lit up. He pulled out his wallet and flipped through the girls' photos, right alongside his own children's.

This fall, Steve took not one but two trips to Guatemala. He and his wife Lynn traveled to celebrate their sponsored student Juana's graduation from high school. Then, Steve turned around and traveled with a Vision Team of student dentists three weeks later.

Steve's passion for Guatemala is obvious, but it isn't his style to wax on about it. Instead, he opts to bring people there so he can show them. Since 2003, Steve has led four Vision Teams, comprised of family, friends, and patients from his dental practice in Hastings, Minnesota. Steve also teaches dentistry part-time at the University of Minnesota, and his most recent trip included current and former students (*see right*).

Generosity and thoughtfulness are two notable traits of Steve's. In the past, he has offset his teams' travel expenses, and he always conducts a massive supply collection before leaving. He is a lot of fun on trips, too, with a dry sense of humor his team members enjoy.

Sponsors for 15 years, the Humberts currently sponsor Amanda and Claudia, the sisters of recent graduate, Juana. Steve says his visits with his sponsored children are always the highlight of his trip.

For more information about volunteering as a dentist or hygienist in Guatemala, contact Steve at (651) 437-8657 or humbe004@tc.umn.edu.

The Vision Team with the Chiroy Martinez family in front of their newly built home.



## Dental students cut their teeth

Vision Team brings a smile to everyone they meet in Guatemala

Last November, **Steve Humbert** led his fourth Vision Team to Guatemala, accompanied by nine of his dental students and five other supporters and dental assistants. They spent time working at both the Antigua site clinic and our partner El Faro clinic in San Rafael.

Other than the biannual visit of a volunteer dentist to the El Faro clinic, the village of San Rafael does not have any regular dental care. To see a dentist, residents must travel by bus to the nearest cities of Sumpango or Chimaltenango; services are expensive and reputed to be of low quality. For this reason people rarely go to the dentist until their problem is severe.

Steve's team worked tirelessly during the week, attending to over 220 patients—over 60 patients in San Rafael and 150 in

Antigua. The contrast between the sites was significant. In San Rafael the team needed to treat almost all patients with tooth extractions, as the deterioration of the teeth was so advanced that reconstruction was no longer an option.

Fortunately, at the Antigua site where Common Hope has been working longer, the focus was more on preventive and reconstructive work. Common Hope's accessible dental care facilities and dental health promotion have made a visible difference for Antigua families, a change we now hope to make a reality in San Rafael.

### Dentists and equipment needed

Dentists and dental hygienists are needed in 2009 to work as volunteers at our Antigua dental clinic. Come stay at our comfortable volunteer quarters or a hotel in Antigua for a couple of days or weeks, and enjoy the beauty of Guatemala while giving back.

The Antigua clinic also needs a new dental unit with basic utilities including water, compressed air, electricity, and vacuum. One of our three units is very old and unreliable. These units cost about \$2,500 in Guatemala.



# Keeping Guatemala close

How legacy giving completes a circle for Ron and Karla Heeter



Ron and Karla with Walter and his family at his graduation.

He was dressed in his best clothes and smelled of cologne. He was a bit cautious at first, but soon he chatted freely about everything from his mother's long work days to his love of soccer to his immense gratitude for their support. He asked Ron what sports he liked to play, and Ron struggled to tell him about water skiing and fishing, knowing that this kid didn't even own a soccer ball. And, he said quietly: "In my life, sometimes it is hard to be happy."

"I find myself wondering what Walter would think about all the facets of our lives in this country."

These are a few indelible memories from **Ron and Karla Heeters'** first meeting with Walter, their sponsored student. The Heeters have been down to Guatemala twice since then, and each trip has been a profound experience. Guatemala is never far from their minds.

"I find myself wondering what Walter would think about all the facets of our lives in this country," writes Karla. "Walter will never go to the cabin on the weekend. There will be no skateboards or Xbox. ... He will be lucky to acquire a bike to get him to and from a job. ... So now, I need less."

"I think about the things we have," says Ron, "and hear other people talk about buying a new motorcycle or a car... Now I kind-of have to justify to myself what I buy."

A writer and professional speaker, Karla tries to share her experience as much as she can. But she often finds that words are

pale. "Unless you touch, smell, see ... the exhaust, the wood burning, the starving dogs ... the great opportunity to make a difference ... it's just hard to impress this on someone," says Karla.

Last fall, the Heeters returned to Guatemala to see Walter graduate from high school—three years after their first visit. The event was momentous, but bittersweet. "It kind-of felt like saying goodbye," says Karla.

Thankfully, Karla and Ron are sponsoring two new students, named Dulce and, fittingly, Karla. Dulce is a strong teenage

girl struggling to stay in school, and 10-year-old Karla is the "sweetest little thing."

Karla and Ron explain they don't have children, so they have come to think of the Guatemalan children they sponsor as their own. These children were in the forefront of their minds when they decided to join the Legacy Circle, designating Common Hope in their will.

As they see it, they have made a real difference for Walter, and they are happy to continue making a difference for other children. Says Karla, "It kind-of feels like things are complete."

## Meet graduate Walter Burgos

When Walter was just 12 years old, his mother told him that she couldn't afford his school tuition anymore. Fast forward seven years: Walter has a high school degree in electronics, a job at a cable company, and a goal of a university degree in engineering.

What happened between age 12 and 19 was a sponsorship with Common Hope. For Walter, this was the difference between staying in school and dropping out. But it turned out to be even more than this. It was the start of two enduring friendships.

The day Walter first met his Sponsors, it was pouring rain—so hard that he had to wait it out before walking the 20 minutes to New Hope. When the rain finally let up, Walter all but ran to New

Hope, arriving almost two hours late. The Heeters were still waiting, and he remembers they were not at all upset, just happy he had made it.

Although the Heeters had been sponsoring Walter for more than a year, he still knew little about them. He was nervous throughout the visit, as they talked about his family, school, and future plans. But since then, he and the Heeters have grown close.

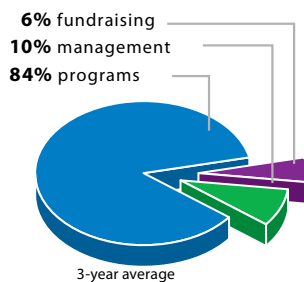
Now, Walter sends a message to Ron and Karla: "It doesn't matter that we are far away from each other. You are my Sponsors and I will always love you. You will always be part of my family."





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## iGracias!

Common Hope wishes to thank the **Association of American Schools of Central America** (AASCA) for its enthusiastic support. Last fall, more than 80 high school juniors and seniors from schools all over Central America visited our Antigua site to paint, clean, and garden. The students also supported the 2008 high school graduates by making cards that were presented at the November graduation ceremony. Thank you to the AASCA students for your leadership and service!

For a full list of the participating schools, visit [www.aascaonline.net](http://www.aascaonline.net)

# *Save the date for Noche de Colores*



The sights and sounds of Guatemala will return on May 1 to the International Market Square in Minneapolis. Please join us for **Noche de Colores**, our colorful biennial benefit for Common Hope. Invitations will be mailed to a regional list in March. All are welcome—contact us at (651) 917-0917 or info@commonhope.org if you would like additional invitations.

For more information and details, visit [www.commonhope.org/noche](http://www.commonhope.org/noche)

