

## PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING

# EL SALVADOR PROJECTS

June, 2021 Newsletter

WWW.PAFMELSALVADORPROJECTS.ORG

### Greetings from Hulda Muaka, Committee Clerk:

Once again we bring you news of current political and social developments in El Salvador, where a new party has taken the presidency and a commanding majority of seats in the national legislature, as well as most municipal governments. We all hope for the best as we see some light at the end of the tunnel, as the whole world fights the pandemic.

The clear message is that we are interconnected and we have to take care of each other. We are grateful for the works of those who came before us, whose foresight has led to better lives for the students who in turn are improving conditions in their families and their communities at large. Our column *The Wind Beneath Our Wings* features Frank Cummings, who dedicated his time and money to better lives in El Salvador through education. Frank shared the vision of the founder of the El Salvador Projects, Carmen Broz: Education is the key to a better future.

The Director's report highlights the successes and struggles of students we assist, with outcomes that are very encouraging despite the odds. This is made possible by your donations. Our appreciation is well expressed in the appeal by Jamie Newton that you'll find in this newsletter.

I am thankful to the El Salvador working group that coordinates the program. Special thanks go to Bill Bauriedel, who has been the treasurer for over 20 years. He recently resigned as treasurer, but remains a Committee member and serves as assistant treasurer to assist Committee member David Hinson, who stepped up to become our new treasurer.

Please keep donating, and remember that no amount is too small. All together, each doing what we can, we provide support that transforms lives and communities.

Be blessed!



Robert Broz  
Project Director

### Director's report

Although the broad goals of my reports to you remain fairly constant from one newsletter to the next – to inform you of conditions in El Salvador as I perceive them from my perspective on the ground here, show you how your donations brighten the lives of young Salvadorans and their

families, acquaint you in very personal ways with several of the students we assist, and thank for your support from the bottom of my heart – this time it feels unusually complex. The nationwide landslide of support for President Nayib Bukele and his *Nuevas Ideas* (New Ideas) party, with a majority of newly elected assembly and city council members taking office on May 1st, has led to speculation about the future of tiny El Salvador. I offer my insights with some foreboding, cautioning you that much cannot be known until we see how the New Ideas Party uses its majority at both local and national levels. In contrast, it will be a pleasure to update you on our educational programs and highlight the lives of several students. I also want to renew a standing invitation. *Would you like to visit El Salvador, meet people you've read about in our newsletters, and learn directly about the projects you support?* Please contact me or the Committee, and we'll help you make that happen!

The February 28, 2021 elections in El Salvador were preceded by tension and some violence. President Bukele and his fanatic New Ideas supporters fueled intolerance by supporters of political parties with illegal campaign practices

and rumors of potential voter corruption. There were also some clear cases of abuse by members of the well-established ARENA and FMLN parties. On the Friday before Election Day, an official central government program called “a computer for every student” was started, and each of the estimated 47,000 public high school students who were in their final year received a name-brand laptop of good quality. Many of these students were 18 years old and eligible to vote the following Sunday. Since the elections, all public school teachers have received laptops as well as some first and second year high school students, but the vast majority of public school students have no idea if or when they may receive their computers. With the national debt at 104% of GDP, the current government will find it difficult to complete projects of this scale without raising taxes and/or continuing to increase the national debt.

Suchitoto, where I have lived most of my 25 years in El Salvador, was one of the FMLN political strongholds. FMLN votes reached 70% in presidential elections and averaged around 60% in municipal and National Assembly elections. I have said publicly that it would take 20 years for the opposing ARENA party to win in Suchitoto, and this only if the FMLN local governments really went awry. I never imagined this new scenario, with the New Ideas party formed by thousands of discontented supporters from virtually every other political party in the country. On February 28 when I went to vote I saw things that upset me, and later I found that this was happening around the country. Several New Ideas election workers were not allowed to participate, as it seemed the Supreme Electoral Tribunal had not given them their official credentials. As a result, voting was slower than usual in these booths, with suspicion that it was a ploy to offset voter turnout. This situation at the polling center in Suchitoto made many voters more tense. For the first time ever, I felt uneasy casting my vote.

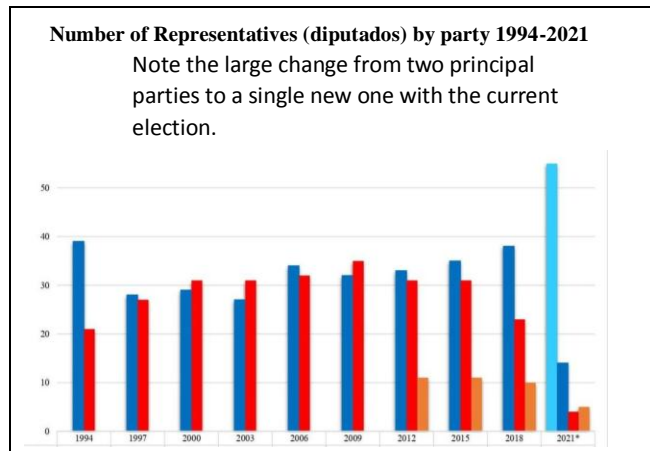
After polling centers closed in Suchitoto and after the very close race, the New Ideas party won by just over 600 votes. I have already congratulated the incoming mayor, Denys Miranda, and the city’s legal representative, Lupe



Denys Miranda, Incoming Mayor, Suchitoto

Barrera, both of whom I have known for years and consider friends. Both mentioned a formal meeting with the new city council to discuss scholarships, education, and tourism. I am hopeful that we will continue to receive the small financial support we use for our coed student house, and that they will continue an already established municipal scholarship program, but I will not be surprised if these programs are no longer part of the municipality’s priorities.

Independently of what went on prior to Election Day, the results changed El Salvador’s politics overnight. With close to 51% of the voters casting ballots, the New Ideas party won not only 56 seats of the 84 in the Assembly but a historic 152 of the 262 municipalities, including



all of the department (state) capitals. With a qualified majority of their own, President Bukele and New Ideas can literally pass any legislation they propose, with little opposition from the FMLN with only 4 seats or Arena, who kept just 14 seats. If we add the coalition GANA party for whom Bukele won the presidency, he has guaranteed support of 64 of the 84 votes.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, the newly elected National Assembly took their seats for their first session of the three-year mandate. One of the first motions passed was to dismiss five of the Supreme Court Judges, naming five new judges who most consider supporters of Bukele and the New Idea party. A few minutes later the Attorney general was dismissed. As days pass even some of Bukele's supporters are becoming concerned, although the vast majority are celebrating their new political power. Most human rights groups, the international community, and local opposition parties are referring to these bold acts as a political coup.

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, Bukele invited most international envoys in El Salvador to what was represented as a private meeting, Bukele later had the meeting broadcast nationally, arousing even more concern. After citing a few passages from the Constitution, he told those present that he was "cleaning house," it was really none of their business, and they should not get involved. The meeting focused on the dismissal of the Supreme Court judges, which many see as revenge by Bukele and the New Ideas Assembly members, because those judges had opposed some elements of the strict "stay put" policies implemented early in the Covid-19 pandemic (March, 2020), policies that approached martial law. The majority of the opposition see this as the start of something much worse, reminiscent of the zero tolerance of opposing groups in the 70s and 80s, which could easily lead to future political persecutions, paramilitary groups, illegal detentions, and disappearance of those who publicly oppose the regime.

Like many, I worry about constitutional changes to the electoral system that could turn El Salvador back into a military dictatorship with a president who could be reelected indefinitely rather than limited to one five-year term. Mentioning my worries to younger New Ideas supporters, I am surprised at their innocence and lack of knowledge of how this qualified majority could change El Salvador for the worse. I feel a little reassurance when some remark, "They have only three years, and if they turn out to be like the others or corrupt, we will vote them out, too." This idea seems common today, as many question

what real changes will happen – if all students will indeed receive computers someday, if crime will continue to fall, if the economy will improve, and most of all, if political corruption will finally end or if El Salvador will return to a succession of one military dictatorship after another, as in the past.

Although I am not a supporter of the New Ideas party, I too hope that this major change from old school political parties and politicians to the younger New Ideas politicians can make El Salvador prosper and become a better place for the majority of the people. But now, after Bukele and New Ideas politicians have held power only a few weeks, I share the fears expressed by many that El Salvador may lose much of what was gained at the cost of so many lives during the civil war of the 1980s – a functional multiparty democratic system. That system suffered chronic problems, with some corrupt politicians and poor use of government funds; but it had working checks and balances between the parties and separation of power between the executive and legislative branches, with oversight from the Supreme Court. A democratic system... now gone with one motion and a rise of hands from the 56 young New Ideas politicians as a sign of loyalty to their supreme leader, Nayib Bukele.

To conclude my review of conditions in El Salvador, I want to bring you up to date on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Vaccinations are in progress. All frontline health workers, police, and military have received their first and second doses. In April, all public and private school teachers received their first and second vaccinations. During April and May, the general population from elders down to age 50 have received their vaccines as well. I got my first shot on April 14, and my second in May. Public schools reopened in late April on a partial schedule, with elementary students going to school for only two hours every other day. Nobody knows why or for how long, but the central government continues providing food packages to literally all Salvadoran homes. On April 11<sup>th</sup> 18,000 packages were distributed in Suchitoto, which has a total population of only 27,000. At our home, where we receive one package and our oldest daughter with two kids

receives another, we still have food items from the last five deliveries. We are looking for families who might welcome some of the items we won't use, before they expire or go bad. There is no financial accountability for these and other COVID-19 relief efforts. We know only that the Executive branch has received around 5 billion dollars in foreign loans since May of 2020. Therefore, as you can imagine, things in El Salvador may be better than in other parts of the world, and we are thankful that COVID -19 cases and deaths have never reached levels as high, proportionately, as in the US and some other parts of the world. I feel very fortunate that my family and those of the majority of our students have not experienced illness or death from the pandemic.

### Our programs at work

We continue to work with the public school and community of El Barío, as we have for many years. This year we are providing a partial stipend to one of the school's teachers, which enables the school to keep two grades separate. We have supported a separate teacher for the past four years, but in 2021 we are changing to pay extra hours to the administrative assistant, Wilson Olmedo. Besides the support for Wilson, we are developing some extracurricular programs for high school students, which we will start in May or June. At the community level, we continue to provide support to the youth group in El Barío that works with the elders in the community. This program started as Project AGE (Adults, Glasses, and Education – or *Adultos, Gafas, y Educación*) which provided reading glasses to elders. It evolved to become a much more active program, with youth making periodic visits to each elder's home. They enjoy these visits, as do the elders, who typically receive few visits from family or friends. Several of our current university students also develop programs and projects within their communities, voluntarily complying with the social work hours we require when things are normal.

We began this academic year with 19 continuing students, down from the 20 continuing students we expected because in 2020 one left the program. Although I did my best to motivate her, even suggesting that she might postpone her

studies, she declined without explanation. This has happened a couple of times over the years, and it always leaves me wondering if I could have done more, especially in cases like hers where I see so much potential. The 19 continuing students are all doing as expected under these adverse conditions. The selection process that led to our five new students was a bit behind schedule, as various universities had delayed enrollment when the second semester of 2020 took more time. Four of the new students were selected in late January, as usual, and the last in late February, although I had expected this student to enter our program much earlier. Only two of our new students are recent high school graduates from the graduating class of 2020 in El Barío. I tend to worry more about whether these newer students will be ready academically for university studies. I will tell you more about both of these young men in our November newsletter, after I get to know them better.

It's always a pleasure to tell you about our students. For this newsletter I've selected two continuing students, both women and each unique in her own way, and also a new student who entered our program largely because of his own determination.

I have known the family of Desyi Lizeth Avalos Artiga for many years, as her older sister Erika was in our program for most of a year. At that time I met her father, Jose, when he attended an optional student meeting (something I welcome as a sign of parent involvement). Near the end of Erika's first year at the university her mother, Violeta, gave birth to the youngest sister, Daniela. With serious complications, Violeta was

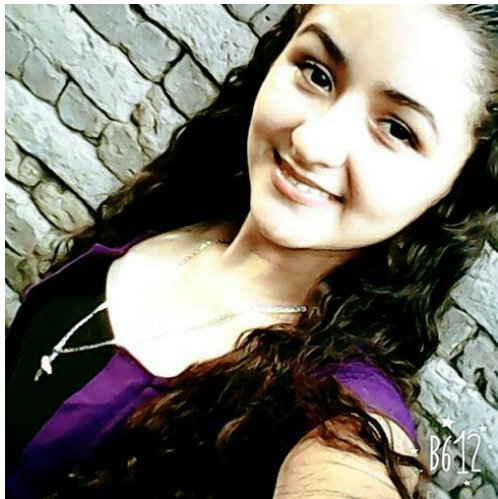


Erika Avalos with Daniela

interned at the hospital for more than two months. A few days after the birth of Daniela, Erika informed me that

she would not be able to continue her studies because she had to take care of the baby and the rest of the family. I was heartbroken and, in a way, inspired as well, seeing bright Erika drop from her studies and take on pretty much all of the family's needs. I told her at the time that she would have a place in our program if she ever decided to continue her studies, and she quietly said that maybe when her sister graduated from high school she could enter the program.

In 2018, Deysi submitted her application and entered our program to study psychology at the National University. She is an excellent student, and a resident at our student house in San



Deysi Lizeth Avalos Artiga

Salvador. Her little sister, Daniela, is now 5 years old. Their mother, Violeta, continues to have health issues. I think she may spend more time in hospitals than at home. In April Deysi, one of a few students using our student house in San Salvador during the pandemic, called me to ask if her mother could spend a night at the house as she had recently been released from the hospital but it was too late to make the trip back to the village. I quickly consulted with the other five students who were using the house, and all agreed that it would be fine. Knowing the financial situation of our students and their families, I offered to drive into the city and take her mother back to their home in rural Copapayo. Jose, the father, came to my house, and we drove to the city together. By noon we were back in Copapayo, where I had time to talk with Erika and get to know Daniela and the parents.

Although Violeta will have surgery, her condition is precarious and she could have complications at any time. She knows her condition has affected both Erika and now more recently Deysi. I did my best to let her know how proud she should be of all her daughters and her husband, and that only God and time will see what happens. Privately I have also spoken with Erika and Deysi, assuring them that my family is willing to help if and when necessary. I know very few families who could have dealt with this situation as well as Violeta and Jose's.

Over the past 4 years I have mentioned Angelica Guadalupe Menjivar Melgar several times. Today I want to tell you how I learned not to trust my first impressions, especially when it comes to making decisions about our university applicants. Angelica, who is now in the fifth and last year of our program and of her study program in law at the Technological University of El Salvador (UTEC), has definitely proved me



Angelica Guadalupe Menjivar Melgar

wrong. She has never had any academic problems, and she maintains a higher than normal GPA. When I looked over her application more than five years ago, I was not impressed by her average high school grades, low exit exam score, and failure to make it into the National University. On the outside, I found a young woman who seemed more concerned with her appearance than anything else. As I usually do, I inquired about about Angelica and her family at the school with the principal and teachers, and in the community of El Barío where she is from. I

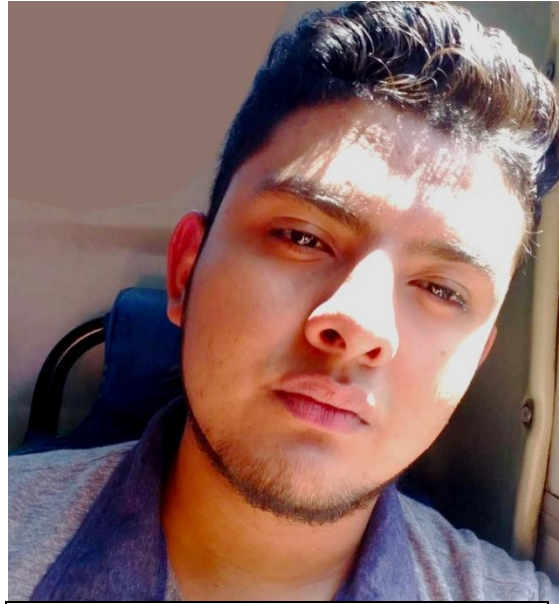
was told that both parents had passed away when she was just a child, and that initially her grandmother and then an older brother had brought her up. No one else in the family had ever finished high school. I took a leap of faith and added her name to the list of approved students, hoping in the back of my mind that she would be able to pass her classes. Not only did she pass her classes, but she is now close to finishing her degree, with the maturity that comes from five years of study. Since Covid-19, I've provided most students' monthly stipends in cash. When Angelica arrived on the back of a motorcycle for her stipend, I asked, "Is that your brother?" and she replied "No he's my boyfriend." When I asked how long they had been dating, she smiled and said since she was in high school. I smiled back, remembering how my mother, Carmen, would say that by supporting superior education you also reduce the number of teen pregnancies. It's good to be reminded of the multiple benefits that come from projects like ours, something that becomes all too obvious when I look back at many of Angelica's schoolmates who were not able to continue their studies.

Let's look now at one of our new students, a young man with determination to study, finish his program, and become a productive professional. In most years, I receive applications from high school students who have yet to graduate. This provides very little information, so deciding which students merit support for the limited spots we have open is a difficult and emotional task. This year was an exception, and three of our five new students had already started their university programs when they applied.

I encountered Dennys Adonay Trejo Joachin last year as he waited on our table at a newer restaurant that had opened after lockdown outside of Suchitoto. After Adonay told me he had studied with my son Roberto, I asked if he had continued his studies after high school. He asked if I remembered him, and mentioned that he had applied to our program several years ago when graduating for high school. I told him that I did not remember him, and that I receive many applications each year. He told me he was studying medicine while working, with several

delays in his studies because of his situation. I invited him to apply again, telling him what he needed to present. That evening the first of his requirements were waiting in my inbox.

Adonay lives with his mother, who is a domestic worker, and his younger sister, who is



Dennys Adonay Trejo Joachin

also studying medicine. He has been working weekends and using his income to pay both tuitions. Looking over his academic record, I noted that he withdrew two consecutive semesters. When I questioned him, he said that at the time he had been laid off and had no choice but to withdraw from the classes. Looking closely at his situation, I saw that he was technically in his last year of course work. With only six classes left, if all goes well he will start his rounds in 2022, for which he will receive a small stipend. He is set to graduate in 2024, but most likely will only be in our program this year and perhaps the first semester of 2022. Adonay's determination and his good grades are what led me to accept his application. Getting to know him better each month, I also see that he is very organized and mature.

### Where they are today

Our program supported Henry Wilson Olmedo several years ago when he studied a two-year technical program in computer maintenance. During those two years he also took English classes, which sparked his desire to continue his studies at the National University in an English program with a specialty in Education. He initially started the program in a new satellite



Wilson Olmedo

campus at the high school in Suchitoto, but the demand was so low that he ended up attending regular classes at the main campus in San Salvador.

Working part time at the school in El Barrio where he lives allowed him to help with his own education as well as supporting for two years his younger brother Edenilson, who also studies at the National University but as a physical education teacher. Besides being the school's academic assistant Wilson also has taught computer classes, tutored and taught English to middle and high school students, and provided

the regular maintenance of the computer at the school.

This year Wilson graduated with honors from the National University. He talks about continuing with a master's and perhaps someday getting his Ph.D.! He represents motivation at its best, and not only insisted that his younger brother study but in 2020 motivated his older sister, who finished high school 10 years ago, to enroll at the University as well. He is the sole breadwinner of the family with his part-time job with the Ministry of Education, and now with our added stipend for teaching English. With those limited funds, he supports both his sister and his brother with their needs and education.

Wilson not only influenced his family to seek education, but also helped six students from the 2020 graduating class figure out what they needed to do to continue their studies at the university level. Of these six only two applied to our program, and both were accepted.

I know Wilson will move on in life, continue his studies, and most likely look for a better paying job or a full-time teaching position. If we are lucky he might get a teaching position at the school in El Barío, which I think would be his dream job. I am happy that we can support him, as I feel he is a wonderful asset at the school where he not only teaches but also mentors and motivates students to continue their studies.

I'll conclude my report by wishing all of you the best during these difficult times and in this changing world. We can only hope that with all the turmoil and change we will learn to make the world a better place for all.

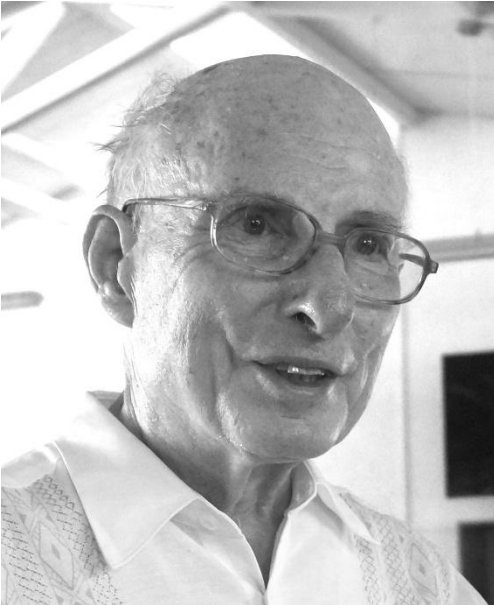
— Robert Broz, Project Director

The El Salvador Project Committee gratefully thanks the family and friends of **Joanne Wytock**, a long-time supporter of the El Salvador Projects, who have honored her memory generously with contributions.

## The Wind Beneath our Wings

**Frank E. Cummings** (2/19/1940-2/19/2016)

- Robert Broz, Director, the El Salvador Projects



A unique and wonderful man whose life expressed his deepest values and convictions, Frank Cummings came to El Salvador with his wife, Carol, after earning a PhD in chemistry from Harvard and teaching for nearly 30 years at Atlanta University. During the 1980's, Frank and Carol opened their home to refugees fleeing from the civil war in El Salvador. They moved to Suchitoto in 2001 after retiring. There both became active with projects sponsored by Atlanta Friends Meeting in the village of El Sitio Cenicero, and Frank tutored students in Math and English. I met them shortly afterwards.

With their projects centered just 4 kilometers from those of the Palo Alto Meeting, we were kindred spirits. The three of us met in silent worship occasionally with visitors from the Quaker meetings in Atlanta and Palo Alto. After Carol died suddenly in 2006, the friendship between Frank and my family deepened. When my wife Tita and I became bird watchers Frank joined us on outings, appreciating Tita's keen sighting skills.

By 2007, Frank and I were working together to coordinate and unify all of the scholarship programs in Suchitoto. In July, we held the first of what became annual University Fairs, where high school students learn about higher education programs throughout El Salvador and sources of financial assistance. Motivated by Frank's commitment and to honor his passing, students formed a new scholarship association and have organized the fairs themselves for the past four years.

At about the same time, Frank inspired the local priest to start a parish scholarship program that began with weekly donations of \$0.25 by Catholics from poor rural villages. The program grew quickly when Frank added funds from Carol's life insurance. He personally funded what he named the Cummings Family scholarships, Suchitoto's only program based on academic achievement, for which Frank handpicked top students from the local high school.

Frank's questions about why we did not take applicants from the high school in town led me to change our policy, opening applications for support to students from rural villages for whom the school in town was the only option. When gang activity forced closure of the house we rented for students in the capital, Frank suggested that we rent a larger house closer to the National University. He shared the rental so that students from the other programs could also stay in San Salvador.

In late 2014, low energy and fevers led Frank to suspect that he had the Chikungunya virus. At my urging, he saw his physician, and within a month he had returned to Atlanta for care by his regular doctor. What was at first diagnosed as a rare blood disease that could be controlled later turned out to be leukemia. Frank returned to El Salvador in 2015 for a last visit with all his friends. He died peacefully on his 76<sup>th</sup> birthday, with his sons Andrew and Robert by his side.

Frank's life of generosity and dedication to social justice and education was evident to all who knew him, but the way he planned every aspect of his departure from this world left many in awe. I confided in him as my dear friend and mentor through the years. As the end of his life neared, I realized that he looked at me as a cherished friend as well, perhaps even as his oldest son. Frank Cummings was, and continues to be, the wind beneath my wings. The benefits to the El Salvador Projects of his guidance and partnership cannot be overstated.

*"It no longer bothers me that I may be constantly searching for father figures; by this time, I have found several and dearly enjoyed knowing them all." – Alice Walker*



Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

Your donations bring the light... Please continue to contribute, if you can

The new dawn blooms as we free it for there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it. (Amanda Gorman, The Hill We Climb)

When young Amanda Gorman concluded her poem at the inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris with these words on January 20, 2021, she reminded us that it is open to all of us to release the dawn of a new era, to perceive the light of hope – to have the courage to declare that the light continues to shine and that we ourselves can see it, and finally, to discover within ourselves the bravery to be the light that illuminates the path ahead for others.

You, the supporters of the El Salvador Projects, are bringers of light to the students we assist and to their families. Through the hardest of times in El Salvador and in the U.S., even though this pandemic that has severely affected so many people worldwide, you've continued the donations we allocate with great care to open a new and promising future to young Salvadorans. Robert Broz's accounts of their lives and progress make it real. Thanks to your generosity, Wilson Olmedo strengthens the curriculum and inspires students in the school of the village of El Barío, where he grew up. Your donations make it possible for Angelica Menjivar to study law, for Deysi Avalos to begin her studies in psychology despite the impact of her mother's long illness on the whole family, and for Adonay Trejo to pay his tuition and his sister's while they both study medicine.

All together – Robert as Director, Committee members, the students who help one another succeed and continue to serve their communities, and you who contribute financially to make it all possible –hand in hand, we climb a steep hill. Let us all find the bravery to continue to be the light.

Jamie Newton, for the El Salvador Projects Committee

YES! I WANT TO HELP SALVADORANS IMPROVE THEIR LIVES!

Mail donations to:

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Check here if you want your gift to support a college student.  
(Please specify on your check memo line "college loans")

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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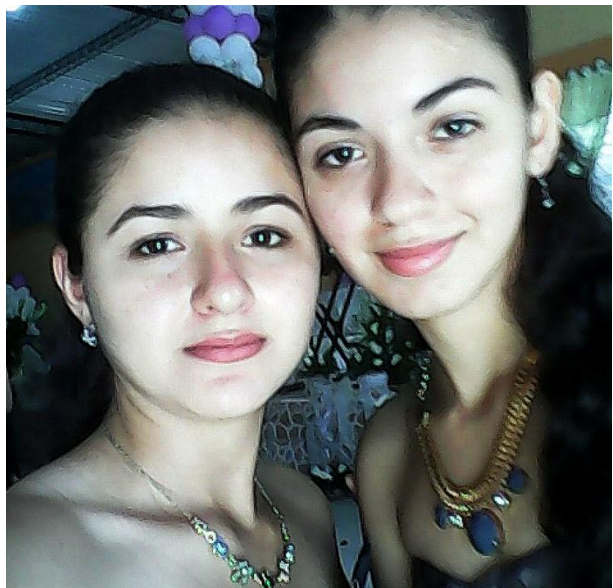
Frank Cummings



Robert and wife, Tita



Angelica Guadalupe Menjivar Melgar



Deysi and Erika Avalos