

# PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING

# EL SALVADOR PROJECTS

November 2022 Newsletter

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## The Clerk's letter, by Hulda Muaka

Happy Thanksgiving! Happy Holidays!

It is that time of the year when we express our gratitude for the good in the World. It is also a time that we reflect on what we can do to make a positive change around us. As noted in our appeal letter that appears on page 9, William Penn once said, **Any good that we can do.....Let us do it now.** Please consider donating to Palo Alto Friends El Salvador Projects. Our goal is to make changes in the communities we serve through Education.

The extensive report by Robert Broz, the Projects' Director, tells a success story of Dr Rafael Rivas who runs his own private clinic in his community and offers great services. Rafael was an ambitious student in our program and had a dream of becoming a medical doctor. Read his amazing story on page 4.

The students we support do not just acquire classroom education, they have a Vision to improve their communities and hence the many development projects that emerge due to the needs of their communities. For instance, during the pandemic the youth visited the elderly and the sick and assisted with getting groceries to them. The activities help the bonding between the age groups and the community at large. Some students also lend a helping hand to those that needed help negotiating the challenges of virtual learning during the pandemic. However, some of the challenges have led to two of our students dropping out of college this year but hopefully will enroll in future.

This newsletter continues to highlight the social, political, and economic conditions in El Salvador. This section is important as it gives you the conditions under which we operate. Robert sums up by pointing out: "Hope carries us forward in the dark times, always seeking the Light....."

Last but not least is the section *The Wind Beneath our Wings* which features Lynn Mitchell, who was active with the committee for many years, served as Clerk, and is a long term contributor.

Thanks again for your continued contributions that change lives of talented students from underprivileged families. Be blessed to bless.

## Director's Report



Robert Broz  
with Tita  
Project Director

Dear Friends and supporters,

I'll begin this report with updates on our work since our June newsletter, with a detailed review of one especially inspiring graduate, Doctor Rafael Rivas. You'll love his story! My commentary on political and social conditions in El Salvador follows that. As you'll see, it is sobering, and as I wrote it I have had to try to temper my own alarm and dismay while sharing my experiences and concerns with you frankly. We are called to bring light into the darkness, and so the El Salvador Projects will continue in that spirit, assisting young people and communities to journey toward a more promising future.

### The projects – activities, students, graduates

Against a dark backdrop of troubling political and social trends in El Salvador, our projects continue to support local initiatives for education and community wellbeing, and open opportunities for bright young people with vision and strong motivation. In the community and public school in El Barío, your donations support an extra teacher for special topics: One of our outstanding graduates, Wilson Olmedo, the part-time academic assistant at the K-12 school, receives a small stipend from our projects for teaching classes to high school students in English and Computer Science. Wilson has also

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done wonderful work motivating and mentoring the small senior class, and 8 of the 13 who will graduate aspire to continue studies at the university level. Two of these recently passed the entrance exam at the National University. We ended our tutoring program in Math, Science, Social Science, and Language in



Saturday science class in El Barío

early October, because attendance in this voluntary program for juniors and seniors every other Saturday had dropped. In discussion with our committee in Palo Alto, it was decided that in future years the program should not be based on a minimum number of students or cost per student, as it is a way to truly benefit those who are determined to excel in high school and university studies.

The youth group in El Barío has recently focused their energies on providing support to families after the death of a family member. Unfortunately, there have been several deaths in the small village of El Barío since my last report in June. Accompaniment by the youth group began before I arrived in El Salvador in 1994. Although the participating youths change as people age, some leave the village to study, and new leadership evolves, this very personal community service has continued. Sometimes it means raising funds for a simple coffin, coffee, and pastries for nine days of prayer sessions with flowers. Sometimes it's just being a kindly presence, and helping to get the word out to family and friends of the recently deceased. It

was discovering this activity so many years ago that showed me the potential that supporting an active youth group could have for nurturing the development of public-spirited young people and strengthening community bonds. Our support to the group has varied over the years, but we have always supported something that they developed on their own, such as ongoing visits to elderly couples and singles who have little family close by. This visitation evolved from a program we created years ago, called *Project AGE*, for “Adultos, Gafas, y Educación,” or “Adults, Glasses, and Education”, distributing reading glasses for elders when glasses were scarce in El Salvador, few of the older rural people could read much, and the glasses enabled people with diminished vision to resume fine work such as sewing and repairing tools.

Service to the school and community of El Barío as well as several other rural villages and schools in Suchitoto received indirect support from our projects in the form of social work hours done by our university students. Since we implemented this requirement six years ago, I have found it one of the most beneficial aspects of our programs. The 40 required hours were suspended in 2020 and made voluntary in 2021 due to COVID restrictions, then reinstated in 2022 as the world and El Salvador relaxed pandemic constraints. In El Barío, we had four students teaching computer skills, physical education, and accounting at different levels. At another K-12 school in Copapayo we had three students tutoring in reading, math, and English. Four other students helped out at a senior center on weekends here in Suchitoto. Still others tutored and mentored in their homes or community centers. I see these micro projects by our university students as bringing a tenfold return on the stipends they receive to continue their university studies.

I'll report next on our university program in 2022. I'm glad to affirm that most of our university students continue to do well in their second semester as usual. Unfortunately, I must also acknowledge two disappointments. One student in his second year is now on my short list of “voluntary withdrawals” from

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our program because he enrolled in only one class (without informing me) and did not comply with basic requirements, despite special assistance I offered. The second case, a young woman I regarded as a star student, has her support temporarily suspended after the faculty of her modern languages program delayed the start of her classes, discouraging her from enrolling. Her next opportunity will come in the second semester of 2023. In the meantime, her English proficiency should enable her to get a job and help support her family in a time of difficulty. One of our bilingual committee members has offered to hold hour-long conversational, reading, and perhaps essay writing tutorials with her, so that she can refine her English language skills before she re-enrolls.

The other 16 continuing students continue not only to do well, but to excel in both their studies and their community lives. Of those, four will finish in our program this year. They include two lawyers, one psychologist, and one doctor (although she still requires two years of practice and rounds in national hospitals and clinics, she will receive a stipend from the government that makes our assistance unnecessary).

For the coming year, I am sure that as usual we will receive more applications than we can approve. However, I find it very concerning that after the first round of testing to enter the National University held on October 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, it was reported that the final number of prospective students was nearly 5000 fewer than last year. It is also concerning news that the central campus will be closed for the 2023 academic year, as major investments and work will be done in preparation for the Central American Games which precede the Olympics. Although the improvements are wonderful and needed, it seems like another blow likely to lower the morale of both continuing and new students, who will be forced to continue their studies virtually.

This semester our student house is getting more use. We now average about 12 students using the house on any given day, which is still well below the maximum of 22 students. With some negotiation

on a rent increase of the house and a new contract, the owners have done some needed upkeep, fully painting the house inside and out as well as some minor plumbing and electrical work that was needed.

A year ago, I asked our students to write about their experiences sustaining their studies despite Covid-19 restrictions. We shared one student's reflections in our November 2021 newsletter. I continue to find the students' creativity and resolve inspiring, so I want to share another of the responses I received.

Edenilson Antonio Olmedo Velasquez, who studies physical education at the National University, after telling about problems with connectivity and waking up early to walk a half an hour to a cousin's house so he could connect for his classes, really hit home when he spoke about how the difficulties and self-discipline changed his life and how he has adapted personally to the COVID conditions in El Salvador. He says:



*On the other hand, my obsession has always been to be seen by my family and friends as an exemplary person. I think I have shown my family that when one proposes challenges and works hard to meet them, opportunities will arise.*

*Throughout the quarantine, I set out to improve my health and started exercising approximately one hour per day. The results were good and some opportunities were opened up for me in different areas like being selected to play soccer on a semi-professional team. From this effort people now see and believe that I have the potential to play that level of sports. The result is already being shown and my family is proud and sees me as I am, a person who does not give up and works hard for what he is passionate about.*

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*I am happy to receive support from my family since they always motivate me and never discourage me from continuing to dream and achieve my goals. Covid-19 was what came and reinforced so much, showing me how important personal health is, and that was part of how I managed to adapt to the hours of exercise, and organize my time between exercise, soccer and my studies, which made me feel great about myself. Now I have confidence and feel it is easy to meet both long and short term goals, but above all that there is motivation and most importantly happiness in my life.*

It's interesting, to say the least, to know how our Salvadoran students, like those around the world, have adapted to the situation. As seen in Edenilson's comments, some have made the best of a situation that many see as hopeless, taking advantage to improve their own lives and the lives of those around them, a true sign of how resilient humans can be.

Having mentioned in past newsletters my small business in tourism, I am often surprised to see how my work with the projects overlaps with hosting tourists from around the world. Recently I had two clients who made this all the more real. The first was a couple from Maryland who just packed up and brought a suitcase filled with school supplies. Most of these I took out to the Day Care Center in Santa Anita that almost always needs even basic supplies. The rest will go to kindergarten and first grade teachers in El Barío. Our new friends Brandi and Marianne



Day Care Center Santa Anita Cooperative  
Mother educators and children

enjoyed the photos I sent of the mother-educators and children receiving the supplies. I hope you enjoy them, too.

A week later, while I was providing a multi-day two-country experience to a woman from Australia, we ended up in Morazán for a two-day civil war history tour. I had contacted an old friend, Rafael Rivas, a participant in one of the FMLN groups during the civil war as well as an active member of the El Gigante Cooperative that we supported for many years. The tour, which I have done with other friends and ex-guerrilleros, was impressive and informative, but I was especially struck by Rafael's news of his son, also named Rafael. This former student of ours had gone back to school, graduated as a doctor, and opened his own clinic in the community he comes from, Los Quebrachos. That same day I had the immense pleasure of hearing from two unprompted patients about how good a doctor young Rafael is. Upon my return to Suchitoto, I contacted Doctor Rafael Rivas to ask for an update, since I had last seen him several years ago. As I listened, I decided that he would be the student to highlight in our newsletter section on *Where They Are Today*.

In 2003, as a fifth-grade student from the El Gigante Cooperative, Rafael Rivas entered our program. His parents received a small yearly scholarship of \$24 – just enough for one uniform, one pair of shoes and a school package of pencils, pens, and notebooks. Our programs back then allowed for only one child from each family, and they continued through high school with a larger amount \$125/year for middle school and \$200/year for high school students. The scholarship students in El Gigante tutored younger children every Saturday. The cooperative and community of El Gigante was smaller but one of the most organized we have worked with. The Saturday classes given by the scholarship students are just a small example of this organization. Rafael told me that as a child he always dreamed about becoming a doctor, but that when he graduated from high school the situation was different, so he entered our university program in 2007 in a two-year technical program as an

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electrician. Rafael easily found a job and for two years, he worked with the telecommunications company, Navege.com, but his dream was still there. In 2010 he took the entrance exam, and entered the



Medical program at the National University in 2011. He studied his first three years at the campus in San Miguel, then completed years 4-7 in San Salvador and his 8th year of social service at the Health Unit in Perquín, Morazán in 2018. He mentioned casually to me that he had received financial support from his family as well as winning a Presidential scholarship (given only to the two best students from each department!). He also talked of working during the semester breaks and summers as an electrician. That same year, Rafael married his girlfriend, María Tatiana Martínez, in February and became a father in December to their first daughter, Lidia Tatiana Rivas Martínez.



Rafael wanted to continue his studies and in 2019 was accepted to the residency program at the

Rosales National Hospital in General Surgery, but financial realities forced him to withdraw from that program. He moved back to his home town and, realizing that jobs within the national health system were few and hard to get, decided to work at the private clinic of one of his colleagues. There he continued to get needed experience, as well as learning about the business component of owning and running a private clinic. Dr. Rivas was able to open his own clinic in 2021, and from what I heard recently he is considered a great medic who gains patients daily. CliMed offers general consultations, medical laboratory services, and medicines. In addition, Dr. Rivas humbly says that they have been doing some small projects like road repairs within the community! In addition to the Rivas family, I encountered other past community leaders and ex-scholarship students in Morazán. In a future newsletter I plan to highlight Clelia Saenz, who is



currently working as a municipal accountant in San Francisco Gotera, the state capital of Morazán, as well as providing accounting services to individuals and helping out at the family business – a growing restaurant, store, honey production, and more with her younger brother, Rudis, and her mother Silvia. For now, I'll simply show you a photo of myself with this family in Morazán.

## Social, political, and economic conditions in El Salvador

On September 15, 2022 – Independence Day in El Salvador – President Nayib Bukele announced that when his five-year term ends in 2024 he will seek re-election, despite the country’s constitutional ban on consecutive terms for the president. Although not surprised, I find myself shocked and disheartened by this development, along with other major executive actions that have weakened democratic institutions and eliminated the most basic civil rights. Some of you, our dedicated supporters, have told me that you rely on my personal observations from right here on the scene for your understanding of social, political, and economic conditions in El Salvador. With that in mind, I’ll do my best to summarize the essentials of what is in fact a complicated reality. I’ll begin with the current situation and its origins in recent history.

In his historic Independence Day speech of 9/15/2022, announcing his intention to seek reelection in 2024, President Bukele declared that “it would be unwise (stupid) to stop the progress made during [his] presidency because of constitutional limits.” What was that “progress” – the context of his announcement?

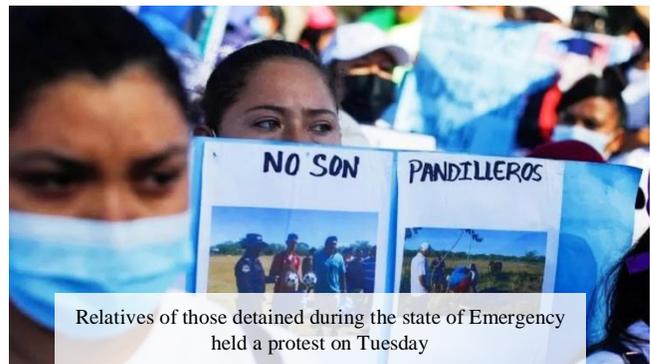


The progress – that El Salvador went from one of the most dangerous countries to one of the safest in Latin America, the major infrastructure improvements in highways, bypasses, and

roundabouts, the success of the Surf City campaign to bring more tourists, the potential of Bitcoin and bitcoin city for investors – all this was more than enough to keep his committed support base happy. He did not mention the national debt reaching the highest level in history, that the country will most likely be unable to repay foreign bonds/loans, and that no fiscal transparency will continue after the

passing of a bill, so that federal funds and spending will no longer be known by the public, and publication of that information will be done only after seven years.

As the FMLN Mayor of San Salvador, Bukele initiated numerous programs that were welcomed by many people as truly progressive, but in a dispute with the city council he was ejected from the party, rebranding himself as an independent. He promoted the vision of positive change by “a million sparrows working together,” attracting legions of young supporters as well as disaffected former members of both the FMLN (left-wing) and ARENA (right-wing) parties who were alienated by the well-known plundering of public resources by high officials of both parties, as well not seeing reforms they demanded made in either party. As the presidential candidate of the center-right party GANA, Bukele was elected by a landslide in February of 2019, but his



executive power was limited by a congress that was still controlled by the ARENA and FMLN parties. In February of 2020, Bukele entered the National Assembly where Congress meets accompanied by 40 heavily armed soldiers, a first for El Salvador, demanding they vote in favor of a 109-million-dollar loan from the US to fight crime. When legislators of both parties opposed him, he backed off with his military power play but swore revenge.

President Bukele responded rapidly to the COVID-19 onslaught in March of 2020 with bold restrictions that initially slowed the pandemic in the country, despite congressional opposition and eventually the reversal of some policies that were ruled unconstitutional, like banning Salvadoran

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nationals from entering their own country. Determined to strengthen his powers, Bukele pushed the growth of *Nuevas Ideas* (New Ideas), his own new political party, which swept the mayoral and congressional elections of February 2021. This gave him control of 61 of the 84 votes in Congress, and 152 of the 262 municipalities (including all fourteen state capitals). Seizing the moment, he moved quickly to eliminate any political opposition and overcome the constitutionally imposed separation of powers between the Executive, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Illegally, he replaced five elected Supreme Court judges with others loyal to him, and he replaced the Attorney General with a hand-picked ally. These officials have condoned Bukele's disregard for the constitutional ban on successive terms.

In a previous newsletter report, I described some of the severe restrictions that were imposed at the height of the COVID surge. For example, a person found outside his or her limited residential zone, even for a purpose such as seeking an essential prescription not available within the zone, could be summarily detained. In March of 2022, Bukele and his supporters took another large step toward authoritarian rule when they introduced a 30-day "regime of exception," with suspension of basic civil rights. An outright war on gangs was declared after a bloody weekend in March, when gangs killed 80 people, a murder wave that was rumored to be a reaction to failed secret negotiations between Bukele officials and gang leaders. As I write, the state of exception has been extended seven times. More than 55,000 people have been imprisoned, often with group hearings involving more than 500 detainees. Sentences have become more severe, such as 25 years for accused gang members and 7 years for alleged participation in an illicit gathering. Human rights groups have opened files on over 3000 detainees who have no criminal history, and on many of the over 80 deaths that have occurred in prisons with inhumane conditions. Although I do know personally of a few people with no criminal background who have been arrested, I feel fortunate that nobody from our programs or within the communities where we work has yet been detained.

Responding to criticism of his expansions of executive power, Bukele has nicknamed himself the world's "Coolest Dictator." His high-risk introduction of Bitcoin as an alternative national currency appears to have cost the country dearly, as Bitcoin's value fluctuated erratically and has at this time dropped severely. In a few short years, El Salvador seems to have moved far away from the culturally cooperative, promising character, and functional democracy that impressed me and made me fall in love with the country when I first arrived in 1995 to visit my mother. Although there are great differences between this smallest of the Latin American countries and the US, the world's richest and mightiest nation, I fear that the parallels between the two may mean that in some ways the current experience of Salvadorans may foreshadow aspects of the emerging future of the United States.

Hope carries us forward in dark times, always seeking the light, and so I will conclude on a note of hope. Doctor Rafael Rivas's determination, success, and service stand as a luminous demonstration of how your contributions enable focused projects with a modest budget to transform individual lives, and eventually whole communities. I estimate that he and his family received in direct support perhaps \$2825, from fifth grade through two years of post-high school technical vocational training as an electrician. He then put himself through medical school and now operates a clinic, lab, and pharmacy in his community, providing high quality but low cost health care and supporting communal improvements. I see this strong potential in each of the four students who will finish our program this year. Watch for their accomplishments to be highlighted in future editions of our newsletter!

Thank you for your confidence and your support. Please be aware that the strength we gain from knowing that your dedication and faith continue is as important as your financial generosity, as the Committee and I find our way in partnership with the communities of El Salvador. Let us go forward together with courage!

Robert Broz, Director

# The Wind Beneath our Wings

## Lynn Mitchell

- *Trudy Reagan*, the El Salvador Projects

Lynn Mitchell has had a very long involvement with the El Salvador Projects Committee (ESPC) and Central America. She knew Carmen before the committee began.



Two childhood influences would later draw Lynn Mitchell into involvement with El Salvador. Born in 1937 in New Jersey, she lost her younger brother to polio when she was 12. Her father, having read about Quaker works, sought solace at Plainfield Friends Meeting. Lynn liked to go with him. Also, while in grade school, Lynn read a book which inspired a deep respect and fascination for languages. Later, at Stanford, she set two goals: to be a speaker of Spanish, and to make a hammock!

Early teaching jobs gave her the opportunities to learn and practice Spanish. For example, the teacher's group that went to study Spanish in Guatemala while living with families made a pledge to return to teach it at school. Years later Lynn spent three months living with a family in beautiful Antigua, Guatemala and intensively studying Spanish. Later she was inspired to open an import business with Diana Forsythe of unique and beautiful Central American crafts- weaving, embroidery, ceramics, and wood carving. She found meeting with artisans around Oaxaca, learning about their work and their lives, to be deeply satisfying.

Lynn first came to Palo Alto Friends in 1963. She met Salvadoran Carmen Broz there in 1986. That was an important year for Carmen, who returned to her native country –in war– because SHARE El Salvador recruited internationals to accompany a group of displaced campesinos. They had been confined in a San Salvador church, having been chased off their land. The SHARE El Salvador group agreed to accompany them to their farms in the conflict zone. Dangerous!

In 1988, Carmen retired, and the following year she returned to El Salvador, still at war, to help. Palo Alto Friends formed a support committee. Already the Meeting was a Sanctuary church for local refugees.

At war's end, Lynn and Trudy Reagan visited Carmen in December 2000. Lynn by then was a teacher of English as a Second Language at Foothill College. Carmen had developed several projects in her 12 years there. The community of El Barío, founded by those displaced people, had gone from a school meeting under trees, to three buildings. Next, way out at the Honduran border were our two communities that had been granted some very hilly land in the Peace Accords of 1992. The coffee, teak, and mango trees they planted were already tall. And beehives! A third project beside Ilopango crater lake, was on the inside bank of the crater – extremely steep. Carmen helped them educate their children. Lynn and Trudy were bowled over by the persistence and love people put into growing their communities. They brought back crafts to raise funds in the US – funds suddenly needed! Just after they returned, two severe earthquakes took place! Fortunately, our projects on solid rock survived, but the country's need was dire.

Lynn became chair of the El Salvador committee around 2001. Carmen's 80th birthday in 2003 was a jolly tribute to her and also raised funds. Lynn shepherded the arrangements for it, which involved a large venue to seat 150 guests, food, decorations, and music. All of Carmen's far-flung family came. This celebration made Lynn's time as chair memorable!

She now lives quietly with her partner Don, and still contributes to our student loan fund and during ESP Zoom presentations, occasionally speaks a little Spanish with our University students

**Graduating soon! ...or finishing our program.**



Daniel Eduardo Rivas Mejia Law



Giovanni Alfredo Chevez Ramirez Law



Deysi Lizeth Avalos Artiga Psychology



Keira Julissa Aguilar Pineda Medicine

***Any good that we can do... Let us do it now!***

*I shall pass this way but once. Any good therefore that I can do, any kindness that I can show to a fellow creature, let me do it now. Let me not neglect it nor defer it. Let me do it now, for I shall not pass this way again.*

Attributed to William Penn, and also to another early Friend, Stephen Grellet

**Dear friends/supporters:**

It is no exaggeration to declare that our planet and all of humanity – indeed, all of life – are coping with an unprecedented kaleidoscope of intensifying crises with catastrophic consequences. Within that context, democratic institutions and the practices that sustain them are severely threatened. El Salvador is a country that has already lost precious civil liberties and guarantees for citizen participation, as Robert’s report documents.

The darkness is deep and daunting. Is the little good that we can do truly worthwhile? All of us together – the El Salvador Projects Committee of Palo Alto Friends Meeting, Program Director Robert Broz, visionary young Salvadorans and their rural villages, and you whose donations make it all possible? Or are our shared efforts simply too modest to matter?

A story a friend told me is worth repeating. On a hot summer day, countless starfish had been washed onto the searing sand by a rogue wave. There they lay, dying under the blazing sun. A little girl ran back and forth, choosing starfish that looked as if they could be saved, and tossing them one by one into the safety of the cool sea water. A man watched her for a time, then chided, “Little girl, give it up. You can’t possibly make a difference to all these starfish!” Without pausing, the girl flung another starfish to safety, calling back to the man, “Made a difference to that one!”

My wife, Marion, and I met Rafael Rivas and his son, now Dr. Rafael Rivas, when the younger Rafael was a child receiving just enough money for shoes, a uniform, and school supplies. Robert’s story of this young man’s education and employment as an electrician, then his success in medical school, and now the health care he provides to the community where he grew up – leaves no doubt of the benefits that can flow from a little financial assistance with expressions of confidence. The students we assist choose widely diverse fields of endeavor, and they enrich the lives of their communities in similarly diverse ways.

*Please continue to contribute what you can to the El Salvador Projects. Let us do the good that we can do now together, for we shall not pass this way again.*

Jamie Newton, for the El Salvador Projects Committee

**If you want to receive your newsletter by email please contact [davidphinson@yahoo.com](mailto:davidphinson@yahoo.com)**

YES! I WANT TO HELP SALVADORANS IMPROVE THEIR LIVES!

Mail donations to:

Palo Alto Friends Meeting–El Salvador Projects, 957 Colorado Avenue, Palo Alto, CA 94303

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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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Our Students! 2022



**Inside:**  
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These lower two rows of students all started during COVID.

