



An update of the Bienestar project is long overdue but here it is at last. As you may recall, our church community supports an outreach project in Guatemala in collaboration with nursing alumni from Selkirk College. We are working closely with the Cooperative of Nuevo Horizonte (New Horizons), a small village of 450 people that is located in the Petén, an area most known for exceptional tropical flora and fauna and the infamous Mayan ruins of Tikal. However, it is also home to high levels of poverty and marginalization of the indigenous peoples, 70% of whom live in isolated rural hamlets without any infrastructure. Bordering Mexico and Belize, it is also a haven for drug trafficking, cattle rustling, and extensive monocrop agriculture of African palm oil.

In the midst of these challenges and widespread political corruption at the national level that led to the conviction of former President Molina in 2015 and corruption charges against current President Morales, the members of the cooperative work steadfastly to be self-sufficient and to support youth and women's leadership, both within the cooperative and the region as a whole. They have prioritized youth education scholarships and employment, women's development, and community health promotion as the way forward and so that is the focus of Bienestar.

We are grateful to the local women's group that administers the scholarships for us. This is no easy task as there are many more applications than resources. We continue to be hugely impressed by the high standards to which they hold the scholarship recipients. Each of them is required to volunteer in the community and share of their time and talents. They view this as a way of paying forward their blessings of talent, family dedication, and financial support. Pretty significant for the growth of leaders as the recipients are mentored to understand that to gain an education is to also gain greater opportunities to serve others. You can review the 2015-2016 project update on the Nelson United Church website at <http://nelsonunitedchurch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Bienestar-January-2017-update-1.pdf>

**Projects of 2017** - we are delighted to report that due to an increase in donations, your support has helped

- ✓ Launch the Corazon de Maria Spanish Language School (\$1121). The school is the vision of a small group of young people from Nuevo Horizonte who value community tourism that involves tourists and local communities genuinely sharing and learning from each other. And so with seed money from Bienestar to host an experienced Guatemalan Spanish language teacher to teach a month long Spanish teacher training program, seven young people opened the school for business last January 2017. You can google it for further details or check out the glowing article that local Nelsonite Louis Bockner wrote as their first student at <https://matadornetwork.com/read/learning-spanish-ex-guerilla-community/>

- ✓ Offer scholarships for six youth to attend high school or technical school (\$3,000) increasing sponsorship by 30+% which is fabulous news. It is important to realize that each of the students and their families also contribute financially to their education. Costs for higher level education include uniforms, books, tuition, bus fare, all of which are similar to Canadian costs yet the people typically earn seasonal wages around \$15/day.

Rossland Outreach:

We also had the real pleasure this year of partnering with the senior students and teachers of Rossland Summit School at their request where the nursing students and Mary Ann shared their experiences in Guatemala to support their global studies courses. They in turn held a bake sale at their Christmas fair and raised \$680 which they in turn donated to Bienestar to fund another scholarship!

This was fortuitous or dare I say the work of the Lord for we received an urgent request for an

- additional scholarship for 17 year old Darwin who is in his 1<sup>st</sup> year of agronomy studies. Darwin's study costs are even greater than normal as he has to stay in residence due to the prohibitive distance between home and school. His studies were threatened because funding from a local benefactor within Guatemala was sadly withdrawn as he suffered a car accident and needed to pay for his own exorbitant health care costs. This is the reality of Guatemala on a daily basis: fund food or health care, fund health care or education. What a difference our support means to the individual lives of people that we or other members of our congregation know.

Scholarship Challenges and Unique Successes:

Unfortunately, Evelyn, one of the Bienestar scholarship recipients was in a motorcycle accident in early April. She suffered a miscarriage and was on bedrest for six weeks due to a fractured pelvis. Amazingly strong and resilient, she endured the sadness and pain while still working on her studies. This was only possible because of the support of her family, friends, and the community. Her teacher and classmates visited from their school in a nearby town and have worked with her during her convalescence to ensure that she maintained her high marks – incredible to witness the fragility of life and yet at the same time the fortitude in the face of adversity

As you may know, I lived in Nuevo Horizonte last winter. I was struck one evening by the discipline and dedication of everyone involved in the scholarships when I witnessed two of my neighbors, both of whom are members of the women's group dispensing the monthly stipends to the students after reviewing their progress reports which the students need to obtain on a monthly basis from their teachers.

The women read and where necessary reviewed problematic reports for a total of 26 students and then had them sign for receipt of their stipend. I learned that earlier in the day, the women had gone into town and withdrawn the monies from the bank. Month after month they do this work as volunteers because they care deeply for their children and the wellbeing of the cooperative. On this particular night, they did all of it by candlelight as we had quite a windstorm that afternoon that brought a wee bit of rain to an otherwise humid 41 degree day - yikes!

The Bienestar board will be meeting shortly to look at upcoming projects that include the much valued student education scholarships and a diabetes outreach program put forward by the community where they want to prioritize prevention education with youth given the epidemic rise in type 2 diabetes and high costs of this disease, both emotionally and financially.

We welcome your support and look forward to talking with you more in the days to come about ways to be involved. Thanks to all of you for caring and daring to hope in the dreams of those invisible in society in this time of chaos and challenge.



*Diabetes group members and nursing students during foot care and stress reduction workshop – May 2017*



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