

ELLEN DOZIER'S NEWSLETTER

February 2008



Education is a precious commodity in Guatemala for girls and women of all ages. I think about Amalia, a woman who lives near the Presbyterian Seminary where I have lived for 12 years. For many years Amalia has worked in the homes of missionaries who have lived at the Seminary and has helped me weekly for a number of years with cleaning, washing clothes, sometimes cooking, and being a friend. Last year Amalia fulfilled one of her dreams, to graduate from 6th grade! I wonder how many North American women at the age of 60 would toil over math problems, science experiments and grammar to get a 6th grade diploma. Amalia credits her grandchildren with helping her achieve her goal. When she was discouraged one of the grandchildren would offer help with a math problem or words of encouragement, “¡sí se puede!”

(yes, you can do this!) I think of Marta Debbie, Amalia's 13 year old granddaughter. Last year Debbie as she is known by the family finished her first year of básico (comparable to junior high school). She wanted to continue with her studies but there was no money. Her father had abandoned the family, and while both her Mother and Grandmother work there was not enough money to send Debbie and her two brothers to school, so of course the brothers were chosen to continue their studies. At first Debbie accepted her fate, the same fate of many girls in Guatemala who never get beyond 6th grade, and of course there are others who never even graduate from primary school. But somewhere inside Debbie there was a strong desire to continue her studies, so she devised a plan to get the needed funds. She went to her neighbors and to her church community and asked for help and even though her neighbors and church members are also very poor, one gave 10 quetzales (about \$1.20), others gave pens and pencils, another several notebooks. Her school helped as well with a small scholarship. Now Debbie is back in school, but there is the daily struggle. Several weeks ago her grandmother told me that Debbie did not go to school on Valentine's Day because she had no money for a present. The struggle goes on, but like her grandmother Amalia, I think Debbie will graduate one day!

It is good that many U.S. Presbyteries and congregations are working with their Guatemalan



partners to provide scholarship help for children. It is encouraging that these programs are expanding not only to include more children, but also to offer workshops for parents so they can better help their children in school. And there are initiatives from Guatemalan women to provide scholarship help for children. Several years ago a Young Adult Volunteer was concerned that a young girl in the community where she lived, who at the time was 11 years old and had never gone to school, would

never have a chance to study without some outside help. Though the encouragement of the

Young Adult Volunteer, the Presbyterial of Occidente (women's groups in the Presbytery of Occidente) developed a program that offers scholarship help to young girls in their Presbyterial.

The program provides money for registration fees, books, school supplies, uniforms as well as visits by members of the scholarship committee to encourage and help both the parents and the young girls to improve their studies and stay in school. Recently the committee made an exception to the rules of their program to include a scholarship for young boy, Kevin. Both the boy's parents died of AIDS; he and his 12 year old sister, Paula, live with their elderly grandmother. Paula, who is now in her second year of básico, was receiving a scholarship through this program, and the grandmother asked the committee if they could help Kevin as well. After much discussion the committee decided that the compassionate thing to do, even though it went against their rules, was to help Kevin, so he is now in his third year of primaria.

When I first came to Guatemala, some 12 years ago, I was impressed by the hunger of people to learn; they travel many miles via bus or pickup or on foot to get to school; they eat tortillas and beans three times a day (if they are fortunate) while attending week long intensive courses; mothers sell tacos and enchiladas on street corners to have money for their children's education. That hunger continues along with the realization that education is a precious commodity, never to be taken for granted, always to be celebrated, and at times brothers and sisters from other lands can have a part in filling the empty places left by this hunger. Often North Americans who come to Guatemala are overwhelmed by the needs they encounter here. They feel guilty when they think of all they have at home. They want to help but the most sensitive realize that simply handing out money or "stuff" is not truly helping, only encouraging dependence and alleviating for the moment a bit of their guilt. I believe that the scholarship programs offer one way to be in ministry together, each partner helping the other. Those who donate funds receive photos of the children as well as a copy of their grades. "Our Scholarship Children in Guatemala" is the title above some of the children's photos in a U.S. church. While in Guatemala, Paula, Kevin and many other children are able to be in school this year. Perhaps this is a tiny glimpse of the life we profess when we proclaim that we are one family in Jesus Christ.

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Guatemala

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