

October 2019

Dear Friends of Centro Maya Project,

Nineteen years ago I arrived in San Juan after a 12-hour bus ride from northern Guatemala where I had been living with a host family and studying Spanish. I traveled to San Juan la Laguna to volunteer at a new center for children and adults with disabilities and practice my improved Spanish skills.

San Juan's main street wasn't what I expected. I was looking for a paved road, stores and maybe a restaurant. What I found was women sitting on a dirt road selling vegetables and small fish from baskets, a few horses carrying wood, adobe houses, a few small shops and a large Catholic church. San Juan was much larger than the village I had left, but it didn't seem more prosperous.

My volunteer work introduced me to families living in poverty I never before imagined: meals of corn tortillas and salt, shoeless children, babies with diapers made from old sweaters, dirt floors, no water or electricity and minimal health care from a national clinic without a doctor or medicine. This was the beginning for Centro Maya Project. All of our programs evolved from witnessing severe malnutrition and substandard living conditions.

Fortunately, life in San Juan la Laguna today is very different from what it was in 2000, allowing us to expand our focus to include mountain villages. Please read about these changes and celebrate with me.

Centro Maya Project is looking forward to another great year of helping people as we learn and grow. Your generous donations provide these and other necessary services. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Jeanne Nakamaru

## **Expanding our focus to mountain villages**

The municipal government and other organizations in San Juan now offer more services. Today, schools, public water supply, electricity, a library, doctors, two clinics and pharmacies improve the lives of *San Juaneros*. Tourists visit San Juan and enjoy cafes and shops where local women sell their weavings.

However, when I take an hour bus trip to small mountain villages I am reminded that life for those communities has not changed. It became a goal of Centro Maya Project to promote the well-being so desperately needed for families living closer to the sky.

## **Family food assistance**

More than 3,000 people live in these mountain communities. Centro Maya Project now offers food assistance for families in Palestina, Panyebar and other small communities nearby. HOPE: Helping Other People Eat is our largest program.

Mothers are usually the ones who walk more than an hour each month to pick up the food and carry it home in a basket or feed-bag on their heads. We provide 25 pounds of corn, ten pounds of black beans, powdered milk, high protein cereal, rice, sugar, cooking oil and eggs, as well as toothpaste, vitamins and laundry soap for more than 125 children and women and men. This food assistance has changed their nutritional status from extreme malnutrition to a healthier sustainable diet. In addition, it created new social connections for women.

Even though our food assistance occurs once a month, and the walk is strenuous, these women find joy and hope not only in acquiring food for their families – they look forward to the companionship with women from different villages in the program. I wish I could find a way to share their happy voices, gentle laughter and warm hugs. Perhaps the photo included in this letter of women wearing traditional *traje* getting ready to begin their difficult walk home will help you feel the closeness they share.

## **Water for mountain villages**

Our Water for the Mountain Villages project continues to work to provide potable water for more than 3,000 individuals. Centro Maya Project is working with Engineers Without Borders who are designing a system which will provide clean water to homes in four mountain villages. Through this partnership villagers are clearing away boulders from five springs, and teams of engineering students from Pennsylvania spend their breaks installing water tubing.

When I hiked to the springs this summer, I could hear the water falling on rocks below, an audible sign of progress. Centro Maya Project has been a vital part of

organizing the village Water Committee and coordinating their work with the municipal government, which is responsible for bringing water from the springs to the holding tanks in the villages.

### **School tuition**

*El Fondo para Mi Escuela*, a scholarship program, is now in its eleventh year. Twenty-two students have graduated from high school with career education, and fourteen of these are young women! This November six additional students will complete their studies. In January 2020, when school begins again, all of our remaining students will be in middle or high school. This program has strict guidelines, and students must have good attendance and maintain good grades. Report cards and letters of thanks are sent each year to program sponsors, enabling meaningful connections between donors and students. We are proud of the graduates and thankful to all of the individuals who have supported education for children from elementary through high school. It has been a dedicated commitment.

### **Hearing aid program**

The Centro Maya Project Hearing Aid program has become well known to residents of the towns on Lake Atitlán, and some people travel two hours to have their hearing tested in our quiet quarters located in Clinica San Juanerita. Our new audiology assistant, Lucy, is compassionate, dedicated and a tireless worker. She is trained to examine patients' ears, administer hearing tests, make ear mold impressions and fit individuals with suitable hearing aids using computer software to program the hearing aid. We are grateful to GN ReSound, which has donated more than 225 excellent new hearing aids with cases and batteries to our program since 2015. It is astounding. We appreciate receiving used hearing aids, too.

### **Medical assistance**

Medical assistance continues to help a child with leukemia, people with diabetes or glaucoma, and children with special dietary needs. We pay transportation costs to larger city hospitals when needed. We are fortunate there were not any medical crises in our last calendar year. (Although I did break my arm two weeks before I came home. I discovered how difficult it is to get an x-ray but was surprised to find an orthopedic surgeon working in a village nearby. Sometimes help comes from where I least expect it, filling my heart with joy and the desire to return to my beautiful community of friends and caring strangers.)