

# **Palo Alto Friends Meeting El Salvador Projects September 2011**

**[www.pafmelsalvadorprojects.org](http://www.pafmelsalvadorprojects.org)**

## **From the Director, Robert Broz**

El Salvador, as I tell my friends and travelers, is a country that is bipolar in almost every aspect. Discussions and debates are fought in the classic “you are either for it or against it,” and generally there is no middle ground. Over the past 17 years that I have been living in El Salvador I have found that Salvadorans make their judgments by grouping themes and people together. Politically, one either is left (FMLN) or right (ARENA); economically, one is rich or poor; geographically, one lives in a city or is from the country; and religiously, one is either Catholic or one is not.



This is the basis of a constant conflict within the Salvadorian people, the government and religious groups and is openly expressed in current events. In the news recently, both locally and internationally, are two topics that are the cause of some new social unrest.

The first is the case of the Spanish judicial prosecution of those responsible for the assassination of the six Jesuits in 1989. The second is an international legal struggle to be between El Salvador and the Canadian mining

company Pacific Rim. The National Audience of Spain (Audiencia Nacional de España) has accused 20 ex-military officers.

Many feel that the amnesty law is the problem and it is clear to the FMLN that some of their people could be held responsible for atrocities committed by the guerillas if amnesty law is removed. But it is also clear that the vast majority of civil rights violations, assassinations and massacres were committed by the military, death squads and government officials during the '80s. The UN reports carried out after the peace agreement in 1992 states that 95% of the civil right violations and war crimes were carried out by the military and death squads, and only attribute 5% to the FMLN guerilla forces. Personally, it has always surprised me how known ex-death squad participants and ex-military commanders live such normal lives, commonly serving as politicians, high-level police officials or as high-level military commanders. Whatever happens with the current case locally or in Spain, tension is building between the FMLN and ARENA parties as well as within the Salvadoran population in general.

Also in the news and causing much unrest and violence is the ongoing legal battle between Canada's Pacific Rim mining company and the government of El Salvador. Although there are several areas that had been contemplated to extract gold and silver in El Salvador, most problems have been in the area of the El Dorado mine in the state of Cabañas. Pacific Rim, a Canadian company through its US subsidiary and acting under the Central American Free Trade Agreement

( CAFTA ), obtained initial permits to mine in El Salvador, but back in 2008 the permits were revoked after environmental studies showed how damages would affect the majority of the people living in the proposed areas. Since the debate started, the three activists have been killed, two in December of 2009 and one in July of 2010. Activists working at the Victoria Communal Radio station, the Communal Association for Social and Economic Development of Santa Marta, and leaders from other communities in the area have been receiving death threats since 2008, when local groups organized to fight the mining company and its plans to reopen the mine. Even before the FMLN obtained the presidential seat, ex-ARENA president Tony Saca, stood up to the multinational saying "I 'd rather pay the more than \$100 million lawsuit than let Pacific Rim work in El Salvador," contaminating the area and using more water than 3.8 million people consume on a daily basis. President Funes has not been clear on this issue. On a recent visit to the state of Cabañas he said he would do everything possible to find the assassins of the activists and stated that under his mandate he would not approve any mining in El Salvador, although he would not commit to approving a new law to prohibit mining in El Salvador.

Community and activist groups suspect that Pacific Rim, through the people they have hired locally to promote the so called "Green" mining, is directly responsible for the above mentioned assassinations. There has been a more recent killing, that of a young man who had been posting flyers against the mining in Cabañas. His body was found in San Salvador and could possibly be the result of gang vio-

lence, but knowing that three other activists involved have been assassinated does make one suspect that this could be another killing related to the anti mining campaign.

On a brighter note, our own work continues to have very positive results with the young men and women from rural El Salvador. In 2011 we are supporting 19 university students from three of our communities. We also continue to support three high school students in the community of El Gigante, pay two librarians at the school in El Barrio and will continue providing reading glasses, thanks to the many pairs that were collected and brought down with members of the June Service-Learning Trip. This year, Frank Cummings ( Atlanta Friends Meeting ) and I organized the 5<sup>th</sup> annual University Fair here in Suchitoto. Thirteen institutions/universities came and almost 50% of this year' s graduating high school students, our university students, as well as students from other programs brought the total participation to just under 200. In contrast with past years, in 2011 Frank and I obtained the majority of the financing ( around \$600 ) from other groups supporting education in Suchitoto and \$300 from the city of Suchitoto. Also new in 2011, we have implemented math and science classes in four of the five high schools in Suchitoto. The classes are being taught on Saturdays by university students from three different programs, including ours.

To finish my report, this month I would like to highlight a young woman from the cooperative of El Gigante located in Perquin in the northern part of Morazan.

**Karla Lili**, a bright and smiling young woman has just started her second semester at the Dr. Andres Bello University in San Miguel. Last year before graduating from high school she decided to study to become a social worker ( the first within our projects ). Her decision did not surprise anyone and if you knew her parents you would understand why. Both her father Rene and her mother Reyna have been active communal leaders

within the El Gigante Cooperative. Rene has participated in Pueblo to Pueblo an agricultural exchange program in Latin America, has served as a board member in FECAMN



Karla Lili and her family

the Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives in Northern Morazan, and CONFRAS, the Confederation of Agricultural Cooperatives of El Salvador. He is also on our local committee and the person in charge of education within the cooperative. Reyna has been active as well, and is a founding member of the women 's group in El Gigante. She is the current treasurer of the cooperative, maintains beehives and produces organic coffee. So it is easy to imagine what their daughter Karla is like!

As a child she started participating in a local folkloric dance group, has been active in Saturday tutoring with kids from her community and has been an exceptional student. At the university she is blooming, making new friends, seeing what life outside her community is like and studying as if she wants to rule the world. I just received her grades and she did quite well,

especially for her first semester when most students have a hard time adapting, owing to the insufficient public high schools and life in the city. She took four classes and passed all with grades of 8.7-9.1 on a scale of 10. I should mention that Karla is only 17, as that puts things in perspective.

In a recent letter she wrote to her sponsor answering a question about her Anthropology class she said, " About what you asked about my interest in personality and culture in my anthropology class, the truth is that both interest me, because they are both related, because personality is formed over time but is also dependent on the culture that each of us belongs to. " I don ' t know if the translation does her statement justice but I feel that this young woman knows how to express herself. Being able to meet and know people like Karla Lili and her parents, Rene and Reyna, is what makes my life here and working with our communities so worthwhile.

Before finishing up, I would like to briefly mention the July 2011 Service Learning Trip to El Salvador. We had a wonderful and very diverse group this year and I think that all involved enjoyed visiting El Salvador, our communities and the service work we did in each of the four communities. I would like to send a special thanks to Palo Alto Friends Meeting for sponsoring the trip, to Barbara Babin for all her work coordinating preparations in the U.S. Thanks also to Nate Seacrest, a volunteer in El Salvador for three months, who also helped with the preparations and to all the participants both young and old.

# The Most Vivid Memory

by Thea Rodine

For me, the El Salvador trip was all about late realizations. While I was there, I enjoyed myself, but I was so hot and tired and disoriented that it took me a while after I got home to unscramble it all into decent memories. The strongest things I remember from being there were little things, like eating at the pupuseria and strolling through the market. I remember several misunderstandings that came about because I couldn't really speak Spanish. And of course, I remember the toilets – oh! the toilets. One of my favorite memories was riding in the back of trucks to get to places in the small villages. Like Koky, our translator, said, everything in El Salvador was simpler – and the bonds between people were greater. There were no fences in between houses, and often we walked through the back yards of people we didn't know in order to get somewhere we needed to be.

The saddest memory I had was not the monument to the massacre or the war museum, for as I said, everything big took time to sink in. It was one of the last worship-sharing sessions we had the night before going back to Suchitoto for the last time. It was in the evening after a long day of rain, and we sat on mattresses in a circle on the floor of Menelio's living room. Roberto and Koky had joined us during the part where we had just said how we were doing. Since this was one of our last days, we included how the trip has made us feel, or if we felt somehow spiritually guided in a new direction by our experiences.

When Koky's turn came, he said how thankful he was for us being interested, and how important it was for us to see third world countries like

El Salvador. Then he spontaneously told us his life story, including his childhood during the war, and why he worked so hard to get a great scholarship and go to school in the U.S. We were all so surprised to see that this person who had been gotten so close to was involved this much in the war. I guess I thought he was younger than he was, but the fact that he could remember it made me so sad. I remember when I told my parents on the first night they almost cried just from hearing about it from me.

I think this was one of the most shocking experiences because throughout our trip Koky had been incredibly light hearted. He never seemed like a person with a heavy past. But I was so grateful to him for telling us his story, because to me it was one of the most moving things of the whole trip.

Robert Broz helps four participants paint a community building for the Sueños cooperative in Jocoaitique.



## “I want to go back!”

by Rose Hinson

One of the things that struck me when we visited the rural communities was that they really were *communities*. Everyone was so open, friendly and curious. On our first night in El Barío, we were warmly welcomed by the local youth group. While doing introductions and learning about local youth leaders, I ended up sitting with a group of girls from El Barío, none of whom spoke English. As I sat there (feeling slightly out of place) the girl on my left introduced herself as Sandra. Despite my extremely limited Spanish, we spent the rest of the night getting to know each other. We easily found common ground and were so immersed in our conversation that we had to be “shushed” because we were talking during someone else’s introduction. I think that’s the first full-length conversation I’ve had in Spanish outside of school. I’m really proud that we were able to talk and connect despite the language barrier. Later on that night we played ice-breaker games, ate dinner, and ended the night with an impromptu dance party. That night was probably one of my favorite memories of the trip.

Not only did I make new friends within the communities, I had an amazing time getting to know others on the trip. By the end of the trip we had formed an extremely tightly knit community. We bonded over our struggles with Spanish and our shared awe of El Salvador as a whole.

My Spanish improved a lot over the two weeks. I became more confident in my speaking abilities, and less embarrassed about starting a conversation even though I knew I would mess up. I definitely got a lot better at understanding Spanish. We were immersed in Spanish, and I eventually adjusted to

how rapidly everyone spoke. I still struggle with the language, but since the trip I’ve noticed that my ability to comprehend what someone is saying has hugely improved.

The trip opened my eyes to a lot of things. Its one thing to hear about poverty, but seeing and experiencing it first hand is a whole new experience. It helped me to grasp just how lucky I am. I’ve become a lot more grateful for what I have, and I’d like to think I take fewer things for granted now. One thing I finally grasped is just how lucky I am to have such a good shot at going to college. It’s shocking how different things are in El Salvador. It was crushing to talk to people like my teacher from the language school we attended, who wished they could go to college in the United States but didn’t have the resources. Growing up in Palo Alto, I’ve been extremely sheltered from that sort of thing, because I’ve been raised to assume that I’m going to college.

One thing that I’ve told people when they ask about my trip is that I definitely want to go back. I hope I’ll have the opportunity to visit for an extended amount of time, and really get to know people one on one.

Robert with trip participants



## **Building Bridges: June 2011 Service-Learning Trip**

by Barbara Babin

This past June, sixteen people participated in our fourth Service-Learning trip to El Salvador and had an amazing experience building bridges across distance, economic status, age, culture, and language. For two weeks, we took part in a rapid variety of learning and service activities which brought us close to each other and to our Salvadoran friends in the town of Suchitoto and the rural communities of El Barío, El Gigante, Sueños de Jocoaitique, and Apulo.

In spite of the faltering economy, we had eleven paying travelers from the United States. Our group also included an organizer/chaperon, a nurse, a translator, a youth liaison, and Robert Broz, our El Salvador Projects Field Director. We ranged in age from 14 to 79 years old, and our level of Spanish varied from absolute beginning to quite proficient. The group brought a variety of interests and talents. Dick, a soils engineer, and Robin, an architect, were able to lend their professional expertise to the local communities. We enjoyed hiking, talking with local people, playing ice-breaker games, visiting historical sites, doing service work, and spending time in Salvadoran homes.

Besides the organizers and adult chaperons, several of our group had ties to our previous trips. It was Nate's third trip to El Salvador. His interest in the country and people was sparked by our first trip in 2005 and his second trip in 2009. This time he spent the 5 months in El Salvador prior to the trip, volunteering on his own and assisting with the planning. As our youth liaison and an experienced traveler, he was a great help to the rest of the group in making new friends and understanding the local customs and youth culture of the areas that we visited. Both Rose and Thea had older siblings who came on the first trip and they were looking forward to having their own exciting experiences.



Barbara Babin

We spent several hours a day during the first week learning or improving our Spanish at the Pájaro Flor language school in Suchitoto. Everyone made progress in their communication skills and put them to practical use! As we ventured out into the communities, spending the

night with our home-stay families, joining the community associations for welcoming events, working side-by-side on our service projects, or meeting our scholarship students, our group courageously applied their Spanish skills and found themselves successfully communicating! A few words, some gestures, and doing common activities was all it took to be able to make new friends. We had so much fun!

Most of our service work involved painting. Although the work wasn't difficult, it was so satisfying to see the end results of our labor and to know that we were providing something meaningful. It was also enjoyable to be working alongside and talking with people in the communities, especially with the high school students in El Barío.

We certainly experienced differences between our lives at home and the everyday lives of people in El Salvador. We learned to appreciate new foods, and even learned how to prepare some. We learned how to live simply and to value the simple necessities—clean water, a roof that doesn't leak, a basic diet, and warm relationships. After talking with our scholarship students and their families, we became aware of how we take our own educations and possessions for granted and gained a real understanding of the enormous difference that the El Salvador Projects have made in the lives of these people over time. From the

projects that provided health care, child care, and nutrition in the early days, to the scholarships of today, the donations of people like yourselves have enabled these folks to move beyond the harshest levels of poverty into lives that, although difficult, are somewhat easier and are filled with hope for the future.

In the six years that we have been making these trips, we can see small signs that life is improving for at least some of the people that we meet. In El Barío, the road is paved all the way to the school and at least one family now has a flush toilet attached to the house. The bathroom at the community building is completed at the community center in El Gigante. The cooperative's bee-keeping business is financially sound, and honey is being produced and marketed. One of our graduates has come back to live near his family in Sueños, and his family has expanded their home to include a new room for their married daughter, her husband, and baby. Other graduates are now employed and helping to pay the way for younger

siblings to attend university. ADECOI, the cooperative in Apulo, has expanded their community building and offers tutoring sessions for students every Saturday.

The El Salvador Projects, of course, come from the work that Carmen Broz began over 20 years ago, and Carmen is remembered with great love among the communities. Because of our association with Carmen and the projects, we are welcomed with open arms when we visit, and people share with us their stories, their dreams, and their time. We are welcomed not just because your financial contributions have made such a difference in their lives, but because our visits with young people and the letters that you exchange with the scholarship students let them know that you are in a long term relationship with them and that you care.

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Yes I want to help offer access to education at all levels in El Salvador!

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**Address correction requested**



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