

Guatemala Journal: 07.14.2010

The day is drawing to a close. It has been very full and we are tired. This morning we visited a school that is partnering with AMA and is trying to raise enough money to put in electricity and build a kitchen. This is the same school where Sara's team went to level a floor and it really was digging out a hill for building. They had quite an entourage of local folk working on it today. Their current kitchen occupies part of the 4th grade classroom and when they need to operate something they run extension cords from a nearby house.

Today, they were having a cultural program with dances, arts and crafts, and Mayan calendar interpretations. Some people bought some artifacts, we ALL had our birth date interpreted, and then we played duck-duck-goose with the children. It was very interesting and fun.

There was a troubling episode however, when a member of another team had a severe asthma attack. Jordan had his epi-pen with him and their pastor administered it to her after it became apparent that this was atypical. They finally took her off to a Doctor in their bus and the other team members joined up with us on our bus. An interesting coincidence is that our bus had exactly enough seats for our new passengers. Our day was altered a bit but we heard later that she was okay and back with her team this afternoon.

In the afternoon we finished up the estufas we had started yesterday. It was slow going because we at the more technical stage of the firebox. Our fatigue was beginning to show in only 3 days of doing this work. It was a beautiful day and the warmest day yet. But as usual in the rainy season, the rain came on very suddenly about 4:00 this afternoon just as we were getting ready to walk "home". The off-shoot group who dug at the hill yesterday had an opportunity to go to another area this afternoon where some years ago AMA helped some local women build a community oven where they could make bread to sell to support themselves. There they saw a bread-making demonstration, and a training session for mid-wifery.

One of the really neat things that happened today was seeing a rainbow. As we were cleaning up our stove sites and the rain was coming in, we looked over at the next mountain in the distance and saw a rainbow arching over the mountain. The rainbow moved in front of the mountain along the left edge of the arch so some of it was against the earth and some of it was in the sky. It was a connection of hope between us on earth and God within the universe. I had never seen a rainbow in front of land before.

Tomorrow is our last day of work here in Guatemala. It is hard to believe. We will also have a cultural experience and of course, a bit of fun. We will begin with a Mayan ceremony. Then we will have an eco session with tree planting to replenish where there has been some abuse of the land. Our lunch will be a community meal with the families who received the stoves. After that it's on to a sweat lodge that is run by the local mid-wife. There we will receive herbs and spices that are used in Mayan ceremonies for relaxation and healing. Tomorrow evening we get to have Salsa lessons.

Chrissy Ammons has been offering devotions each evening this week. They have been very thought provoking and it is evident that the youth are wiggling a bit in their skin feeling and thinking about things in new ways. Heck, it isn't just the youth. It doesn't matter how many times I am exposed to these situations of extreme poverty; I am always touched by the graciousness of the people I come to serve. Indeed I am always helped and ministered to in ways too deep to express. It leaves me more open and vulnerable but still yearning for more because it is only in that state that I can be fully filled.

God bless each of you in the ways only the spirit knows you need so that you may live tomorrow more fully.

Guatemala: July 13, 2010

What a fun day!! After a breakfast of fresh fruit, banana pancakes, scrambled eggs and strawberry yogurt, we headed back to our casas where we left our unfinished stoves. I just looked back on the journal from yesterday to refresh myself with how much I mentioned. Please excuse the many missing words and typos – it was late and I was muy tired. Oh! And I wanted to mention that on the Refugio property there are huge Eucalyptus trees lining the drive and courtyard. Isn't that sweet?

The stove fairy (local mason) had visited and fixed our mistakes and got us farther along where we should be for our work today. It went much better. The family Lindsay, Alex and I had was blessed with a husband who was very involved with the process. He always wanted to make it better. At first it was a nuisance but then I realized that he wanted the best for his wife. That made it easier to deal with. Parents, your sons and daughters now know how to mix mortar, lay out a structure, lay level block walls with mortar, and finish with stucco. How cool is that?? I see a barbee pit in Good Shepherd's future.

The little boy who was so sick yesterday seemed a bit improved today. You gotta be strong to make it here. One time when we needed more mortar for our house, the husband was mixing it and asked for a picture to be taken of him. That was amusing and I wasn't sure if he was expecting it to be sent to him or did he want us to remember him. After spending over an hour completing the next step on our stove; asking for multiple clarifications of directions and even getting some help from Aaron, when the mason who is overseeing all of us came to check, he patiently shook his head, took out half of what we did and fixed it for us. Such are good intentions. We all finished our stoves by lunchtime and sat down to traditional tamales wrapped in corn husks. We each had two; one was chicken and one was sweet with raisins. They were very good.

After lunch Lindsey, Alex and I went back to the family to say good-bye and got a foto of the family with the stove (estufas). These folks are desperate – they took us to another area where we were to build two more estufas. Well, this time, it worked like a charm. We got these two up in no time. Still needed some help from our trusty mason, whose skills are amazing, but we could see our skills had improved. After getting them to a stopping point for completion tomorrow, our mason guided us through the corn fields, past the cows and mules to our home, el Refugio. That was an interesting jaunt. The boys had to show off their water tight boots by stomping through every puddle in our path and Aaron and Hunter tried to befriend a donkey. The donkey was not impressed; our mason was amused. (I need to find out the mason's name – such a nice guy).

A few in the group (Chrissy, Kendra, Tyler, Johnette, and Sara) were sent in another direction to help level a floor. They just returned to the hostel and they are soaking wet and muddy. It turns out that leveling a floor meant digging away dirt from the side of a hill to level it so a building can be constructed. This dirt was hauled away in wheelbarrows down the hill and dumped to make a garden. It started to rain on them, so it was just a mess! They are laughing and in good spirits – quite an adventure for them.

The rain last night and today has squelched our trek up the volcano. We are going to participate in a Mayan sweat lodge practice instead.

So we're all chillin', playin' futbol with some local chicas, entertaining each other, waiting for cena (dinner), a shower, and a good night's sleep. Thanks for your continued prayers and positive energies. We are coming up on mid-week and sometimes travelers get in a slump during this time.

Guatemala: July 12, 2010

After thought: I seem to be wordy with this but don't know how to tell you about it with less. I hope it isn't tedious.

Today presented us with a gray, chilly drizzle. It rained last night. We expect that – it is the rainy season, their “winter”. But when we went to breakfast, the excitement of the group provided the sunshine. We are being treated well. We have had traditional foods of chicken, potatoes, squash, carrots, a white “farmer’s cheese”, eggs, beans, rice, fried plantains or bananas, and tortillas. We broke fast with a feast.

After breakfast, we went to a school close by that has received some assistance from U of R and VCU. In all the projects that AMA (Highland Support Project) supports, the people affected are required to invest what they want others to invest in. This school wanted a computer lab. The teachers and parents found that the children who were fortunate enough to continue their education after 6th grade were at a disadvantage because they were entering secondary school away in the city without technology skills. They were viewed upon as backward (“country” as my urban students would say) and ridiculed and discriminated against. The PTA enlisted the support of the community and came up with a plan to present to AMA. AMA communicated this to Univ of Rich who gladly took it on and helped to raise funds to provide for the lab. Because they had to use one of the classrooms (6th grade) a new classroom is being built through a joint effort of community involvement and outside funds. VCU art students came out and helped paint murals on the walls of the school. The teachers seemed very proud of the accomplishments of the community and the students.

The school is build up on a hill with courtyard that is lower. Because of the rain the courtyard had puddles in it. Several of the students (mostly girls) had brooms and were busy pushing the water away so they could have their presentation. Small chairs were brought out and lined up to seat the special guests (us) and the children stood all around. While we were waiting we decided to do the wave. This caught on with a Buenos Dias added to the wave. We did it; then the kids did it. It was pretty funny.

Mayan culture is part of the school curriculum. We were treated to two Mayan dances by the children. It was truly endearing. The children were respectful, orderly, wondering, giggling. You could see shy faces, pensive faces, cheerful faces, sickly faces, tired faces – but indeed, all faces of God.

After we left, we went to the village where we began our stove building. We broke up into 4 grupos; each with a house that needed a stove. A demonstration was given, tools were disseminated, and we started walking to our destinations. One place touched our hearts because of a toddler there who was very sick with respiratory infection. He looked miserable, whined and cried, and then we saw it – literally, green tears. This is one reason why providing a family with safe, enclosed stoves is so important. With traditional open fires, there is so much smoke and ash that the people have chronic infections. There isn't adequate health care so this goes untreated and at times results in serious consequences.

Another family had lost their husband/father just 6 months ago. A young man about 13 had become the “man of the house”. He was very helpful in constructing their stove. All the families who receive stoves have been civically involved and have pledged to be leaders in the community promoting harmonious values of the Mayan culture which AMA is trying to keep alive. They have sought out the AMA program to help them and their community. I think this is important to know because it shows they have to proactive in improving their situation.

Everywhere we go, children are playing with us. They ask us our names, hide and poke their heads around corners then dart away in a peek a boo game, some stand around being curious onlookers. They all come out

for the cameras, though. And if you smile at them, give them high 5 or a fist bump, they feel like they are special.

Back to the stoves... We definitely had a learning curve today. We should be able to hit the brick and mortar running in the morning. We are trying to get all of our stoves finished so we can hike a volcano (don't fret, it's inactive) Thursday. From the top, we should be able to see an active one on the horizon. Pretty cool, huh?

This evening we were treated to a presentation by a professor of archeology, paleontology, and archeology who spoke about the *cosmosvision* of the Mayan culture. This is the mystique or spirituality of the Mayan. It was very interesting and the kids had some great questions. They could definitely see the same threads of love, harmony, respecting creation, being true to self, interconnectedness, etc. that is familiar in Christianity.

We have had a very full day. Spirits are good; the kids are **GREAT** and we looking forward for more good things throughout the week.