

## PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING

# EL SALVADOR PROJECTS

November, 2020 Newsletter

WWW.PAFMELSALVADORPROJECTS.ORG

### Greetings from Hulda Muaka, Committee Clerk:

Happy Thanksgiving! It is that time of the year when we update you on the politics and progress of our education program in El Salvador. This time the Director, Robert Broz, has taken a slightly different style to give his report. We will see the politics through the eyes/experience of the Director. Some similarities can be drawn with America in the handling of the pandemic and choosing of favorites for political posts.

We will also read about the views of some students on their studies and experiences during the pandemic. Lessons learned will just make students stronger and not take life for granted.

The founder of the projects, Carmen Broz, had the aim of having the students who benefit from the student loans stay in the country and help develop the country from within. This has been adhered to, but as life changes happen, a small number find their way out of their country as they look for greener pastures. The good news is that they still repay their loans and assist their families, and some have also contributed to the program.

Don't miss The Wind Beneath Our Wings with Carmen's life story, in this newsletter.

We are so grateful for your contributions that make these success stories possible, and the work continues. I conclude with the Director's words of hope: "As every year passes, it becomes even clearer that the fruits of our work continue to ripen, and now after three decades, we see such positive change, not only in the communities and lives we have assisted but also in other parts of the world."

### Director's report



Robert Broz  
Project Director

After we have all had to deal with so much over the past months – our lives being transformed abruptly, the loss of loved ones, fires, politics, division and hate in many parts of the world – I have decided to write this report differently than in the past. My desire is that it may bring some hope, love, and light into your lives. I will try, as usual, to bring you up to date on what has been happening in El Salvador, not with dates and numbers this time but through what my family and I have experienced since our last newsletter. Afterwards, instead of detailing the continuing effects of COVID-19, I'll share the varied and moving answers some of our students gave to several basic questions I presented. I will also highlight one university student who will be finishing in our program in November, but has decided to continue his studies. I will finish this report with news of two past graduates who reflect well the impact and benefit of our work in El Salvador. I am certain that their stories will convince you that our programs continue to improve the lives of the people and communities in rural El Salvador, where we have worked for over 30 years now. I will start with a general look at social, political, and economic developments that influence my life here in El Salvador.

Although this may not seem directly related to El Salvador, I feel a need to share it with like-minded friends, and I do hope that this news will make many of you smile, or at least that it will bring a bit of hope into your day. For the first time since moving to El Salvador, I decided to participate in the upcoming presidential elections

in the US. I considered voting in 2016, but my absentee ballot came too late. I can tell you that I have already sent in my ballot for this election, and I've received confirmation that my vote will be counted! I was motivated by local politics and the fact that our President, Nayib Bukele, has a good relationship with the Trump administration, which many Salvadorans see as a good thing.

That terrifies me.

Bukele's cynical smile as he swore in Milena Mayorga, El Salvador's new ambassador to Washington, seemed a clear sign to many that this was public repayment for her

recent support of Bukele and his administration. Mayorga, a right wing ARENA assemblywoman, had recently criticized her party in the National Assembly and now publicly supports President Bukele and his administration. Trump may remember Milena Mayorga as Miss El Salvador when she competed in the 1996 Miss Universe pageant, for which Trump was Executive Producer.



Bukele swearing in Milena as new ambassador

The political division in El Salvador, similar to that in the U.S., has me for the first time in 25 years tiptoeing through life with close friends and acquaintances as we participate in the different local elections set for February 28, 2021. These are not presidential elections, with Bukele now in his second year of a five-year term, but rather elections for the three-year term National Assembly seats and city governments. President Nayib Bukele and his recently formed New Ideas Party are hoping to win some seats in the assembly and are projected to sweep the elections in many cities, which will reconfirm his popularity. Most local news in El Salvador is controlled and biased, so I have found it more difficult to keep informed on the behind-the-scenes politics than in the past, and I've found myself in the uncomfortable position of not knowing who will run things after the elections, even at a local level. Two good friends are running for the New Ideas party in the Suchitoto elections, only one of whom I would consider to have the skills needed to be a good politician. The mayoral candidate and two of his council

members for the FMLN have asked to meet with me to discuss education. With years being involved in tourism, I was invited by the New Ideas governor of Cuscatlán to attend a meeting with other businesspersons from Suchitoto. As you can imagine, there is always tension, as all of these meetings are considered by most to be part of the electoral campaigning process. The department governor said at least twice that he did not want the meeting to be considered part of the electoral campaign, but I for one did notice that the candidate for the Suchitoto mayoral position was present. The situation gets more complicated when I consider the internal division within the FMLN (the left-wing party) at both National and Local levels. In Suchitoto, much of this division was due to how and by whom the internal (primary) elections were handled, with accusations of fraud throughout the process. Our current mayor, Pedrina Rivera, whom I consider a friend, expressed months before the internal elections that she was okay with not running for what would have been her fourth term. Rivera's supporters pushed her to run against a young non-militant FMLN candidate, who is well respected as a small business owner and a longtime FMLN supporter. The mudslinging public accusations from supporters of each candidate run rampant on social media, which only aids their real opponents from New Ideas. This all has made it a bit difficult for me to maintain personal and professional relationships, as I know all parties involved personally.

From politics I want to move on to the economy, but as is common in many parts of the world, this involves more politics as well. El Salvador started reopening the economy in August, after almost six months of varying levels of quarantine and mobility restrictions for most of the population. Today the country is pretty much business as usual, but with common restrictions and implementation of biosecurity required. One thing I found a bit backward, and Salvadorans will say "Only in El Salvador," is that the malls and big box stores were given permission to open long before the public parks and beaches. It was only in late October that Natural Protected Areas (similar to national parks) reopened. Seeing how in other parts of the world many were able to go for walks, hikes, and camping, it was difficult for

my family and me not to be able to visit open and natural areas. In many cases, even nearby public plazas and parks were closed and off limits to the public. To date my family and I have been in no hurry to go to a busy mall or shopping center, and we still go only to the now over-packed supermarkets as seldom as possible. As a plus, we have found that most of what we use can be found locally. We feel good continuing to support local small businesses over the large chain supermarkets. I am certain that the backwards decision of malls opening before parks and beaches was political. In addition, most government workers have been receiving full-time pay while only working part time. It is quite possible that having more free time with the same salary sounded good at the ministry level, and a good way for Bukele's New Ideas party to win the support of government employees for the upcoming elections in 2021.



Tita and Robert at beach resort

In September, my wife Tita and I took advantage of a discount offered in the middle of the full quarantine and prepaid a night in a very nice beach resort. Initially we thought that things might have been back to normal for our 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary in late June. When that did not happen, we changed plans for my 59<sup>th</sup> birthday on August 25. The reopening for lodging actually was August 24, and hotels were only allowed to operate at 50% occupancy. Neither Tita nor I was willing to be the first clients so we reserved for Aug 27, when we were in fact the ONLY guests at the hotel and restaurant. That seemed weird, but it ended up being just what the doctor had ordered for our first outing since mid-March. Most of the staff was busy painting and gardening, and it looked like the owners had done no maintenance since March.

In El Salvador, as in many parts of the world, thousands of businesses have closed permanently. In the case of our own two businesses, Gringo Tours (which I opened in 2006) and my wife's new restaurant, Ajhuyak Ne Tupal, it was only due to my part-time salary from Palo Alto Friends Meeting as well as money from a property I sold in 2019 that we were able to survive. Since March I have been the primary provider for eight, a long story that I mentioned briefly in the June newsletter.

I now have my first clients scheduled for two short tours in early November, and another reservation for the first days of January. After reinventing her restaurant, my wife continues to operate only for take-out and delivery, plus participating in a fair every Sunday where as a family we sell things like baguettes, honey, kombucha, pickled vegetables, and hot sauce, most of which we produce at home. Fortunately, in Suchitoto the vast majority of businesses were able to reopen, in contrast to other tourist destinations where many shops, hotels, and restaurants have closed permanently.

In a recent Gallup poll about how well our president has dealt with Covid-19, Nayib Bukele was rated by 92% of the population as doing a good job in dealing with the virus and keeping cases to a minimum. I wonder about the results as he and many of his cabinet have been receiving much criticism for the uncontrolled use of federal funds, especially funds related to the new Hospital El Salvador, which many consider



New hospital, El Salvador

excessive for a country like El Salvador with a population of just over 6 million. The hospital boasts over 3000 ICUs, which is more than the

total number of ICUs in the rest of Central America.

The childish power struggle between Bukele and the national ministries against the Legislative National Assembly is leading the country and cities to the point where most public services will shut down, if both parties don't come to a mutual agreement soon. The Federal government has yet to release the annual 8% of the national budget based on population to each city government, and the National Assembly continues to block the unrestricted use of federal funds by the President and his ministers.

I hope I have not provided too much information, but I have found that the normal soap opera of deception and corruption in El Salvador's politics has been amplified under the pandemic. I'll continue on a different note, letting you hear a bit from some of our 27 university students in their own words.

Rather than telling you how our programs have continued since our last newsletter in June, I decided to ask our university students to answer three simple but related questions: 1) How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect your lives? 2) What problems did you have with your studies, and how did you resolve them? 3) What have you learned about life over the past six months? I asked the students to be as concise as possible, but many provided much more than I had expected. I cannot share all of their answers here, of course, but I have tried to select some that I think will be especially interesting to you.



**Angélica Guadalupe Menjívar Melgar** wrote “The pandemic affected me in a very personal way as my brother, who has taken care of me, has helped me with my expenses to study, and has been my only family since my parents passed away, was infected with

Covid-19. This worried me so much as I was concerned for his health and that of his wife, who was pregnant. Just knowing how bad the virus

can be affected me, but fortunately and God willing he recovered and his wife, other children, and I all tested negative.”

**Ercilia Alas** responded to the same question in English, which she is studying (now her final year): “In my personal opinion, this affected me a lot in different ways. Because of the pandemic I could not complete some of the personal plans I had for this year. I also lived one of the saddest moments in my life when I lost my uncle. The news was terrible. We could not say goodbye due to the established protocols in this pandemic.”

**Miguel Francisco Barrera**, who we will hear more about later, wrote: “The context of the pandemic meant a drastic change in social relations. Strict confinement was what was adopted by the federal government, this accompanied by politically polarized discussions, division, and fear. All of this affected my daily life and emotional state. In my life I felt frustrated, so many projects that I was not able to do, slight depression set in not being able to see my friends and extended family. A high level of stress set in as I saw what was happening in my country, especially after two large storms that affected production. The stress was amplified watching news, as local stations always added the fear factor to Covid-19 and worst-case scenarios. I think the worst was not being able to see my family.”

The students answered the second question so similarly that I think just a few words of mine will do. Most were affected by problems with Internet connectivity and lack of knowledge of information technology and virtual platforms such as Zoom, Meet, Skype, and WhatsApp. Many students at the National University also expressed lack of effort by older professors, who until this second semester just did nothing. Due to the connectivity problems, we have reopened our student house in a very controlled and limited manner, allowing up to six students to occupy it during the days and week of exams.

Let me share now some of the responses to the last question, “What did you learn about life over the last six months?”

**Edenilson Olmedo**, in his third year of studies in physical education at the National University (UES), wrote “I have learned to prioritize my health and personal hygiene, which is fundamental in our lives as if we are healthy we can have energy, character, and discipline to fight to meet our future goals. One of the



other things I have learned is that we have to be organized, applied, and form good habits. During these past six months, I have been able to improve my grades as I set study hours and made sure I didn’t miss any of the virtual classes to which I paid attention to be able to learn completely the content.”

**Keira Pineda**, a fourth year medical student, responded: “I have learned that personal contact with others is vital and important to all. It can be nice to spend time alone, not leave your home, but it is necessary for us to spend time with our friends, families, and partners. I also learned to spend more quality time with my family, do my university work at home, and share limited family spaces.”



**Jeaqueline Alas**, a first year modern language student in English and French, wrote: “Apart from my studies at the university I also learned to value more the people who are close to me. I learned to organize my time and to be self-taught. I also realized something very

important; I understood that life in a second can give us surprises, good or bad, and that it depends on each of us how we want to see the life and how to deal with the facts presented to us. I know that this pandemic has not been easy for most, but as long as we are in good health, we must always try to do things in the best way without harming anyone and always fighting for what we want to achieve in life.”

For those of you with interest or with a basic understanding of Spanish I will be posting all 27 student responses on our website, as well as a full photo album of the photos they sent representing their time at home studying under different levels of confinement and quarantine. But now, I want to talk about a new development with a student who is currently in his last year of studies under our program.

**Miguel Francisco Barrera Ramirez**

is in his last year at the National University (UES), finishing his program in Sociology with honors. For students with high GPAs the option to start a second program is available. When he entered our program,



Francisco indicated that he was unsure what he wanted to study and was trying to decide between enrolling in Sociology or Fine Arts. I had seen some of his drawings and could see that he had natural talent, but as Project Director I told him that he should consider all aspects and make his own decision, and that his decision would not affect his chances of entering our program. He decided to pursue Sociology and has done well, but when he entered our program five years ago he said he could always continue his art later.

Early this year and pre COVID-19, Francisco asked to speak with me. When we met in January he asked if it would be OK for him to start a second major. He gave me all the details, and expressed that he felt it would not affect his current program negatively. Because of his high GPA, it is most likely that this will be his final year in Sociology and that he will graduate from his first program in 2021. Projecting to the future, although he will not be in our program he will most likely graduate in his second major in Art in 2027! As I prepared to compose this report, I asked Francisco for more details and photos of some of his art. Francisco provided me with loads of material. I have summarized what he wrote above, but he also sent me 20 photos of his art. *(Continued on page 7)*

## The Wind Beneath our Wings

### Carmen Broz

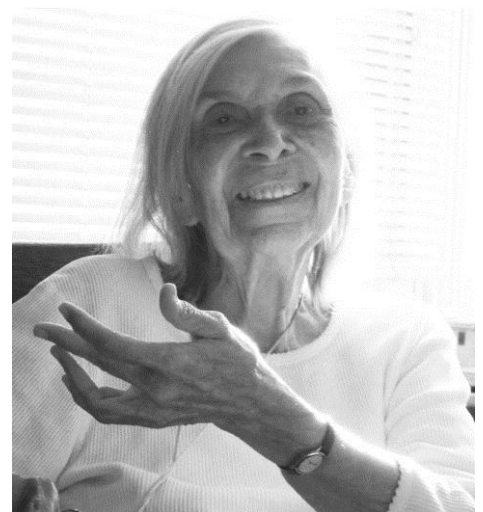
by Jamie and Marion Newton



Direct experience on the ground in El Salvador at the height of the civil war in the 1980's inspired Carmen Broz to ally herself with poor and oppressed people who were determined to rise from poverty and claim basic human rights. The El Salvador Projects we support today evolved from those early efforts, informed by Carmen's whole life experience. At age nine, she heard shots in Sonsonate when campesinos were gunned down for their indigenous ancestry in the genocidal *matanza*. She left her first job at the Bank of America after she graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in economics because she realized that her mission in life was not to provide financial services to the affluent. An American Friends Service Committee work camp in Mexico acquainted her with Quakers and led her to earn a Master's degree in Social and Technical Assistance from Haverford College. At the Catholic Worker House in New York Dorothy Day was her mentor. Her teaching career in California is reflected in the education focus of the El Salvador Projects.

In 1986, Carmen accepted an invitation from the SHARE Foundation (<http://www.share-elsalvador.org/>) to accompany a group of *campesinos* who were returning from refugee camps to land near Suchitoto, aiming to restore the agricultural way of life the war had taken from them. After they stopped for the night in the bomb-destroyed town of Aguacayo, the group was surrounded by the Atlacatl Division of the army, famed for its massacres. Carmen confronted the officers, demanding that they "stop terrorizing these people!" She and other internationals traveling with the group were deported, with passports stamped *persona no grata*, but the families were allowed to reach El Barío. Carmen returned to El Salvador to establish child care centers in several communities, worked with her son Robert to help secure a grant from Spain that made it possible to build a school in el Barío, and raised funds for clothing and basic school supplies. In response to requests from new high school graduates, she evolved a new and enduring focus: to enable gifted young people from poor rural families to gain university educations and return to serve their communities in education, health care, and other fields.

We were the wind beneath Carmen's wings for many years – the Committee members who circulated news and insights from Carmen to supporters in the United States, with many others who donated funds, collected and transported school supplies and computers, and sometimes visited El Salvador so that they could share their own experiences and extend the network of support. When advanced age required Carmen to release herself from responsibility for the Projects, she became the wind beneath the wings of those who sustained the work – Robert Broz (now the Project Director), community organizers in El Salvador, Committee members and supporters in the United States. Even those who never met Carmen could recognize and respond to the qualities of character that guided her work – visionary determination, tenacity when obstacles arose, a deep spiritual connection with others, and a capacity to blend compassion with energy born of outrage. Carmen Broz died in 2015 at the age of 91. Her living legacy is evident in the lives of the thriving young people and families we meet through the pages of this newsletter.



*(Director's Report, continued from page 5)*

As always, I will be sharing an online gallery on our website that will include all of the digital photos of Francisco's art, photos of all our students that I received with the Covid-19 questions, and photos of two of our past graduates that I'll tell you about in a section I call "Where they are today".

Let's see where **Omar Marroquín** is today and



learn a little more about what he is doing in Ireland. Omar finished in our programs in 2015, a student of International Relations at the National University (UES). Outside of his program he also studied and learned basic English. Before finishing his thesis year, he started working at call centers,

graduating some years later in 2018. At the beginning of 2019, Omar was considering starting a Master's program in Finance, still working at a call center, but looking for work in a related field. A friend mentioned a study/work abroad program in Ireland, which piqued his interest. Omar looked into the program, applied for a loan to offset the initial expenses, and left for Ireland. He is studying in an English program that will last two years, and for which he has to renew his student/work visa every eight months. He told me that he hopes to finish the certificate program and pass the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) which is a requirement to continue studying at university level in the UK. He works part-time, and explores Ireland with other students from Latin America when they have vacations. When I asked if he would return to El Salvador he said much will depend on his next study program, but that most likely he would return to visit his family in El Barío in a few years. Omar has always impressed me as an excellent student, a responsible person coming from a strong and loving family. I am sure his younger sister, still in high school now but approaching university age, will also do well. Omar will repay his student loan by paying for her university studies, a repayment option we encourage because it extends the educational benefits of your donations.

Let me finish by sharing a little about a young man who ended up just a bit closer to our supporters



Esther and Chomingo

in the U.S. I have mentioned **Chomingo (Juan Domingo Rivas)** in newsletters in the past, from when he entered our program supported by a donor who wanted to help an art student to his work as a volunteer in various programs in Suchitoto. Like Omar and many others, he is from the village of El Barío where our programs began back in 1989. After finishing his studies at the National School of Art and Music (CENAR), Chomingo had worked as a local volunteer at the Art Center for Peace here in Suchitoto, teaching art to many over the years. In 2016, he met a foreign volunteer, **Esther**, who worked at the Art Center for more than three years. They fell in love and in 2020, just prior to COVID-19, Chomingo's visa was approved and he left for Lancaster, Pennsylvania, arriving in late February. Esther and Juan Domingo were married soon after on April 15<sup>th</sup>. They were among several artists chosen to paint temporary COVID-19 murals in different parts of Lancaster. Here is an excerpt written about their mural: "*The idea of the piece, "Superheroes at Home," comes from prevention and distance as it is being applied in various places. We tried to create how we can be superheroes daily, taking hygienic measures and being creative with our family and children. The main objective is to educate ourselves from our own houses. We put a gray background so the images would be the principle part of the piece visually in the composition. Being at home we can save lives!*" See more about this public art project at:

<https://lancpublicart2.squarespace.com/news/Psaartists>

*(See mural below)*



Mural by Chomingo and Esther

It looks to me as though Chomingo and his art will go far! Here is a link to a follow-up event held virtually in October and titled “Celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month with Chomingo Rivas”

<https://lanccpublicart2.squarespace.com/news/chomingo> .

Well, friends, I hope this update about El Salvador and the people we support shows you once again how important our programs are. As every year passes, it becomes even clearer that the fruits of our work continue to ripen, and now, after three decades, we see such positive changes not only in the communities and lives we have assisted but also in other parts of the world. For me, this brings hope for a better future for this delicate planet we all call home.

In Peace

— Robert Broz, Project Director

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***Once again, we invite your support for courageous people struggling toward a brighter future...***

Friends, you may recall how our appeal to your generosity in the June, 2020 newsletter began:

*Only a few months ago, few of us could have imagined the worldwide coronavirus pandemic that now dominates the news and shapes our daily lives. .... In that context, your donations continue to illuminate the lives of young rural Salvadorans with hope and opportunities.*

*Crises that bring suffering to the privileged are truly catastrophic for the most vulnerable – the marginalized who barely sustain a meager living in the best of times, whose isolation from the circles of political and economic power makes it easy for elites to disregard their needs. All of us know this, but for the poor of El Salvador it is a reality that is experienced directly every day.*

Sadly, that message is even more timely and relevant now.

What does it mean to be poor in El Salvador? In 2015, the Pan American Health Organization reported that the average household monthly income in rural areas of El Salvador was US\$373.90, and in 2017 the World Bank estimated that 29% of Salvadorans lived below the official poverty line of US\$5.50 per person per day, a percentage that would be higher in rural areas. Those figures help us understand how the income an educated young Salvadoran can earn is sufficient to raise an entire family out of poverty. We see it happen!

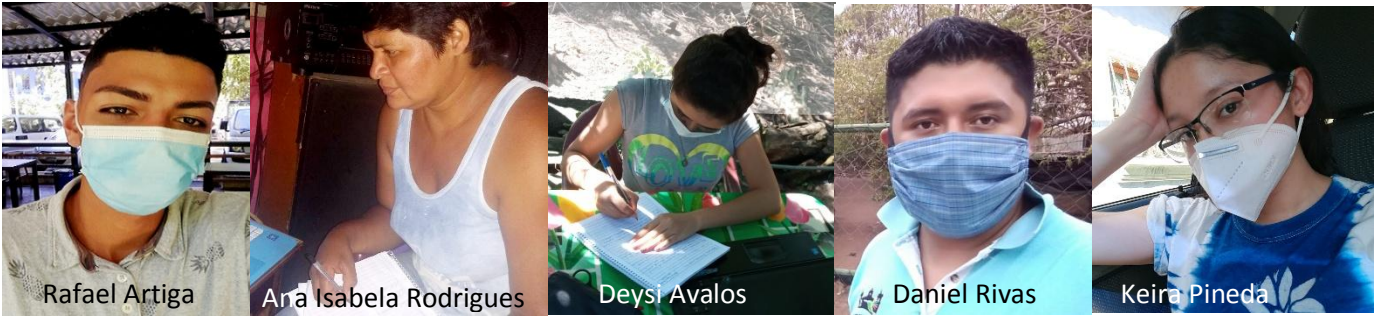
Most of us receive daily requests for donations, many with a tone of urgency that is justified by the crises that surround us – raging wildfires, resurgence of the coronavirus, a series of devastating extreme weather events, and what many of us see as the most consequential U.S. election of our lives as we prepare this newsletter. There are so many real needs! So... we conclude this appeal as we did in June: **In these difficult times when so many people are financially stressed, if your resources enable you to continue the generosity of the past year or two, your donations will be welcomed with deep gratitude. They will be carefully stewarded, supporting young people like those you’ve read about in this newsletter.**



**Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects**

If you cannot give now, please be assured that we are grateful to you for being part of this community of support that sustains the visions and the efforts of young people and families who strive on, resisting despair.

Jamie Newton, for the El Salvador Projects Committee



*Do you know that this newsletter can be sent via email (in color) and is available on our website [www.pafmelsalvadorprojects.org](http://www.pafmelsalvadorprojects.org) (along with all past newsletters)? Email is an easy way to forward the newsletter to friends who may be interested in our projects. If you prefer to receive our newsletter via email or read it on the web, rather than by paper mail (or if you are no longer interested in receiving our newsletter) please send an email with your preference to Dave Hinson at [davidphinson@yahoo.com](mailto:davidphinson@yahoo.com).*

**YES! I WANT TO HELP SALVADORANS IMPROVE THEIR LIVES!**

Mail donations to:

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All donations are used for education programs. Most donations are used for our university student loans, and some smaller donations are used for other educational purposes such as high school tutors or supplies.

Contribution checks should be made to **PAFM – E.S. Projects**. Your contribution is tax-deductible.

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Wendy Hernandez



Aristides Landaverde



Karla Alfaro



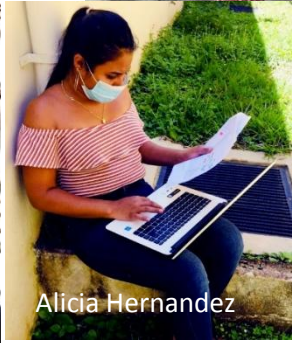
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Alicia Hernandez



Zulma Lopez

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Photos



Diana Pineda



Karla Meija

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