

English Language Program  
Antigua, Guatemala  
January 3 to January 14, 2011

By Susan Feinberg

For many years, as a former board member and office manager for Maya Educational Foundation, my participation in the English Language Program occurred stateside, providing administrative, logistical and moral support. I met many of the other teachers at various MEF functions and enjoyed the stories about their experiences. This year, I had the opportunity to participate as a volunteer.

I arrived in Guatemala with all the trepidations of first time volunteers, not sure what to expect, anxious about the routine, not sure what the students would be like, not sure if I would measure up as a teacher. The curriculum, developed by volunteers over the seven years of the program, had evolved into an organized and logical schedule, with the flexibility to allow for students at all different levels of English proficiency. Our group consisted of 20 students and 14 teachers. Teachers were paired with one or two students for the first week, switching to different students for the second week.

The day's routine consisted of English class in morning from 8:30 am until noon. After class, students went to lunch with their host families. Optional informal activities were planned each afternoon. These enrichment activities included visits to local sites of interest, singing, dancing, political discussions, presentations by volunteers and experts on a variety of diverse topics. All activities were conducted in English. After the group activity, tutoring was available for individual students who requested help with the day's lesson, with homework assignments, or with something of their choice. After dinner, there were often evening activities planned. Each day was full, exciting, challenging, exhilarating, and exhausting.

As the days flew by, the group dynamics evolved. The beginning students, shy and embarrassed at first, were able to stand before the group and speak in English with confidence. Students, who came from disparate communities all over Guatemala, became a cohesive group, supporting each other and freely sharing their experiences with each other and with the teachers. Bonds between students and volunteers became easy and comfortable.

What impressed me most about this experience was the palpable hunger to learn. The majority of students took advantage of all activities every day. The questions they asked and comments they made during group discussions were mature, thoughtful and relevant. Even during activities that were a bit boring, the students were polite, respectful and attentive. When they evaluated the program on the last day, one repeated comment was that they wanted more activities, shorter breaks and more exposure to English.

I am aware of the great challenges confronting these Maya students in order to reach university level. They must deal with blatant discrimination, financial difficulties, and family demands. I sensed a relentless determination to succeed in their studies and desire to give back to their communities and country. They are all exceptional individuals. To me personally, their attitude and demeanor contrasted vividly with many contemporary American youth, who feel entitled and do only the minimum amount of work to get by.

I am grateful for this opportunity. As volunteers before me have said, the volunteers gain more than the students. It is more about the relationships that develop than about the actual learning or teaching of English. After all, realistically, how much English can be learned in two weeks? The experience of working with young people who respect and want what you have to offer is inspirational. On the other hand, students receive the interest, admiration, and encouragement of adults who are "gringos," providing them with a new perspective on their own lives and their places in the world.

In encourage readers to contact MEF to learn more about participating in this unique experience. **NO SPANISH REQUIRED!**