



Stories of persistence, hope and beauty.

'It's worth dreaming'
page 44



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This isn't everyday journalism. This is a passion project. It took years of planning, weeks of reporting and a constant desire to amplify the voices we believe need to be heard. Thank you for hearing them.

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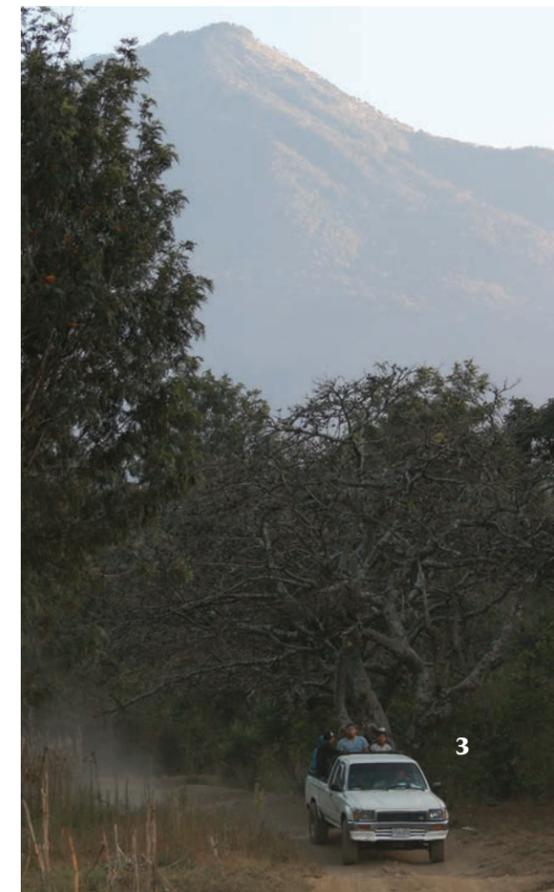
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A break in routine

an invitation



By Majo Díaz

Every day had started to feel like the same routine. I saw the same people, listened to the same music – even the perfect Guatemalan weather had started to feel stale. How was I supposed to give all these things meaning if they weren't new? I wanted a new tune.

The answer was hidden in a little house down a dusty hill in Tecpán. The first time we arrived, the Tians prepared for our visit. They cleaned their house, set up some chairs and dressed in their nicest clothes. They were all wearing masks and keeping a safe distance because they didn't know where we had been. They answered our questions politely but hesitantly because we still came from the unknown.

As days went by, more members of the family approached us. They would eat and drink with us, let us see their bedrooms and their photos. Soon it felt like we were a part of the family.

To understand more about the Tians' life without wasting their time, we visited them at night, while the men were still working and the women of the house were getting ready for dinner. Juliana,

the mother of the household, prepared black corn tortillas on the top of a cinder block oven powered by burning wood. Along with two other reporters and an instructor, I crammed into the small backyard kitchen made of sheet metal. One table, a dirt floor and the smoke from the oven filled the space.

Juliana formed small balls of corn dough and invited us to eat tortillas off the flat metal atop the fire. After trying one and deciding they were the most delicious tortillas in all of Guatemala, we asked Juliana if she would let us cook at least one tortilla with her. After she agreed, we rolled up our sleeves, wet our hands with hot water and dug our hands into the basket of corn dough. Juliana was an excellent teacher. She told us that the secret ingredient of a good tortilla was to find the perfect balance between patience and agility.

As we cooked tortillas, Ramiro, Juliana's husband, entered the kitchen and saw us – a Guatemala City college student with three Americans – cooking and smiling with his wife. We were side by side, sometimes arm in arm, laughing, eating and sharing memories as we cooked the week's supply of tortillas.

The warmth in this room was unique, mainly because all the other rooms were ice cold, but also because the six human beings vibrated to the same tune. At that moment, I realized Guatemala, my Guatemala, is all about family, love and happiness. Even though it was a cold January night outside, this family warmth was all I sought.

The Tian family has had to live through tough times (see pg. 44), but coming home to a pile of torti-

llas, a warm yellow light provided by the only lightbulb in the kitchen and a handful of smiles makes every sacrifice worthwhile.

My life took a surprising turn. It wasn't a routine anymore but a journey of learning and appreciation.

One of our Textura teams witnessed appreciation for learning at Colegio Angelitos de Dios, a private primary school that has been online for the past two years due to the pandemic. In January, the kids were able to meet their teachers in person and collect their homework and supplies – the students' excitement to learn was contagious.

Another team met a woman whose husband and two children were killed in a devastating volcanic eruption, but who is gracious to the Lord for his strength and will for helping her move forward.

The beauty of Guatemala was seen with fresh eyes at a vineyard where the process of winemaking is seen as an art form and an act of love and faithfulness.

Even though I have lived in Guatemala all my life, had a routine and became too used to my life here, I was able to see my country through a new lens. I met people who changed me. I saw a side of the country I've never seen before all because of these stories. I hope you can appreciate them and see the beauty in them as you read these pages as much as I do.



on page 44

Mardoqueo Tian holds his daughter, Ana Lucia, in his tuk tuk. Tian had only just arrived home as Ana Lucia came to meet him on the street. | Photo by Nataly Basterrechea



A bus, a *brocha* and bullet holes

CHECHA TAJ DRIVES ONE OF THE MOST DISTINCTIVE FORMS OF GUATEMALAN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION DESPITE THE DANGER THAT COMES WITH THE JOB.

By Soraya Keiser

Checha Taj braces his hand on the half-open driver-side window of his *camioneta* as he whips around the bends of the Pan-American Highway at 70 mph. The door to the blue and white brightly-painted former school bus is wide open, and César, Taj's son, holds on to bars just inside the bus. He stands in the doorway, undeterred by the speed.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE >>>

Checha Taj drives his *camioneta* through Guatemala City on his first of three daily trips. He drives that stretch of the Pan-American Highway seven days a week. "I've experienced many hard things doing this job," Taj said, "but it's the only one I know how to do, the only one I'm good at." | Photo by Bryson Rosell



»» The bus makes its way first through the town of Santa Lucía Milpas Altas and 10 minutes later the town of San Lucas. César hops off the bus as it slows down, calling out “¡Guate! ¡Guate!” He makes sure everyone gets on as quickly as possible before jumping back onto the bus as it drives away. Taj releases the clutch and the bus starts to move before César is even completely on the bus.

Taj and César make this drive three times a day, seven days a week as the *piloto* and *brocha*, or driver and helper, of a *camioneta*, a cheap form of transportation in Guatemala that is known as a “chicken bus” to tourists. Taj is one of hundreds of *camioneta* drivers who brave the dangerous

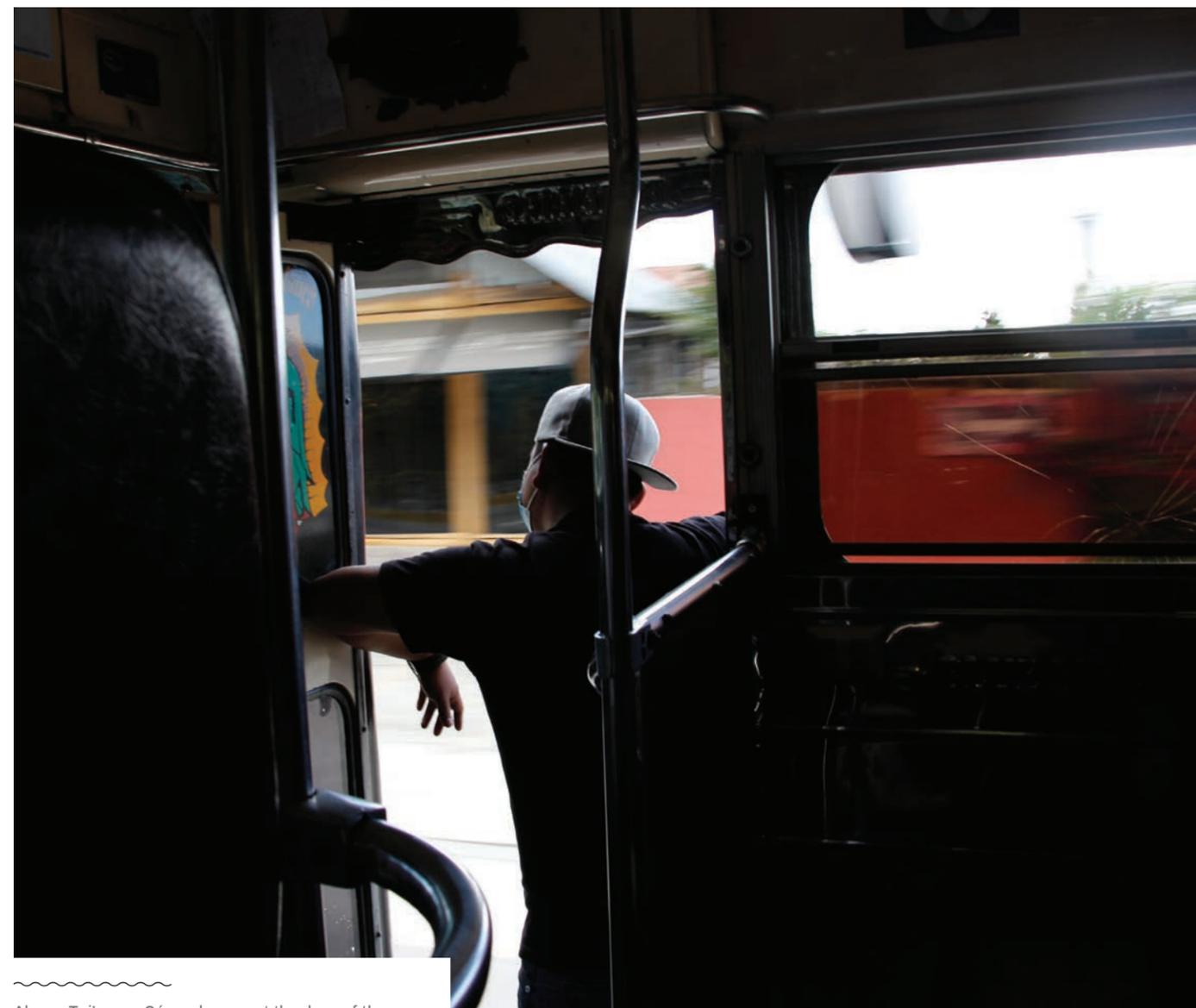
streets of Guatemala City to get Guatemalans where they need to go as fast as possible.

The sun begins to rise over Guatemala City as Taj whips around a white Nissan truck, and passengers hold on as tight to the backs of chairs as best they can. Because it is the morning shift, the bus is full of people heading to work. Under the blue LED lights attached to the ceiling, passengers squish into seats and stand in the aisle, clinging tightly to bars hanging from the ceiling. As Taj continues to drive down the highway, he weaves in and out of cars in order to get to the next stop as fast as he can. He must bring in 2,500 quetzales (\$325) per day if he wants to receive his monthly salary of 3,000 quetzales (\$390).

The bus fare is 20 quetzales (\$2.60) for the full drive from Antigua to Guatemala City, less if people get on later. This price has doubled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because fewer people are allowed on the bus at one time for social distancing purposes, bus companies have had to make up the money by increasing the ticket price. This increase in price means more people opt out of using the bus, making Taj and César’s job harder. Their required daily quota has stayed the same. They must move faster. Take more chances.

Soon the *camioneta* hits traffic. The roads are already streaked with red taillights at 5:45 a.m. Taj switches on the music. *Bachata* for the morning. The distance for the first leg of the drive is 37 kilometers, about 23 miles, but it takes about an hour and a half.

Taj has been up since 3:30 a.m. He drove 10 minutes from his house in Ciudad Vieja to the bus depot. He checked the tires, tested the breaks and made sure the gas tank was full.



Above: Taj’s son, César, leans out the door of the *camioneta* as Taj speeds through Antigua. César’s uncle died as a *brocha* when he fell from the bus as it was driving full speed. | Photo by Soraya Keiser

Left: Checha Taj’s shirt, half unbuttoned, reveals scars he acquired from years working as a *brocha*, a job his son César now holds. “The job [of a *brocha*] is really more disadvantageous than advantageous,” César said. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

Checha Taj crawls under the bus at the halfway stop of his first route to check the brakes before finishing the rest of the route with malfunctioning brakes on the right half of the bus. | Photo by Bryson Rosell



**CAMIONETA
SLANG**

Brocha
(bro·cha)
The bus driver's helper.

Plata
(plah·tah)
Money.

Pasaje
(pah·sah·heh)
The voyage ticket every passenger has to pay. The brocha is in charge of collecting it. The amount changes depending on where the passenger hopped on the bus.

¡GUATE! ¡GUATE!
(Gwaa·tuh / Gwaa·tuh)
When the brocha yells this out the door, he is telling the people standing in the bus station the bus's final destination is Guatemala City.

Camioneta
(kha·myoh·neh·tah)
This is the word Guatemalans use to refer to a "chicken bus."

Chafa
(shah·fah)
Something that is fake or not of good quality.

Pasele
(pah·seh·leh)
Welcome, get in!

Soplones
(soh·ploh·nehs)
People in each bus station whose job is to call the bus drivers to let them know if they have passengers for them in that particular station. They are much like dispatchers.



I've experienced many hard things doing this job, but it's the only one I know how to do, the only one I'm good at.

~~~~~  
Checha Taj

The *brocha* is supposed to do all of this, but because his son is his helper, Taj lets César sleep in for a while longer.

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Taj was a *brocha* at 16, hanging out the door himself. He has scars on his chest from lifting baskets full of avocados, textiles and tortillas onto the roof of what English speakers call the “chicken bus” because they have been known to carry any number of people, goods and animals — including chickens.

Day after day, the rough woven material would cut his skin and make him bleed.

Taj's *piloto* was an alcoholic, he says. But Taj would buy the *piloto* alcohol so that he could practice driving instead of just hanging off of the side.

At 18, he became the *piloto* himself with a fake license. He earned a regular license when he was 21 and his professional bus license at 23.

Taj has been a driver for 35 years. He is 52.

Taj spent four years undocumented in the United States. He left Guatemala because being a *piloto* was not giving him enough money to provide for his five children. Taj says it was easier to cross the border in 2001 than it is today, but he still had to pay 94,000 quetzales (\$12,200) to a *coyote*, or migrant smuggler, to help him make the journey successfully.

In the United States he spent time in Miami, New Orleans and Houston working odd jobs and eventually

buying a bus of his own to drive. But after the uninsured bus was damaged by a young driver in 2005, Taj decided to return to Guatemala. He began driving *camionetas* again, even though that was the vocation he tried to avoid in the first place.

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The job drains Taj not so much physically, but mentally. He always has to be paying attention — to the busy road, to the passengers and to César hanging off the side. Taj tries to get a few minutes of rest at stops if he gets to them fast enough. However, he often prioritizes César over himself, letting César sleep on a seat in the back of the bus when possible.

“It becomes something very different, something hard,” Taj said.

Taj's bus is insured by his company. He is not. If Taj were to get into an accident, he would have to pay his own medical bills.

At age 22 and without a family to provide for, César enjoys his job more than the clerk job he used to have at a store. However, he dreams to leave *camionetas* behind and become a chef.

“The job [of a *brocha*] is really more disadvantageous than advantageous,” César said.

It's dangerous. Taj fears for César's safety. One of Taj's brothers died being a *brocha*. He lost his balance, fell off the bus and got run over.

*Camionetas* also have to deal with the possibility of thieves boarding the bus at any time of day.

Once, Taj was driving his normal route through Guatemala City when someone pointed a gun at his head.

Taj was ordered to continue driving through the busy streets as four thieves robbed the *camioneta's* passengers and threatened to shoot if they didn't comply. One passenger moved his hand down to his pocket, and without hesitation, a thief shot him point blank.

Taj covered the bullet holes of his bus with stickers.

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Taj needs the money, so he continues his routine. At 6:35 a.m. the *camioneta* reaches its final destination in the city, a bus depot in Zone 12. He takes a few minutes to stretch his legs and check the brakes before starting the journey back to Antigua.

The right side of the brakes are completely shot. He will need to get a full repair back in Antigua, but for now half of the brakes will have to do.

By 8:30 a.m. the *camioneta* is back where it started in Antigua. Taj will make the trek two more times that day. He loves to drive, but he gets tired of the routine. In fact, his dream job is to be a tourist bus driver.

“If I could have any job, I would choose to be a *piloto* but for tourists,” Taj said. “[I want] to be able to wander without taking risks.”

But Taj keeps driving the chicken bus.

“I've experienced many hard things doing this job,” Taj said, “but it's the



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only one I know how to do, the only one I'm good at.”

Sometimes, Taj finishes his last ride from Guatemala City as late as 10 p.m. He parks the bus and drives to his dark, empty house in Ciudad Vieja. In just a few hours, he will wake up and do it all again. ✂

(Additional reporting by Majo Díaz.)

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Checha Taj climbs back into his *camioneta* after quickly checking his brakes at a bus depot in Guatemala City. The right side of the bus's brakes are broken, meaning Taj will have to get them repaired after driving back to Antigua. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

## Dust turned *ash*

NORMA ASCON SURVIVED THE 2018 ERUPTION OF VOLCANO FUEGO BUT LOST HER FAMILY. FOUR YEARS LATER, SHE CONTINUES TO MOURN THE LIVES LOST.

By Talia McWright

**X** Norma Ascon snapped pictures on her smartphone of the dust-covered corridor outside her work at the *finca* in Antigua, Guatemala. Sending the photos to her 15-year-old son, she wondered if he too saw the sand-like dust in the air near their home in San Miguel Los Lotes.

“I think you and your sister should come to Antigua and have ice cream.”

“Thanks mom, but we still have a lot of homework to do.”

The dust turned to ash and Ascon’s last conversations with her children became memories.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE >>>

Through the volcano's destruction, Norma Ascon, a woman of faith, lost her children. A survivor of the loss, she finds ways to find meaning in tragedy. | Photo by Hannah Hobus



»» Volcan de Fuego erupted in Guatemala June 3, 2018, killing a formally-recorded 190 people, destroying villages and affecting the lives of all Guatemalans. Today, the volcano continues to be excavated as families live without closure. More than 260 people are still missing.



The villages near the volcano are labeled “red zones,” unsafe for habitation. Before the eruption, the people of these villages were unaware that they were living under a possible death threat, some survivors say. With no preventative measures in sight, the Guatemalan government attempted to relocate those affected.

Ascon, 37, lost 35 family members, including her two children, Damaris Julissa and Lester Fabian Castillo Ascon, whose bodies have not been found. Devastated by the tragedy, Ascon said she lost the motivation to work, go outside and speak with others.



“I locked myself up and I entered into depression for about two and a half years,” Ascon said.

On the day of the eruption, Ascon was working in Antigua 56 miles away from her home in San Miguel Los Lotes. Her son, daughter and Ascon’s father, Ervin Ascon, were home together. She felt that something strange was happening when she noticed what looked like dust or sand in Antigua, 18 kilometers (11 miles) away, on the ground and in the air. Throughout the day, she’d check in on her children. The two were doing homework and studying for school. It was nearing 3 p.m. when Ascon was no longer receiving text messages from her son. The country and Ascon were in panic when news of the eruption surfaced.

She lost her daughter Damaris, who would now be 17, and her son Lester, who would now be 18. Ascon worked, dedicated to providing for them. She lost her husband Ervin. She said the couple relied on each other for emotional and moral support. Ascon later lost her father, but she still had someone left to provide for.



Along the trail where the lava from Fuego ran, the ruins of destruction remain, leaving small signs of what once was in the town of El Rodeo. | Photos by Hannah Hobus



“I used to go to work for my kids, but when I lost them, I had no motivation,” she said. “Now I have to take care of my mother, and she’s my new motivation.”

A few organizations, including Antigua al Rescate, reached out to Ascon after the eruption and provided her with aid while continuing the search for missing bodies. However, the aid did not last long, and the efforts to find the bodies of Ascon’s family members became a solo effort. Ascon discovered half of the body of her uncle in front of his house. She watched as a truck came by and swept the other half away.

*Is this normal?, she wondered. Are bodies just taken and thrown in landfills like trash?*

At 9:30 a.m. the day of the eruption, the hotel La Reunión, which is also a golf resort, was evacuated with warning of a volcanic eruption. According to Ascon, villages of families along the nearby Rio Achiguate near Fuego, including residents of San Miguel Los Lotes, received no warning.

“We used to hear the volcano all the time,” she said. “I felt that it was too far, but I never imagined the magnitude. If authorities give some kind of talk about how to act in case of an eruption then people would know how to take better precautions, but sadly they didn’t or it was too late when they did.”

At 3 p.m. the volcano erupted and pyroclastic material spread into the villages. Sirens blared, alerting the villagers to lock up their houses and stay inside. Ascon later found the bodies of her brother and his wife and child locked inside her sister’s house. There is still no protocol in Guatemala for those living near active volcanoes like Fuego.

Under 20 feet of ash lay bodies: young women preparing to fulfill their education, fathers excited to dance at their daughter’s *quinceañera* and children just learning to speak. Volcan de Fuego, a beautiful natural site for Guatemalans and tourists, became an apocalyptic force of

nature. It tore apart families and left people like Ascon without closure.

For two and a half years, Ascon lived in a deep state of depression, she said. Every morning reminded her of just how much she’d lost. Four years later, with her questions not fully answered, her mind replays the events of the tragedy. Not a day passes where she doesn’t think of her children or of how unified her family once was.

A woman of faith, Ascon leaned on God to give her strength and the will to move forward. Ascon goes on. Putting her mother first and sharing her story, she aims to comfort those who’ve experienced the loss of loved ones.

“When something tragic happens to us, we feel the wall falling in on us. We feel that everything is falling, and it is horrible, but in the end you become strong and you can help many people,” Ascon said. “You start to keep going even though life is not the same. You can go on.” ✕

*(Additional reporting by María Isabel Castañeda.)*



# Old, new and equitable ways of producing coffee

FAMILY FARM OWNERS, COOPERATIVES AND LOCAL ARTISANS MODERNIZE COFFEE CONSUMPTION WHILE STAYING TRUE TO THEIR ROOTS.

By Ella Roberts

Petro Nélio Gonzalez, 83, gripped an orange-handled machete in one hand and held an empty sack draped over his opposite shoulder. He began the same barefoot trek up the base of the Agua Volcano he has been repeating since he was 8. Here, in the town of San Miguel Escobar, 15 minutes outside of Antigua, some of the most fertile farmland nurtures flourishing coffee trees in volcanic ash soil.



This work is Gonzalez's livelihood, he says to two of his grandchildren during a break in the shade.

After receiving a second-grade level of education, Gonzalez's parents put him to work in the fields where he tended avocados, corn, beans and coffee fruit, which looks like a cherry but holds the gift of the coffee bean inside. Now, both national and international markets want Guatemalan coffee, which has changed the diversity of crops in the fields but not the work ethic Gonzalez instills in his children and grandchildren as he hopes to keep the land in the family for generations, even after his death.

"When you get older, you need to guide them to their future the same way my mom and dad taught me about agriculture," Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez embodies where the journey of the coffee bean begins, a process that has been crucial to Guatemala's economy for hundreds of years. Today, an estimated 125,000 coffee producers drive Guatemala's coffee industry and coffee remains one of Guatemala's principal export products, accounting for 40% of all agricultural export revenue. However, a local coffee cooperative estimates that a sliver of this revenue, as small as 10%, goes to coffee-pro-



Petro Gonzalez has never worn shoes all the years he has worked in the fields. This practice was common for the older generations of farm laborers who could not afford shoes. Now, he is just used to it. "I have been working in the fields since the day I could walk," Gonzalez said. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

## The process Step by step

The De la Gente cooperative tries to pay workers fairly.

1. *Through a direct trade process, farmers are registered as exporters and are then able to start processing their own beans.*
2. *De La Gente plays the role of importer, investing in quality control and marketing the coffee.*
3. *Roasters, realtors and final consumers are then able to purchase coffee directly from farmers.*



Follow this link to learn more about De la Gente, or to buy some coffee.



Depending on the variety, it will take approximately three to four years for newly planted coffee trees to bear fruit. The fruit, called the coffee cherry, turns a bright, deep red when it is ripe and ready to be harvested. The red coating of the cherry is known for its sweet flavor. The cascara, which means "husk," "peel" or "skin" in Spanish, is the dried skins of coffee cherries. These pulped skins are collected after the seeds or the coffee beans have been removed from the cherries. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

*When it starts raining we thank God, because there will be provision. God sent to us the blessing of rain, because without rain plants wouldn't grow and we wouldn't have something to harvest.*

Petro Gonzalez, finca owner

ducing countries. While coffee is a source of enjoyment, a daily ritual and a community for billions of drinkers around the world, it is too often a source of economic precarity, experts say, for those who cultivate it.

Without a plentiful harvest, Gonzalez's family would not be able to meet their basic needs. Gonzalez puts the success of his harvest in God's hands.

"When it starts raining we thank God, because there will be provision," he said. "God sent to us the blessing of rain, because without rain, plants wouldn't grow and we wouldn't have something to harvest."

The history of coffee production in the region dates back to the mid-19th century, but it had been the domain for mostly *fincas*, or small farms. Only about 25 years ago did small-holder farmers with experience working at those *fincas* start planting their own coffee trees. Because nobody had enough knowledge to process the beans themselves, farmers would sell their fruit on the street at the mercy of prices set by big producers. Today, farmers are able to partner with co-operatives as a way to improve the quality of coffee and life of small producers, such as Gabriel Minas.

From December to April, the harvesting months of coffee fruit, Minas and other farmers pick only the reddest fruit from the trees for nearly 12 hours a day, filling five to seven wicker baskets, or 150 pounds worth. From there, the beans are prepared for their annual exportation through a process of depulping, washing and fermenting the seeds. Each harvester then stores sacks of the processed coffee in individual storage rooms found inside their homes. In April, the coffee will be ready to export, either roasted or raw, depending on the buyer.

In 2005, with the partnership of seven coffee producers and a non-profit organization, came both the Café

Artesanal San Miguel co-op and De la Gente. Café Artesanal San Miguel allows small farmers such as Minas to start processing their own coffee rather than going through the conventional avenues, adding up to 30% more value to the product and allowing farmers to pay pickers, on average, 75 quetzales (about \$10) for a day of work, 34% more than most large *fincas*. Today, 28 members, including three women, work with Café Artesanal San Miguel, which gets fair trade prices from buyers, including many in Wisconsin.

Minas' family, which lives in San Miguel Escobar, owns one out of 10 smaller pieces of land called a *cuerda*. 10 *cuerdas* make up one-third of an acre and in each *cuerda* lie about 300 coffee plants. For 36 years his family has harvested the same land. Once a field full of vegetables, his plants now bear the fruit of coffee.

De La Gente is a fair trade company, which means it follows a system of certification. For farmers and workers, fair trade means workers' rights, safer working conditions and fairer pay, Minas said. Because of this, producers like Minas are able to give their money directly to their employees, even if it costs buyers in America or Europe a few more dollars or euros per pound. That markup, and its benefits, wouldn't be possible without the co-op.

"If we sell directly to a big farm, the price is very low," Minas said. "We have the opportunity to have better plantations which means we are going to produce more coffee, have more income."

Minas said working with fair trade allows him to provide more income for his workers so that they can afford their children's continued education, improve the size and quality of their houses and invest in better healthcare for their families.

Meanwhile, in the tourist town of Antigua, Artista de Café, owned by

Guatemalans María Andreé, 28, and Guillermo Durán, 32, prepare to sell the coffee in the form of specialty drinks. When choosing a coffee farm to partner with, Andreé considered the benefits of a fair trade system.

"We make sure there is a fair trade between the people who work there and how they treat the people inside and they're paying correctly," Andreé said. "It is so important."

Andreé believes supporting local artisans, skilled craft workers while also modernizing coffee consumption with design and aesthetic supports the best of Guatemalan culture. Paired with Andreé's specialty coffee drinks, bright white walls, pink roses and art designed by Durán, Artista de Café seeks to provide a space for artists to be creative.

Although the interior design is inspired by European styles, almost everything inside can be found in local stores or made by local hands: the furniture, coffee bar, rugs and even the bronze lettering on the back wall which was handmade by an artist they found walking on the street who doesn't have a phone number. Durán

said the aesthetic allows the two to stay close to their Guatemalan roots while also appealing to people from throughout the world.

"Our philosophy is to be modern Guatemalan people, not as our parents' and grandparents' style," he said. "We are living in a new world and people from France, Africa and India are coming to Antigua for the coffee shops and other businesses."

For Gonzalez, the international coffee machinery can mean a better life, if his family can get its fair share for walking up that volcano every day. But even if he gets more for his beans, he will still walk barefoot. It's his way. ☼

(Additional reporting by Estefania Rosal.)

*Our philosophy is to be modern Guatemalan people, not as our parents' and grandparents' style. We are living in a new world and people from France, Africa and India are coming to Antigua for the coffee shops and other businesses.*

Guillermo Durán, Artista de Café owner



Five years ago on the streets of Momostenango, Guillermo and Andreé came across Don Feliciano, an artisan who weaves wool rugs on a wooden loom. After falling in love with his intricate and colorful designs, Andreé helped Feliciano grow his business by purchasing his work and selling the rugs at Artista de Café as well as creating an Instagram account for his business. "People don't see those kinds of things because they don't know the story. It has nothing to do with coffee. It's about being human," Andreé said. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

# Memories and marimba



MAYARI DE LIÓN RUNS PROYECTO LUIS DE LIÓN IN HER VILLAGE OF SAN JUAN DEL OBISPO TO PROMOTE MUSICAL EDUCATION AND TO MEMORIALIZE HER FATHER.

By Matt Teigland



Mayari De Lión stands in her garden that sits behind her school/museum. Mayari grew up in the same place she lives today, a common thing in the village of San Del Obispo. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

Mayari De Lión took another scoop of dirt, tenderly patting it around a bed of flowers in a black plastic box on a January day. De Lión plants flowers when she is stressed. She continued to add more dirt and roots around the stem with her fingers as she recounted her day. From a broken phone to a COVID-19 booster appointment that fell through to a plumber who may be ripping her off.

“Look at my garden,” she said as she motioned toward her array of flowers and other fauna, all popping with reds among the greens.

The garden sits in the backyard of her home, built directly on top of a museum dedicated her father, the author and political activist Luis De Lión.

“Look at my garden,” she said, “and look at all of my stresses.”

De Lión stretched her short frame to maximum height and set her box of flowers on a chain link fence. Inside the fence sits a personal zoo full of

rabbits, turtles, ducks, parrots and doves. Sometimes, when her daughter Stephanie comes over after long weeks working at her medical residency in Hospital General San Juan De Dio, they pretend the animals are people. They create funny and dramatic scenes as they mosey throughout the yard.

In 2005, when she moved back to her hometown to start Proyecto Luis de Lión, she could never have predicted where she is today: a single indigenous mother, or *vilomah*, living in a country that killed her father. She said she tries to instill dreams into the more than 700 children in her after school programs in San Juan del Obispo. Proyecto Luis de Lión works to inspire and give students positive memories through musical education, painting and musical therapy.

Proyecto Luis De Lión, in a yellow building covered by its namesake’s poems, was founded in March 2004. However, Mayari De Lión celebrates the anniversary in May, the month her father went missing in 1984, abducted by the army

intelligence or the government of Guatemala.



When De Lión arrived in San Juan del Obispo from Guatemala City with her daughter Stephanie 17 years ago, she says she was shunned by her community for a combination of reasons. For one, she was a single mother, frowned upon by the predominantly Catholic community. Secondly, the status of Luis De Lión as a communist supporter generated criticism, even a decade after a brutal civil war in Guatemala.

Few children showed up for her first classes. For the first five years, it could be in the single digits. Sometimes none. But attendance was far from the biggest struggle.



Luis De Lión was born in the same small wooden house that is nestled in De Lión’s backyard garden surrounded by the walls of Proyecto Luis De Lión. His father, Mayari’s grandfather, was a police officer but also painted and

*I wanted to transform the world like my father did.*

Mayari de Li3n,  
head of Proyecto Luis de Li3n

worked in theater. His mother was a Katchiquel woman who worked in agriculture and took care of the kids at home. They struggled to make ends meet. Two of his older brothers died from the inability to purchase necessary medication for their ailments.

Mayari De Li3n was his eldest child, and their relationship was composed of the many stories that Luis would tell to her for entertainment, as his job as an elementary teacher in San Juan allowed little room for the luxuries of toys and television. They were very close, she says, and her father taught her how to write and read in a time when literacy among women was low in Guatemala. UNESCO reports female literacy has improved from 13% in 1994 to more than 90% in 2015. De Li3n recounts how her father told her that abundance of food and health are the most important things in life. Material possessions come second.

Luis spent most of his young adult life in San Juan, teaching for free at

times, intent on providing accessible education to all individuals. He started a library with a group of friends in 1962 that his daughter would end up reviving. His most famous work was “El tiempo principia en Xibalb3,” or “Time Commences in Xibalb3,” a story of a man who returns to his village after serving in the military. It won the Juegos Florales de Quetzaltenango, a Guatemalan literary award that has been recognized since 1916.

Luis taught literature at the University of San Carlos during Guatemala’s civil war. He became a member of the communist Guatemalan Party of Labour. Anti-communist sentiments ran rampant amongst the Guatemalan officials at the time, his daughter said, and he became an instant target. As she tells the story, in 1984, on his way to work, he was pulled over by a group of men lacking official military markings and forced into a van. A replica of the gray sweater he was wearing the day he went missing hangs in one of the rooms of Proyecto Luis De Li3n,

along with texts he buried in the garden that were illegal to possess during the war. His daughter was 17 years old when her father was kidnapped. Her mother immediately filed a case against the government, but with no evidence for the family to present, they simply ignored her.

Some of her family’s questions were answered in 1999, when a 74-page intelligence record listing 183 people executed by the government was leaked to a human rights organization. This document, known as the Diaro Militar, ended up at George Washington University, where De Li3n flew out to analyze them. In this record, one of the 183 people listed among those executed by government forces between 1983 and 1985 was Luis de Li3n. In 2004, De Li3n and her family went toe to toe with the Guatemalan government in a human rights court to force officials to claim responsibility for the murder of the activist. The De Li3n family won.

Luis De Li3n was the first missing person during the 36-year Guatemalan Civil War the government would take responsibility for. Military members remain under investigation by several human rights organizations to this day to be held accountable for the disappearance of political figures, but the government itself puts few resources into any internal investigations, she says.

For the De Li3ns, the wrongful murder

recognition proved that Luis’ ideas did not make him a criminal. The school and museum, De Li3n said, is a symbol of their courage and willingness to not be afraid of tyranny.

The government promised to give scholarships to the grandchildren of Luis De Li3n and fund a library in his honor. That promise, she said, was never fulfilled.

•••••

In January, Stephanie recounted how her mom was probably the only mom in the world who was upset when her daughter decided to pursue medicine at one of the most prestigious universities in Guatemala. Instead, De Li3n wanted Stephanie to study music.

A rebellious cello player, Stephanie did not follow the encouragement of De Li3n and Juan No3 Rajpop, a mentor and teacher at the school, to play the marimba, Guatemala’s national instrument, professionally. Stephanie, however, still can play the marimba, as she was one of the first students of the school that opened up on the museum grounds in 2008. No3, a marimba teacher for 11 years, tells of how Stephanie’s class used to give him the biggest headaches.

No3 said that when they practice their timing in rhythm, the younger children will often be too eager to jump into the beat with mistimed strikes on their

## Life of Mayari de Li3n and Proyecto Luis de Li3n

**1939**

Luis de Li3n is born

**1967**

Mayari is born

**1984**

Luis de Li3n is kidnapped and murdered by the Guatemalan government

**1988**

Mayari gives birth to her first child, Luis Alberto De Li3n

**1997**

Mayari gives birth to her second child, Stephanie De Li3n

**1999**

Diario Militar is leaked to human rights organizations and Luis de Li3n’s name appears on the list of oppositional voices executed

**2004**

De Li3n’s win case against the government in a human rights court. Guatemalan President Oscar Berger assumes responsibility for Luis’ death. Mayari works with government officials to reopen Luis’ library

**2005**

De Li3n’s son, Alberto, dies from bone cancer

**2006**

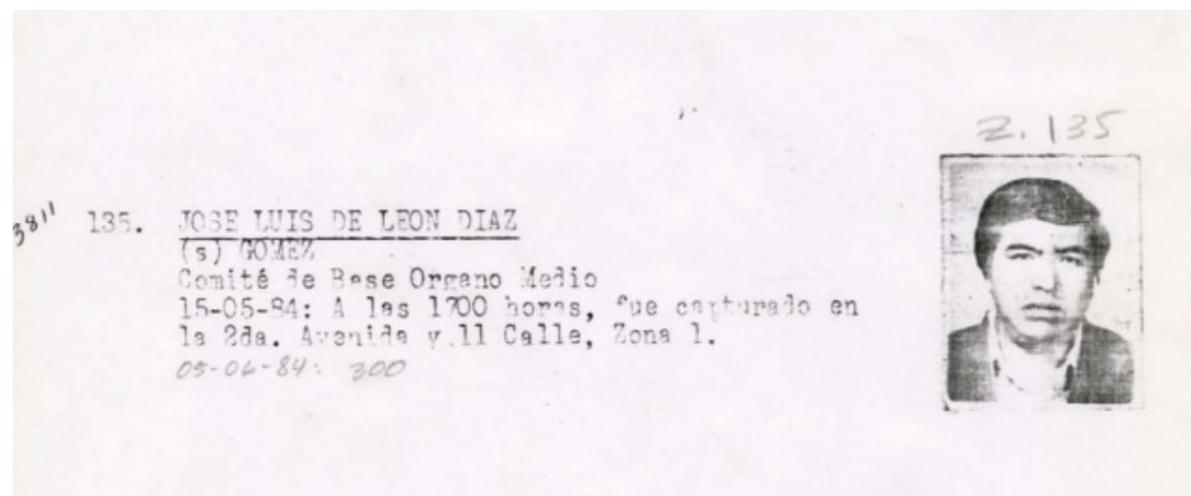
Proyecto Luis de Li3n begins, museum opens

**2008**

Marimba and other after-school classes start

**2022**

In-person marimba classes begin again



Luis De Li3n’s picture in the Diaro Militar, a Guatemalan government record of executed citizens. De Li3n was the first person the Guatemalan government posthumously admitted to kidnapping and executing during the country’s civil war, his daughter said. | Photo from *The Diario militar*

marimbas. Noé is easily frustrated. He makes his money as a member of the Presidential Marimba group, accompanying the president of Guatemala to foreign countries, such as Italy or the United States, playing marimba and covering popular local music as a diplomatic gesture.

When Noé heard marimba being played at Proyecto Luis de Lión, he could not resist his curiosity and knocked on the door to investigate. According to Noé, De Lión slammed the door on his face. Years later, in need of a new marimba teacher, Noé was suggested to De Lión by a friend. Noé was hesitant to agree, but did so anyway out of respect for marimba, he said.

His start in the Proyecto had its hiccups. Rambunctious classes like Stephanie's drove Noé to the edge and he submitted a letter of intent to quit. De Lión refused to read it, worried about the contents inside. Noé went to work the next day, expecting to have some sort of exit interview. Instead it was business as usual, and now Noé has worked with the Proyecto going on 11 years.

De Lión sees in Noé and the marimba the same passion her father showed for literature and education. This passion, she notes, is the main contributor to the success of the project.

"We try to make true little dreams and hopes with all of our love, because life needs to continue," De Lión said.

In San Juan del Obispo, little dreams are incredibly valuable to the poorly educated youth of rural Guatemala, where the average years of schooling sits at 6.5, according to the United Nations Development Program.

De Lión said the goal of the Proyecto isn't to change students' economic or social standings, but to change the way they view themselves in those

contexts. Most importantly, De Lión believes that children's dreams are meant to be protected.

"Life is hard," she says, "but you can dream what you want to face those hard things."

Control is something De Lión wished she would've had in 2005, when life gave her one of its hardest punches.

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In the wooden house where her father grew up, figurines crafted from a myriad of materials lay on the ground in a nativity scene. De Lión expressed frustration as she picked up a wooden doll, its foot having fallen off.

"This is art," she said.

She grabbed another off of the ground.

"My son," she said as she set the straw figure with a miniature hat back on the ground.

De Lión gave birth to her son, Luis Alberto De Lión, in 1988, a few years after the kidnapping and execution of her father. Alberto was diagnosed with bone cancer when he was 13. De Lión recounted the story with tears in her eyes. When he was in the hospital, he had made a 10-year-old friend who was given a terminal eye cancer diagnosis. Alberto locked himself in his room for a day, and when he emerged he told his mother he wanted to take guitar classes and learn English, a testament to not giving up in the face of his own cancer. De Lión would secure a scholarship for him to learn English, but could never afford to give him the guitar lessons.

Now, when she supplies students with musical education at the Proyecto, she can never forget the lessons her son couldn't receive.

## A poem on the wall of Proyecto Luis de Lión

*Estaba sobre la piedra  
No era un rocío  
Era una lagrima  
Y como nadie dijo que fuera suya.  
La piedra dijo que era de ella.*

I was on the stone  
It was not a dew  
It was a tear  
And since no one said it was his.  
The stone said it was hers.

by Luis de Lión



Proyecto Luis de Lión Director Mayari stands outside Proyecto in the street in San Juan del Obispo. The walls are covered in poetry from Luis de Lión, her father. Many of his poems were intentionally destroyed, along with some of his manuscripts during the Guatemalan Civil War, but De Lión still finds some here and there. One of these poems was hidden in a book her father had in his public library a couple blocks away. | Photo by Savannah Heeren



Top: Students practice marimba together at Proyecto Luis de Li3n for the first day of classes of the school year. The group often travels across Guatemala to play at various venues and hope to return to doing so this year if enough funding can be secured. "Dreams are important," De Li3n said. "The force of having a dream makes things move in the right way." | Photo by Savannah Heeren

Right: No3, teacher of marimba and member of the Presidential Marimba group, instructs the beginners marimba class. Among heavy COVID-19 lockdowns during 2020, he and Mayari would travel to students' houses lending out marimbas and giving personal practice sessions. No3 is one of five teachers who are currently employed at the Proyecto. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

At the National Pediatric Oncology Unit, the hospital where he was treated, her son would dance for the other children to cheer them up. When he was given his own terminal diagnosis, people didn't know what he and his mother were going through. They focused on creating happy memories for themselves, getting ice cream, eating chocolate and basking in the warm Guatemalan air.

Due to government corruption, UNOP did not receive their usual federal yearly operations funding. This caused financial concerns for the De Li3ns. Alberto's treatment would rack up a 14,000-quetzales (\$1,808) charge. At the time, De Li3n could only afford to pay 3,000 quetzales.

One day, the charge disappeared, paid off by a mysterious source. De Li3n still is not sure how or by whom. For this reason, De Li3n said, she believes in miracles.

After a brief period of remission, Alberto died in 2005 while De Li3n worked with officials to secure funding for the Proyecto. De Li3n said he died smiling. His final wish was for his mother to provide a space for his sister Stephanie to grow and be friends with other children.

Stephanie says her time spent by her brother's

side at UNOP would be the catalyst for her career in medicine. About the Proyecto, she notes, "[It] is a memorial for my grandfather and brother, and that's the reason why it works."

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This year, De Li3n predicts more than 80 students will be attending the violin, drawing, musical therapy and marimba classes the Proyecto provides for the children of San Juan. De Li3n collects tuition from parents, organizes classes and is still in charge of the library that sits outside the basketball court, its shelves filled with books in Spanish, English and the Mayan language of Kaqchikel.

Parents sometimes send their kids to the Proyecto as punishment for being a rambunctious child. De Li3n remembers how a little girl with bad behavior at home was sent to her. De Li3n was so occupied with the kids and their classes that she forgot to get lunch, so she took them out for ice cream. The parents came back to pick up their daughter from her punishment to see her eating ice cream and laughing with De Li3n. They stopped sending their kids to the Proyecto.

De Li3n tells the story of a bright 7-year-old who showed significant promise as a marimba player. She had a dream to join NASA.



As time went on and the financial difficulties of her family caused by a sister with a disability caught up to her, she switched her dream to become a secretary to make money for her family.

This kind of tragedy is what De Li3n and the Proyecto fight against.

"I have seen children's hearts die," she said. De Li3n is aware that they cannot change the environment around them, but they can give them the tools and motivation to change their story.

De Li3n looks for more opportunities for her students, such as performing outside of the country, getting pen pals from America for her students and buying as many books for them as she can afford.

Among the sounds of dogs barking, squawking parrots and cars and motorcycles zooming down the steep incline in front of the Proyecto pier-

es the flowing notes of the marimba. The students are spread out across the large marimbas, some holding three different rubber mallets to play the notes.

De Li3n tells how so many of the kids have grown since last time she's seen them. The group goes from playing a cover of John Lennon's "Imagine" to the iconic marimba piece of "Bajo el Cielo Azul". The group of 13 to 15-year-olds are happy to be together again and hope they can return to touring across the country, playing the marimba with professional groups such as the National Orchestra of Guatemala.

"I wanted to transform the world like my father did," De Li3n says in the garage where she hosts classes, a small stage in the back covered in marimbas. "We do not choose marimba. Marimba chooses us." ❌

(Additional reporting by Estefania Rosal.)



# Contact with history

FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN  
UNIVERSITY  
PROMOTES DISRUPTION  
OF THE STATUS QUO,  
EVEN IN ITS “SPECIAL  
COLLECTIONS” ROOM  
OF THE LIBRARY.

By Clark Frederickson



A collection of some of the rarest books belonging to the private collection of Francisco Marroquín University sit meticulously placed on the library shelves. | Photo by Davis McElmurry.



### The Lexicon 1528

“Lexicon” is the oldest book in the special collection. A lexicon is similar to a dictionary in that it contains words specific to a person, region, subject or time. This one contains Greek and Latin words. The art within it represents ways of life in the city of Basileae, or Basel, located in what is now Switzerland.



### The Oeuvres 1819

“Oeuvres” by Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a 22-volume collection of books about French philosophy, correspondence, dialogues and literature. They were published in Paris in 1819. This volume about politics has a butterfly form within its pages because it was slowly eaten by moths.

Libraries are places of rules and order. Hushed voices. No eating. Special collections which can only be handled by staff.

Francisco Marroquín University’s library, Biblioteca Ludwig von Mises, has similar rules. However, stamped on the brick walls of the university’s library are the words “rebels” and “provocateurs” and “disrupters.” Disruption can also be found inside the special collections room. To a point.

“We don’t allow the students to touch these books. They are too old and valuable,” librarian Regina de La Vega said.

UFM’s Biblioteca Ludwig von Mises in Guatemala City is constantly receiving donations of books. Many of the books are newer and kept in the larger part of the library. A small, locked room where the humidity and visitors are monitored is where the valuable collections donated from the estates of politicians, map collectors and economists are housed. One of those donors was José Cecilio del Valle, a founding father of Central America. The former mayor of Guatemala City helped declare independence from Spain and Mexico. Some students think this room is off-limits to them, but with an appointment, any student can use the room with the help of staff.

De La Vega believes the importance of the special collections lies in their history and craftsmanship. She proudly showcases to visitors the classic leather bindings, crisp typography and centuries-old illustrations. She slowly slides books off the shelf and gently sets them on a red velvet book-holder. She takes her time to turn each page. She is especially cautious with the lexicon from 1528, the oldest book in the collection.

At UFM disruption is also encouraged. Bold artwork of a man swinging a sledgehammer above the

word “disrupter” stands near the library. Director of Public Relations Luis Figueroa thinks the library is essential to the school.

“I think that it is important for students to make contact with history,” Figueroa said.

When he takes students and tourists to visit the special collections, he makes it a point that they touch the historic books despite the rules. He has them turn the pages and run their fingers across the fragile bindings. To him, students connecting with these books is more important than the rules.

In January, UFM students returned to their campus in person for the first time since March 18, 2020. Students come before tradition at UFM. Liberal arts students can create their own assignments. Business students are expected to develop their own business endeavors. Literary and history students touch these books as they study.

Biblioteca Ludwig von Mises is home to the valuable collection of one of the great disrupters in Guatemalan history, Cecilio del Valle. Students rebel against the library rules to fully connect with the history of the books. UFM students and staff look to disrupt the norms in Guatemala, even in the library. ✕



### José Cecilio del Valle 1780-1834

José Cecilio del Valle’s donated collection makes up most of the books in the special collection room. The university considers Valle to be one of Central America’s founding fathers. Though born in what is now Honduras, he was raised and spent most of his life in Guatemala.

Valle was the mayor of Guatemala City in 1821 until he wrote the Act of Independence of Central America (also known as the Act of Independence of Guatemala) and Central America became independent from Spain. In 1822, Central America became a part of the Mexican Empire and he was imprisoned on charges of conspiring against that empire. He was released in 1823, the same year Central America became independent from Mexico.

He turned down an offer to be Vice President of the Federal Republic of Central America in 1830 and became Director of San Carlos University’s Fine Arts Department. He earned a bachelor’s degree and two law degrees at San Carlos University in Guatemala City during the three decades prior.

In 1834, Valle won the presidential election in Guatemala but passed away from an illness before he could take office. Valle was a writer interested in many fields, as shown by UFM’s collection, which contains books of law, history, geography, literature and more. The politician’s heirs donated his collection of 1,800 books to Francisco Marroquín University in 1986.



### The Encyclopédie 1751 - 1772

The Encyclopédie, one of the first encyclopedias, was published in France in the 18th Century. More than 150 writers or *encyclopedistes* – members of a French writers’ society – helped to create it. It was edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert.

An encyclopedia is considered an extended dictionary or guide of sciences, arts and crafts. Diderot wanted to change the way people thought and archive all of the world’s knowledge. The Encyclopédie influenced the French Revolution and helped people shift away from the idea of political powers being definitive and the Catholic Church being authoritative in science.

The success and the popularity of this encyclopedia in France is seen as a reason for the ideological shift that led to the revolution. The church and French government suspended, censored and banned the encyclopedias, but they still managed to circulate.

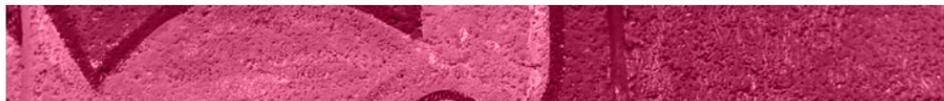
Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales visited the UFM library in August of 2008 to see the Encyclopédie. UFM saw him as a disrupter investigating some of the most important documents of status quo disruption in history.



# Pillars of paint

ARTIST AGUSTÍN JULAJUJ SEEKS BEAUTY WHILE SUPPORTING HIS NIECES AND NEPHEWS OUT OF THE FAMILY BUSINESS.

By Rachel Blood



Mural artist Agustín Julajuj has work displayed up and down the streets of his Guatemala City neighborhood. "Agustín is a recognized artist here where we live," fellow artist Angel Castellanos said. "He always supported me and was on board." | Photo by Hannah Hobus

One-year-old Andrea runs across the floor of her family's Guatemala City *tienda*, tugging a pencil from the calloused hands of Agustín Julajuj. In front of a wall crammed with packs of cookies and refried beans, she grins as she twirls it in her hands the same way her uncle does, between her index finger and thumb, the pencil's yellow paint chipped away from constant exposure to the skin of an artist. Julajuj always has a pencil with him, tucked behind his ear or poking out of his pocket or rolling in his palms, just in case he needs to capture beauty.

And Julajuj sees beauty everywhere: the coat of a jaguar, the water of Lake Atitlán and his bustling home of nieces and nephews.

A self-taught artist, Julajuj, 36, paints and works in the *tienda* – a type of small neighborhood convenience store common in Guatemala – to support his family in a place where artists have little to no support and resources. Whether participating in a muralist project that faced municipal resistance or giving art lessons out of his home, Julajuj finds ways to make.

He makes time for his family, time for the three nephews and two nieces living in the space that serves as store, home and studio.

He makes the best of being an artist surrounded by the chaos of Zone 7.

He makes art.

On the corner of two bustling Zone 7 Kaminaljuyú streets in Guatemala City – the capital with almost three

million people – brick pillars painted with parrots, trees and blue skies mark the abode of Julajuj's family, along with his studio and store. Past the painted pillars in a space partially exposed to the outdoors, green metal bars separate 25-packs of plastic forks, single packets of shampoo and paintbrushes for sale from the walls of Julajuj's paintings. Hung in frames or brushed onto canvases that lean against the walls are glimpses of Julajuj's life: Two nephews and a niece huddled together, posing for a portrait. A landscape of a Guatemala City street. A herd of heterochromatic white cats.

The chatter of seven children fills the space as two skinny cats, white and brown, dart between bars of the gate and disappear under the gap beneath Julajuj's studio door. A pair of sparkly children's shoes sit atop a pillar.

Julajuj paints and works at his family's shop. Living with his mother, sister, two nieces and three nephews, Julajuj works to provide for his family while dreaming of a bachelor's degree in art at Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala. The program runs Monday through Friday, leaving Julajuj unable to attend. He needs to work, so he makes a living by balancing his time in the *tienda* with teaching art classes twice a week to two students: 15-year-old José Pablo Saravia and 60-year-old Irma Yolanda Rodríguez.

Following his brother's death from a cerebral hemorrhage in 2008, Julajuj took over the care of his oldest niece, Sandra. After Sandra's mother died of diabetes in 2017, Evelin and Julio moved in, too. With six-year-



Once displaying Julajuj's mural, this outer wall of a Guatemala City park is now covered in a layer of beige paint. | Photo by Hannah Hobus

old nephew Ángel, three-year-old nephew Daniel and one-year-old niece Andrea, the kids learn art from Julajuj when they're not in school, filling sketchbooks and canvases with lead and acrylics. Sandra has since moved out.

"*Mi favorita*," Evelin says, flipping to a page of her sketchbook depicting a girl with a splash of color in the red flowers adorning her hair.

"I feel very happy and satisfied knowing that they can develop it better through me and in an easier way," Julajuj said. "At least they have my support in whatever they need and what I did not have."

After being born in a village near Lake Atitlán, Julajuj moved three hours east to Guatemala City at age 10 due to a lack of teachers in his home village. In school, classmates would flock to him for help with paintings and drawings after seeing Julajuj excel with *acrílicos*. At 16, he was gifted *tempura* paints, a type of fast-drying pigment mixed with glutinous materials such as egg yolk.

"I fell in love with color," Julajuj said. "With those colors I was born again. Those colors are forever marked in me ... I was not the same."

Julajuj wants his nieces and nephews to have successful careers but also wants them to be able to express the creativity in their blood.

"Art runs through their veins," Julajuj said. "[I want them] to not study a career only to have a profession, but also for them to study for life and use art to be inspired."

Evelin wants to be a doctor, chef and painter. Julio wants to be an English-speaking mechanic and painter. Ángel wants to be a lawyer and painter.

To show his nieces and nephews the importance of continuing to seek



Proyecto Kaminaljuyú founder Angel Castellanos and artist Agustín Julajuj hold a shared desire for expression through art. | Photo by Hannah Hobus



Top: Inside the space serving as the family business, home and studio, Agustín Julajuj leads his niece and nephew out of his walking path. Three nephews and two nieces live with Julajuj, along with his mother and sister. | Photo by Talia McWright

Bottom: Agustín Julajuj twists a pencil between his fingers. He carries one with him everywhere he goes. "I see life more beautifully through art," Julajuj said. | Photo by Talia McWright

beauty in life, Julajuj doesn't stop with the paintings hanging on the walls of his shop. Outside his home, metal panels show two street dogs and a host of other pets Julajuj has had over the years. Down the street, Centro Espiritual Maya is filled with his brushstrokes of fauna, flora and the 20 sacred Mayan *nahuales*.

As Julajuj painted a nature-focused mural on the side of his Guatemala City home one day, freelance artist Angel Castellanos walked by and struck up a conversation. The two artists began a friendship fostering support and creativity, the exterior of Julajuj's home inspiring Castellanos to expand the reach of street art to a communal space.

"[I did it because] it is a public space that belongs to all of us as neighbors," Julajuj said. "What's better than being able to show some of our art where we live?"

With Julajuj as one of his first recruits, Castellanos launched Proyecto Kaminaljuyú – an urban street art project – in July 2021. With the help of Julajuj, volunteer Michelle Mendoza and social media manager Celeste Ovando, more than 40 artists from throughout Central America flocked to Kaminaljuyú to spend two days filling the park with color. After four months of planning and two days of painting, 17 murals decorated the interior and exterior of the sports fields in Kaminaljuyú.

Julajuj's mural was the last part of Proyecto Kaminaljuyú to be completed, as Julajuj had to touch up a few of the parts budding artists Evelin and Julio helped out with. The work depicts Mayan prince Kaibil Balam adorned in jaguar hides, kneeling and holding a white pigeon

in the air. Julajuj spent a month planning the mural, studying the characters and visual elements to see what worked and what didn't. Did he want to paint a sunset? How would the background come together?

On Kaibil Balam's right is Princess Xinabajul, completing a Mayan fire ritual still performed today. Julajuj believes his mural is what the Mayan civilization of Kaminaljuyú looked like before it was destroyed by the growth of urban Guatemala. Kaibil Balam and Princess Xinabajul burn incense, candles and spices for luck while liberating the white pigeon, a symbol of peace.

With Proyecto Kaminaljuyú, Castellanos aimed to unite all groups of people for the sake of art. Women. Men. Members of the LGBTQ+ community. Indigenous people.

"The reunion of everything," he calls it. But, Castellanos said, some neighbors didn't hold the same values.

Local government officials approved mural sketches prior to the project, but only two hours after the completion of the 17 murals, three were painted over by government-approved artists. Where a tiger, a tree and a coffee-drinking skeleton had adorned the bricks only hours before, muted green paint dried on the wall. A man in a straw hat stood painting a series of Mayan symbols in thin black paint.

The rest of the murals on that wall, Julajuj's included, were erased Feb. 2, 2022.

"For me, the censorship of the murals brings me more value to keep on going with a positive attitude in front of negativity," Julajuj said. "As

an authority they only demonstrated their management and planification incapacity and the [little] value they have for art."

With Ovando's help, Castellanos says that through direct messaging, he has rallied neighborhood support on social media in an attempt to prevent the municipality from additional censoring.

"What I want is to leave this precedent for future generations, [for] young people, for them to be interested in coming to [play] sports and see art," Castellanos said.

Though Julajuj is content with the state of his own work, seeing the work of other artists erased is discouraging.

"It is not ethical because that is not appreciating the artists' work, [especially because they had] previous knowledge that this was taking place," Julajuj said. "It feels bad and it shows the lack of value that is given to art."

Between a lack of programs promoting art and economic resources failing to pay for extra courses, it becomes difficult to keep the everyday challenges from bringing an artist down. Castellanos says being a Guatemalan artist is a constant battle for space to create.

Julajuj will keep making that space. Between days spent passing Oreos and deodorant across the store counter, he'll put brush to canvas, using his colors to paint a path through life in the best way he knows how. ✂

(Additional Reporting by Talia McWright and María Isabel Castañeda)



Evelin Yax, 16, aspires to be an artist like her uncle, but also a doctor and a chef. "I admire everyone who paints," Julajuj said. "Now, I see many people that paint and I would like to improve and do the best work I can." | Photo by Hannah Hobus

# X The secrets of a family candy store

MARÍA DURAN PREPARES TO BE THE NEXT MATRIARCH OF DOÑA MARÍA GORDILLO DULCES TIPÍCOS.

By Molly Wilson



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 María Duran and her mother, the matriarch, María Mercedes stand behind the counter of their candy store. They are the fifth and sixth generation of women to run the family business. | Photo by Nataly Basterrechea

Locked away in María Mercedes' house, a black USB stick and a recipe book sit – the only copies of the secrets that produce Antigua's most famous traditional Guatemalan candies.

María Cristiano, María Mercedes' mother, always kept key elements of the recipe directions a secret from her staff, only teaching her family the specifics of how to make candies such as *canillitas de leche*, *cocadas* and *colochos de guayaba*.

Her daughter, María Duran, digitized the recipes and uploaded them to the USB before bringing them both to her mother's house and leaving her to hide them so Duran herself wouldn't know where they were kept. That way, she couldn't tell anyone. Everything made in Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos is now taught to staff and cooked by memory.

For the family who runs Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos – a high-end traditional candy store in the heart of Guatemala's most famous tourist city – the name María comes with a set of family expectations, including guarding the secrets, spanning six generations, that make the *dulcería* unique. No one is allowed in the kitchen unless they are family or one of roughly 20 employees who get to know some of the secrets, including the recipes.

María Mercedes Duran, 27, is María Mercedes' only daughter. She's next in line to take over the *dulcería*.

"I have that responsibility to continue the family business, not because my brothers can't continue, but I know it's a women's enterprise," Duran said.

X A timeline of Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos

Meet the six generations of candy makers

Nun Dolores Ortiz started baking bread and making candy to sell out of her house to raise money for the church in 1872.

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*Eventually, Dolores got lonely and adopted a daughter, Mercedes Ortiz. She took over the shop when Dolores died.*

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Her daughter was María Gordillo, the namesake of the dulcería. Gordillo was widowed and dedicated her time to the family business choosing to focus on selling only candy.

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*Her only child, Carlos Durán Gordillo, ran the dulcería and married. He named the dulcería Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos after the woman who put the most effort toward the business.*

*When Carlos died, his wife, María Christina, decided to continue running the dulcería even though she was not blood-related to María Gordillo. She was in charge until about 10 years ago and died in October 2021.*

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Their daughter, María Mercedes, is the current matriarch. She has started making some changes in customer service to bring the dulcería up to date. She likes to say she was born in the dulcería.

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*Heiress María Duran is slowly taking on responsibilities in the kitchen and customer service as she prepares to take over when her mom sees fit.*



Why would I go  
anywhere  
in the world  
when I have this  
special enterprise?

~~~~~  
María Duran

When Duran graduated from Universidad Galileo with a business administration degree in 2018, her mother congratulated her and asked, “What do you want to do? Do you want to work at Doña María?”

At first, she chose the store.

“Why would I go anywhere in the world when I have this special enterprise?” she said.

In May 2021, she decided she wanted to build something different from Doña María Gordillo and her family to create some balance. She opened a small restaurant, Corazonada, just outside Antigua.

Back at the candy store, the shelves are covered with candles and pottery, including owl piggy banks from María Gordillo’s time when people used them to store money. Hanging on the back wall are copper pots that were used to make candy until 20 years ago, when they were deemed a health hazard. The counter runs the entire length of the shop, some of it covered in glass to showcase candy, other parts wood where workers stamp paper bags with the Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos logo and fold boxes.

Slowly, María Duran’s grandmother taught her some of the secrets María Christina wouldn’t let the cooks know. She was stubborn about how she ran the *dulcería* and valued the traditions that came before her.

Soon, the family secrets and the *dulcería* that comes with them will be Duran’s to share and hide. Until then, she works with her mother on weekends when she’s not taking care of her own restaurant.

For many Guatemalans, Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos is also a family tradition. Customers can walk in knowing that this is how the store looked when their parents and grandparents entered.

“Every time I think about the importance of Doña María Gordillo in Guatemala, it’s an even bigger responsibility because it’s not only my family,” she said.

Duran and her mother have made a few changes, including changing to a more modern payment method, but one thing hasn’t changed – no outsiders in the kitchen. ✕



~~~~~  
Restaurant owner María Duran faces the decision to accept ownership of her family’s traditional candy store in Antigua, Guatemala. Three generations of Marias before Duran have kept secret recipes, successful business and tradition responsibility hidden within the sweet taste of Doña María Gordillo’s candy. | Photo by Nataly Basterrechea



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The eyes of tourists and local Guatemalans stare into glass display cases at the widely-known traditional candy shop, Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos. *Carmote en dulce, naranja con mazapán* and *naranja con coco* captivately stare back. | Photo by Nataly Basterrechea



~~~~~  
Each *dulce* is prepared from memory, the recipes taught from generation to generation, then carefully wrapped in hand-printed bags and boxes. | Photo by Gina Miller





Mardoqueo Tian sits with his daughter Ana Lucia in the house they share with Tian's parents in Tecpán, Guatemala. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

## 'It's worth *dreaming*'

DESPERATE TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR FAMILIES, THREE MEN FROM THE HIGHLANDS OF GUATEMALA ATTEMPT TO REBUILD LIVES AFTER FAILING TO IMMIGRATE TO THE UNITED STATES.

By Soraya Keiser



Mardoqueo Tian was on his knees with 120 other people, head bent to the dirty floor of the abandoned depot in the northern frontier of Mexico. Helicopters swarmed overhead. Dogs snarled. Police yelled. But Tian's hope was gone. After traveling across two countries, spending all his money, eating only one meal a day and sleeping in cramped quarters, he was caught. Three months and all he had to show for it was one quetzal.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE >>>

>>> Like hundreds of thousands of others, Tian had attempted to cross the United States-Mexico border to find work as an undocumented immigrant. The 35 quetzales (\$4.50) he received a day for working in the fields was not enough to support his family. In May 2021, Tian left his infant daughter and wife to make the illegal crossing through the desert with the help of a *coyote*, a migrant smuggler.

Vilma, his wife, with nervous hands that fiddle on the loose threads of her Mayan apron and Ana Lucia, his daughter with eyes as big as the orange sucker she carries around, were left alone for three months, every night knowing he was in danger of being deported or dying.

But Vilma understood why Tian had to go. The fear of not having enough money to provide for their children overrode any fear Vilma had of Tian's crossing.

"I knew it would be difficult for me to take care of my children," Vilma said, "but it's worth dreaming."

.....

When Tian was single, he didn't have the urge to leave, but with a family to provide for, he was desperate. Tian's father Ramiro had unsuccessfully tried to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in 2008, but Tian had also heard success stories about

friends who were making enough to send remittance back to their families in Guatemala. After hearing a *coyote's* ad for a border crossing over the radio, Tian decided to go for it.

But the *coyote* asked for 130,000 quetzales (\$16,900) – money that Tian didn't have, so he put up the deed to his parent's house as collateral to pay for it.

Tian left Wednesday, May 12, 2021 at 6 a.m. His wife was eight months pregnant.

Tian took a bus to Cuatro Caminos, a town in the highlands of Guatemala 103 kilometers, or 64 miles, from his home of Tecpán. From there, he met the *coyote* who would supposedly guide him to his destination.

With 2,000 quetzales (\$260) on him, Tian began the long, stunted journey to the United States. First he crossed the Guatemala-Mexico border and took a bus from Puebla, Mexico to a depot. Then he was told to get into a trailer filled with 300 immigrants. They stood for 18 hours. Some vomited. Others fainted. The *coyote* took everyone's belongings so that they wouldn't take up space.

"It is impressive how far poverty takes us," Tian said.

Tian was used to eating three meals a day back in Tecpán, but while in

## Mardoqueo's journey

- 7. Chihuahua, Mexico
- 6. Querétaro, Mexico
- 5. Puebla, Mexico
- 4. San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico
- 3. Gracias a Dios, Mexico
- 2. Huehuetenango, Guatemala
- 1. Tecpán, Guatemala





*I have a responsibility to my family. I have to be responsible and I have to see to it that they get ahead.*

~~~~~  
Ramiro Tian

Mexico he survived on a single egg and a cup of water each day.

The *coyotes* drove Tian and 100 other people from Mexico City to the frontier between Mexico and the United States in the trailer. It took 32 hours. When they got to the depot, some people had already been there for two months.

The *coyotes* would visit the depot at random times but would not give answers about what would happen next. When Tian asked when he was leaving, the *coyote* threatened to kill him if he asked again. The immigrants drank yellow water and were fed twice a day. The ration of food was so low that it was common for people to faint from hunger.

“It is not an easy thing. Of all the brothers who have tried, many have succeeded, many have died,” Tian said. “There is no compassion from anyone.”

Tian was desperate to return to his family in Tecpán, but didn’t know if the *coyotes* would allow it. They wanted the money, and if the crossing wasn’t successful they wouldn’t receive it all. Finally, some people were told it was safe to cross. Tian’s spirits rose a little, in hopes that he could be in the next group.

20 people were allowed out. 10 came back.

Another group of immigrants were set to leave the following day, but it was too late – the police had found the depot, and along with it 120 immigrants from across Central America. Guatemalans. Nicaraguans. Hondurans. All had failed in their goal of crossing the border. Instead, they were forced to their knees and told not to look up at the police.

Tian and the other immigrants were sent to a detention center in Chihuahua, Mexico where Tian was able to

call Vilma. He could only explain that he was deported and then hang up. Vilma wasn’t even able to tell him that that same exact day she had given birth to José Fernando. Tian had a son. It was Wednesday, June 9 — one month since he had left.

While legal immigration to the United States is sometimes possible, people from impoverished backgrounds with little to no education – people like Tian – are rarely ever accepted. Guatemalans often have to pay officials to put in a good word for them to be chosen for visas.

Tian’s brother-in-law José Pablo Sut was chosen from a large pool of applicants from Guatemala. Now he works as a migrant farmer in Canada picking tomatoes.

Because the legal process is often too expensive and disappointing for most,

they look into options for crossing the border on their own or through *coyotes* like Tian did.

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13 years before Tian’s attempted crossing, his father Ramiro had a similar journey.

Ramiro started working in the fields when he was 15 years old, first at a coffee farm, then planting wheat. He eventually bought a piece of land for himself and planted broccoli and lettuce to sell. This business became profitable for Ramiro, and eventually he managed to save up 75,000 quetzales (\$9,758). But he didn’t know how to manage the money. Ramiro lost most of it and had to sell his land to pay a loan.

He eventually got a job at a clothing factory but wanted to move to the U.S. for more money. He had four children and a wife to provide for.

“I have a responsibility to my family,” Ramiro said. “I have to be responsible and I have to see to it that they get ahead.”

Ramiro’s attempt to go to the United States was

stopped in Mexico, and he was forced to return home. Now he works at the clothing factory once again.

“I can’t sit at home. It would be unfair,” Ramiro said. “After we fail to get to the U.S., we have to go back to look for work.”

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In 2018, Tian’s cousin Mardoqueo Rucuch also attempted to find work in the United States as an undocumented immigrant.

He heard an advertisement on the radio saying that a *coyote* was willing to take people to the United States and they wouldn’t have to pay until they successfully arrived. Rucuch sold his motorcycle for 6,000 quetzales (\$780), left 4,000 quetzales (\$520) with his wife and two young children and took a bus to start his journey.

He was deported back to Guatemala from the Mexican frontier. Unsuccessful.

“I left part of my heart there,” Racuch said. “Whenever I remember myself, I feel in that desert.”



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Above: Mardoqueo Racuch walks down a narrow row of rose bushes with a handful of fresh-cut flowers. After his return to Tecpán, Racuch began working with Plantaciones Mavali S.A., a rose farm in Tecpán, Guatemala. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

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Left: Ramiro, Juliana and Ana Lucia all hang out in the living room of their home. The cinderblock walls surround three rooms that the entire family share. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

Right: Vilma Tian sits with her two children, Ana Lucia and José Fernando, on the bed they all share. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

Racuch now works at Plantaciones Mavali S.A., a rose farm in Tecpán. Since he was deported back to Guatemala, Racuch is on a government blacklist that makes it hard to get a job. Because working on the rose farm isn't a government-regulated job, Racuch has been able to work there for the past 10 months.

His boss, Kevin Eguizabal, says undocumented immigration has made it difficult to maintain a steady, trained workforce. Often if a man is planning on attempting the border crossing, they will ask for vacation and the company doesn't know if they will return. If they don't, Eguizabal must train more people, which takes up time from other tasks.

To combat this, Eguizabal has implemented a contract system in which workers are contracted for two years to the company. This security system is more appealing to people than work that is only

guaranteed for days or weeks at a time.

This is true for Racuch as well, but he still desires to travel to the United States someday.

•••••

Ramiro thinks Tian should try to find work in the United States again. Tian is not eager to do so.

"Mardoqueo will never go back," Ramiro said. "He's traumatized."

Instead, Tian finds work back home.

It is 7 p.m. and already dark on a Thursday night in January. Thursdays are good for business, so Tian continues to drive people around in his tuk tuk, or motorcycle taxi, late into the night. On nights like these, he can make up to 250 quetzales (\$32).

Behind the cinderblock walls of Tian's house that he shares with his parents, Vilma and Juliana, Tian's

mom, are making tortillas for tonight's dinner.

Through the courtyard of uneven dirt and into the kitchen made of sheet metal and wooden reeds, a soft *pat pat pat* can be heard as tortilla after tortilla is flattened, rounded and laid on the cement stove to cook.

As Vilma feeds José Fernando, Juliana continues the methodical portioning and shaping of the dough that she has made by hand. She has it down to a science because she has been making tortillas since she was 12.

The black corn tortillas will be enough to feed the entire family at every meal for three days. Some nights they won't be able to eat together because Tian is out working late.

Even when he is home, Tian must say goodbye. ☒

(Additional reporting by Majo Díaz.)

*I knew it would be
difficult for me to take
care of my children,
but it's worth dreaming.*

~~~~~  
Vilma Tian



# Fear for the fearless

A MOTHER SPENDS YEARS FIGHTING FOR HER DISABLED SON, BUT WHEN SHE LOSES HER JOB, SHE MUST LET GO TO RELY ON HIM.

By Ella Roberts

**A**ura Marina can feel the turning heads and piercing glares of the other villagers as she makes her way along the streets on her way to work. She burrows her 7-year-old son's body against her breast, his weight dragging her down, closer to the cobblestones. Her eyelids hang and her feet drag behind the rest of her body, her torso angled forward. She doesn't know how much longer she can carry this weight, but she tries to remain strong. Marina fears the day she will have to let go, forcing her son to face discrimination as a disabled boy in the *pueblo* of San Juan del Obispo.

Twenty-three years later, Marina, now 52, is a single mother of three who sells flowers on the streets outside her home. Her husband left her. She lost her job as a waitress. She scrambled to pay hospital and physical therapy bills for her kids.

"I would walk on fire for them if I had to," she said.

On top of all that, her sister-in-law died during the pandemic, so she'd taken on the role of caretaker of three more children, and other nieces and nephews show up at her door, too, as the extended family works together to survive..

Despite her stress, she doesn't have to worry about that 7-year-old she used to carry everywhere, and he hopes to someday carry the family himself.

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Estuardo Jimenez, 30, Marina's youngest son, needed her the most when he was born. Jimenez grew up with spina bifida, a birth defect in which a developing baby's spinal



Estuardo Jimenez believes being positive is important because the obstacles he faces are more mental than physical. This is something that was instilled in him at a young age. "I get inspired by my family, because many of them had to start from scratch and I admire that," Jimenez said. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

## Transiciones nonprofit

Donations create tangible results for the wheelchair-building nonprofit organization in Antigua.

**\$450** provides a new wheelchair, in addition to individual client fitting, health education, a lifetime guarantee and follow-up care.

For **\$1,500 – \$3,000** you can provide a custom-made prosthetic with follow-up care and ongoing case management.

**\$960 / year** (or \$80 per month) provides a quality education to a Guatemalan child or young adult with special needs.

**\$15/month** funds special education field trips for children in Transitions' Special Education Program.

**\$25/month** provides anti-seizure medication for a child with epilepsy in Transitions' Special Education Program.

**\$30/month** builds an emergency medical fund for a Guatemalan with special needs.

**\$45/month** will help support vocational training in Transitions' Wheelchair Workshop and Print Shop.

cord fails to develop properly, and he had to learn to live with it, which meant living in a brace until age 16 and, when his condition worsened, moving to a wheelchair.

After a public school rejected her son because of his disability, Marina found a small school for Jimenez to attend.

"He wasn't accepted because they told me he needed a lot of help and that someone always had to take care of him, but in reality he was very independent. He was capable," Marina said.

One day, coming home after school at age 11, Jimenez told Marina he didn't want to study anymore because he was being bullied.

*You don't belong here.*

*You shouldn't be here.*

*You're different from us.*

"They see you as a phenomenon," he said.

Jimenez found himself never being chosen for the playground games in elementary school. He was constantly having to take another path literally and figuratively, feeling like a burden or less capable. And always on the margins.

"It was hard to have a life without being included," Jimenez said. "There are always going to be people who are going to make you feel bad about yourself, but those are the people you shouldn't pay attention to."

Before he received a wheelchair in high school, Jimenez hoped physical therapy could treat his condition. Spina bifida can happen anywhere along the spine where the tube of

bones that protects the spinal cord doesn't close all the way. Often, the spinal cord and nerves get damaged, which might cause mild or severe intellectual and physical disabilities.

Intellectually, his boss calls Jimenez a quick learner. No problems there.

Physically, he can't walk, but he can dominate his boss on the basketball court.

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In order to pay for her son's therapy, Marina had to put in extra hours waiting tables. On her way to work, she would drop Jimenez off and pay for a three-wheeled tuk tuk to return home. Sometimes, she would give the driver the money in advance to pick up her son, but he would sometimes take off with the quetzales without picking up Jimenez, who spent many days sitting alone on the bench outside school, waiting for someone to get him.

Eventually, he told Marina he didn't want to go to therapy anymore.

"I prefer to stay in a wheelchair," he told her at age 16.

However, Marina couldn't accept this fate for her son. Her anxiety never subsided when it came to her son's safety.

"He is a person with a lot of enthusiasm and optimism, because for him there is nothing impossible," she said. But for her, there are many impossible things. Paying bills, getting a car, parenting alone.

But still, Jimenez insisted.

"Don't worry about me. There is nothing that is impossible for me," he would tell her from the chair.

After graduating from high school, Jimenez started going everywhere in his wheelchair. He learned how to move around by himself. For six years, Jimenez traveled in his wheelchair 8.5 miles a day to work, round trip, from San Juan del Obispo to Antigua, taking him 45 minutes to arrive and an hour to go back. Without laws requiring for ramps on street corners, and with narrow sidewalks often obstructed by protruding window sills, Jimenez pushed himself up hills of cobblestone, dirt roads, flooded rivers and dangerous traffic.

He bulked up.

Sometimes, Jimenez says, people offered rides. He liked to hop in the back of a stranger's truck or hang on by the handlebar of a motorcycle. Sometimes, the driver accelerated too much and – upon hitting a bump in the road – he would let go, taking flight into the street.

He toughened up.

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Jimenez hopes to share his determination with disabled children through his work at Asociación Transiciones, a nonprofit organization started in 1996 that advocates for the rights and social inclusion of Guatemalans with disabilities by providing access to social development programs, mobility equipment and opportunities for independent living. The nonprofit's building houses a wheelchair factory of adaptive equipment because the employees work with disabilities of some kind, most of them working from their own wheelchairs.

They know what people want in functional wheelchairs.

At the start of his work day, Jimenez rolls his way to tables and power



Estuardo Jimenez works as a welder for Transiciones, where he uses modern TIG welding and other fabrication equipment and maintains computerized records on each client so he can respond quickly to needed changes or repairs. Transiciones modified many of their work spaces to the appropriate height for their employees in wheelchairs, so that everything is accessible to them. "He is very delicate and precise," Alex Gálvez, Jimenez's boss, said. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

*Changing people's perspectives of people with disabilities is very important for our country.*

Alex Gálvez,  
Executive Director



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 Aura Marina beams with pride when she talks about her son, Estuardo Jimenez. After struggling for years to find him the necessary care and facing discrimination, Marina is proud of the man Jimenez has become. "We would've never imagined him to be this successful. He was able to pursue something bigger than they expected," Marina said. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

equipment that have been adapted to wheelchair height and straps on his toolbelt to bend aluminum, weld parts together and shape a high-end wheelchair, all from the seat of his own wheelchair.

He reaches for six meters of aluminum tubing off shelves and runs it through stations of loud power tools that spray sparks and drown coworkers' jokes. He takes his wheelchair frames up the five ramps to the factory's second floor to be fit with handmade fabric seats and professional-grade wheels.

Nobody helps him up the ramps. They can't. He chooses not to have handles on the back of his wheelchair.

Jimenez started as a client of Transiciones when he was 7 after

running into one of the founders on the street. At the time, he needed crutches and braces. The bosses also provided him a scholarship in order for him to continue going to school. Years later, he started a fellowship and the manager felt that Jimenez could be a future leader. Jimenez first started working in the company print shop when he was 19. Executive Director Alex Gálvez says Jimenez was not always easy to work with, but during the last four to five years he has matured and is now a manager on the welding team.

Transiciones has trained 30 employees, roughly 75% of them disabled, who all started as clients in Transiciones programs. Funding for much of their equipment, tools and materials has come from a Rotary International Foundation Grant, coordinated by the Portland Rotary Club, and from other donors. Donations received go toward better machines which allow for more precision and less waste of materials.

In 2008, the workshop provided more than 100 new and refurbished wheelchairs. The shop makes six different types of wheelchairs, taking two days' of work to produce. Wheelchairs made with metal are donated to those in need and those made with aluminum or iron can cost up to \$1,300. What starts as six meters of scrap material paired with a mold and 48 hours' worth of work turns into a wheelchair well-suited for the rough terrain of Guatemala.

This, Jimenez says, is what makes the company he works for so special. They are able to customize wheelchairs specifically for a region that would not be able to function properly in the ordinary wheelchair. Details down to the angles, precision and heart are what provide the most practical wheelchairs for kids with disabilities – for example, a child with paralysis, a current client that Jimenez is building for. Jimenez explains that when a client comes to the shop, they encourage them to be more independent because "people are not going to be there the whole time" to take care of them.

According to Jimenez and Gálvez, the number of people with disabilities in Guatemala is increasing and yet the government doesn't pay attention.

"It's a problem that should be seen," Jimenez said.

Transiciones' mission during the last 30 years has been to draw awareness to the "corruption" within the government in terms of people with disabilities. To the workers, it's not about the money, but about using the tools they are given to help anyone they can. Gálvez stresses to his employees that in order for them to have the best chance to help others, they must learn to approach the job from the client's perspective.

"Sometimes they take it for granted because they've been here for so

many years. People like what we do and we should keep doing it for people that don't have the same opportunities, right?" Gálvez said.

It's one thing to also have a disability, he says, but what about those who live in rural areas, or among the volcanoes?

The employees of Transiciones have specialized chairs they created for competitive wheelchair basketball. The players have traveled to El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Mexico to compete.

"Changing people's perspectives of people with disabilities is very important for our country," Gálvez said. "It's a great channel to be independent in our country. This is a program that helps to break boundaries in our community."

After spending their week among the loud noises and sparks of wheelchair construction, Jimenez and his coworkers visit a nearby basketball court on Fridays, but only if their work is done.

Often, someone gets plowed over and tossed out of their chairs after pushing and shoving one another.

Jimenez works out every morning, lifting weights, doing uphill chair sprints and shooting hoops. He plays defense, but can play any position well with his speed, he claims. He has the smallest wheelchair on the

I want to be by her side all the time. I want to give back to her a little bit of the huge amount that she has given me.

~~~~~  
 Estuardo Jimenez, Transiciones employee and athlete



Estuardo Jimenez and his mom, Aura Marina, have a good relationship and have always been very close. One of the hardest things for Jimenez was to watch his mom struggle with his own disability. "I admired most the strength she had. I'm grateful for my mom. I'm in a good place because of her," Jimenez said. | Photo by Savannah Heeren



team, allowing him to be closer to the ground to use his arm and core strength. In the golden hour of Friday afternoons, in a valley between puffing volcanoes and in front of the weekend, players fly up and down the court, tossing the ball onto one shoulder and gliding it across to the other.

Jimenez likes to throw the ball in front of him, igniting a fast break, and pulling away from every other player behind him.

Jimenez has learned many lessons over the years while working and playing for Transiciones. Although his condition has affected him physically, his curiosity and activity have not been hindered. He explains that if anything, a physical impairment is more mentally debilitating than physically.

"The mind is a barrier and this stunts growth sometimes," he said. Not having the same opportunities such as access to a wheelchair or a supportive family also have a huge impact, he says. He couldn't be independent without them.

"My mom was the one who always tried to find opportunities for me," Jimenez said.

Like the adaptive sports car he got six years ago, the physical therapy she arranged, the multiple hospital visits and his education.

"He was able to pursue something bigger than [society] expected," she said.

From a young age, Jimenez watched his mom struggle. When her husband left, Marina didn't think she would be able to pay for her kids' college, so Jimenez and his brother both dropped out. Now, Jimenez understands the sacrifices his mom made for him and his siblings and dreams of the day he can take care of his mother the way she took care of him.

"I want to be by her side all the time," he said. "I want to give back to her, a little bit of the huge amount that she has given me."

Jimenez's current ambitions include building a second level to his mom's home so that she can have a whole floor to herself and to build a ramp so that he can go up and down the stairs, too, without anyone's help.

Although Marina is skeptical and has a hard time understanding his somewhat daunting aspirations, Jimenez continues to weld, climb ramps and start fastbreaks with his mom always in his mind. Marina struggles to admit she must rely on her son to make it by, but to Jimenez, he is simply returning the favor. ✕

*(Additional reporting by Estefania Rosal, Matt Tiegland and Savannah Heeren.)*

# The era of female filmmakers

EMILY GULARTE AND PAMELA GUINEA WORK TO CHANGE THE GUATEMALAN FILM INDUSTRY.

By Molly Wilson



Emily Gularte sat in a theater for the 2019 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, that showcased the top artists and filmmakers. She was one of 15 students, ages 18 to 24, chosen to become a part of the Sundance Ignite 2019 Fellowship.

She watched as her film, “Lagartija,” or “Lizard,” played. She watched as Universidad Francisco Marroquín Film School’s logo crossed the screen.

She watched as a girl struggled to fit in with her mother’s new family. She watched as the girl’s father offered to take her to the beach. She watched as the girl realized she wouldn’t fit in with his family either.

And then she saw her name: “Written and Directed by Emily Gularte.”

Gularte is part of a new generation of filmmakers in Guatemala who want to show their country not just in drama, but also in joy.

“The screening was so beautiful because you can sense when people feel something. They are quiet because they feel comfortable,” Gularte’s

best friend, producer and editor Carlos Luxo said. “So when we were watching it at UFM I remember that silence, that emotion that you can sense from the audience.”

Pamela Guinea grew up in Guatemala and Mexico being told she could do what she wanted. She became a film producer with the inspiration of her poet father and feminist grandmother despite the film industry being male-dominated.

Guinea took the attitude that she could pursue any career she wanted to into the film industry where she created Muestra de Cine Hecho por Mujeres, a place where women from across the world come and create a short film while working and learning with other women in the industry. In 2020, 176 women applied to the program. 14 were accepted.

“Everybody [in the program] feels that they are in a secure place,” she said. “I don’t suggest the topics, the topics are free. You can talk about your dog, granddaughter, whatever you want, but everybody wants to talk about violence, the body, the way it feels, the insecurities, the scares.”

Hoping to bring colorful Guatemalan culture into her future films, Emily Gularte plans to further her career in the industry with a master’s in directing at AFT (American Film Institute) in Los Angeles, California. | Photo by Gina Miller

Stills from "Cadejo Blanco" about a working-class girl who infiltrates a gang to find her sister. Guinea was an executive producer on the project. | Submitted stills



A year earlier, Gularte sat on the bathroom floor of her hotel room writing a new script on the hotel notepad. It was the middle of the night and she didn't want to wake up her roommate. Until that moment, she hadn't realized what her project was truly about – being the daughter of divorce.

"I come from a family where my parents separated when I was little," she said. "I think when you're a child experiencing things that are harsh, [it] has a very big impact on you. It makes you grow up a little faster."

Growing up surrounded by creative people, Gularte realized she wanted to go into a similar profession. She saw the value in images and how much they can convey and decided to go to film school.

Two months after rewriting her script on the bathroom floor, Gularte was getting ready to film.

"I got this panic and this fear inside of me that I wasn't able to pull this off," Gularte said. "I'm also very perfectionist, so I was like, 'This is gonna be a disaster, and I don't have the experience, I don't have the talent, capacity.'"

She went to Luxo for support.

"You really have it," he said. "You just have to trust yourself."

Guinea is trying to grow the Guatemalan film industry and make it more representative of the population that actually lives in the country.

"We have our own unique ways to talk, fall in love, smile, so it's important to see those reference points and see ourselves on the screen and to recognize ourselves," she said. "That's why I am so stubborn to keep doing film [in Guatemala]."

Muestro de Cine Hecho por Mujeres is helping her do just that. According to Guinea, the hardest part about filming in Guatemala is funding. Because there are few laws surrounding filmmaking, finding places to shoot isn't hard, but finding the money is.

In Mexico, the government will give a producer or director money to film a movie as long as 70% of the money is spent in Mexico. Guinea has used this method and then taken the other 30% back to Guatemala on locations or hiring other Guatemalan filmmakers.

Her goals are to represent Guatemala in the global film industry and create more opportunities for women in film.

She has found when she hires for a film, the obvious choice is a man. She makes the effort to find a woman who is qualified for the job instead.

"If a woman would have the confidence of a man, it would be really different history," she said. That's why she started Muestro de Cine Hecho por Mujeres. "We need to create this confidence in this group of girls."

Guatemalan film is known for its drama. The stories about civil wars, missing family members and natural disasters. Gularte sees more in her country than the drama it faces. She sees the everyday life, the comedy and the joy.

Her next goal is to get her master's degree in directing at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles so she can learn how to make comedies and showcase the joy she sees in the Guatemalan culture she wants to return to after she graduates. Alumni from the program include Patty Jenkins, who directed "Wonder Woman."

She wants to change Guatemalan film.

"I really want us to tap into the colorful, beautiful, funny side of Guatemala," she said. "That's where I feel very connected to and what I found to love the most about Guatemala. And I don't see that on screen." ✕

(Additional reporting by Nataly Basterrechea.)



Pamela Guinea became a well-known producer in Guatemala by making movies like "Gasolina." She has won the Order of Arts and Letters in France for her work. | Photo by Nataly Basterrechea

**X WOMEN FILMMAKERS**

**Guinea's favorite movies that happen to be directed by women.**

- Lost Daughter**  
*directed by Maggie Gyllenhal*
- Noche de fuego**  
*directed by Tatiana Huezo*
- The Power of the Dog**  
*directed by Jane Campion*
- Painted Portrait of a Lady on Fire**  
*directed by Céline Sciamma*

## Smiling behind the mask

FOR MANY REASONS, RURAL GUATEMALAN CHILDREN SUFFERED MORE THAN MOST UNDER THE CONFINES OF COVID-19. NOW, THEY'RE TRYING TO MAKE UP THAT TIME.

By Morgan Day

Jakelin Marleny smiles behind a pink and white polka dot mask while hopping up to straddle the cement of the dried-up fountain in the plaza of Santa María de Jesus.

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine — I’m nine,” she says, counting out the numbers on her fingers as she recites the few English words she knows. Jakelin learns English, Spanish and Kaqchikel at her school, Colegio Angelitos de Dios, but she hasn’t been able to attend school in person for nearly two years.

Colegio Angelitos de Dios is a private primary

school attached to Iglesia Santa María de Jesus. Seven years ago, a group of five Mayan women, with the support of the town’s priest, Father Hugo, founded the school with the goal of improving literacy in the *pueblo*, or town. The school serves as a low-cost, private alternative to the town’s public school, which is currently full and does not have room to accommodate all of the *pueblo*’s children.

Colegio Angelitos de Dios’ staff work to provide students with the skills necessary to succeed outside of the *pueblo* with higher education and better job opportunities. The adults of Santa

María de Jesus often face discrimination from other towns because of their traditional Mayan clothing, lack of education and imperfect Spanish — the school’s mission is to combat this.

“The things we face, the things our parents faced ... I don’t want that for our kids,” school administrator Elvia Oritz said. “We do this so they can have a better life — so they can do more than we could.”

Colegio Angelitos de Dios exists to provide the children in attendance an education in English, Spanish and Kaqchikel, giving students highly sought-after skills that will

Homework in hand, Jakelin Marleny twirls around the courtyard of Colegio Angelitos de Dios after meeting her third-grade teacher for the first and only time this year. | Photo by Gina Miller



*I never went to school, but with [my kids] I am learning...I tell my husband that little by little, I will learn and with time I am going to be able to read all the messages.*

MARÍA HERNÁNDEZ

make them more suited to find jobs as they grow up.

But with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and parents have noticed the quality of education has decreased dramatically despite the efforts of the community.

“You can clearly see how the kids are not getting the same results in education,” first-grade teacher Cindy Acalón Ortiz said. “Some parents don’t know how to teach them, because they didn’t have an education themselves. We are seeing low performance from kids because of the pandemic.”

Marta Estrada has two children currently attending Colegio Angelitos de Dios. Her eldest, 10-year-old Jorge, wants to drop out.

“He feels that he isn’t learning. I feel that he isn’t learning either,” Estrada said. “He likes that he can make money working.”

Jorge is part of the 62% of Colegio Angelitos de Dios students without internet access. He receives his lessons weekly via WhatsApp text

messages, sending photos of homework back and forth on his mother’s phone.

But not all families are able to receive these messages, and not all who do receive them are able to understand them.

María Hernández never learned to read and write. None of her six children living in her home are currently enrolled in school, either.

“I never went to school, but with [my kids] I am learning,” Hernández said. “I tell my husband that little by little, I will learn and with time I am going to be able to read all the messages.”

When classes went online and Colegio Angelitos de Dios closed their doors, Hernández’s children’s access to education shifted. Unable to afford internet access or a cell phone, the family doesn’t receive the weekly Google Meet or WhatsApp lessons. Not having received schooling herself, Hernández is not able to assist her children with their lessons, but she is determined to learn.

“All my kids are learning with me,” Hernández said. “‘You learn. I am also learning.’ That’s what I tell them.”

Donning medical masks and hand sanitizer, a teacher from Colegio Angelitos de Dios will meet with the family for an hour each week to correct their homework.

“People keep asking us ‘Why would you do this? You’re risking your safety,’” first-grade teacher Miguelito García said. “But I tell them, ‘It’s for the kids.’”

Hernández’s 13-year-old daughter Maribel walks up the dusty dirt road to Colegio Angelitos de Dios each week to pick up homework packets, meeting with teachers to review their work.

At least, she did until her father’s accident.

Three months ago, Hernández’s husband was hospitalized due to a work-related injury. Relying on his income to sustain them, the family could no longer afford the 15 quetzales (\$2) monthly scholarship tuition rate at Colegio Angelitos de Dios.

The Hernández family did not return to school for the new year Jan. 17, and the public school in the *pueblo* does not have enough space for them.

García spends two six-hour days each week crafting homework packets for his students, meticulously placing black-and-white images of strawberries and oranges to teach numerals in English and Spanish. If his work is approved by administration and makes it into the hands of students, he knows that he needs to have clear, direct instructions anyone

Left: Without internet access, nor a formal education herself, María Hernández is still determined to learn alongside her six children. Once a week for an hour, a teacher from Colegio Angelitos de Dios meets with the family to help with homework. “All my kids are learning with me,” Hernández said. “‘You learn. I am also learning.’ That’s what I tell them.” | Photo by Gina Miller

Bottom: Despite many challenges due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers and staff of Colegio Angelitos de Dios are on a personal mission to educate children, combat discrimination and overall better the Santa María de Jesus community. “God is beautiful because he helps us help others,” Oritz said. | Photo by Gina Miller





## Learn words in *Kaqchikel*, Spanish and English

English: *Avocado*  
Spanish: *Aguacata*  
Kaqchikel: *Oj*

English: *Pumpkin*  
Spanish: *Calabaza*  
Kaqchikel: *K'un*

English: *Watermelon*  
Spanish: *Sandía*  
Kaqchikel: *Q'oq*

English: *Pineapple*  
Spanish: *Ananás*  
Kaqchikel: *Chop*

English: *Lemon*  
Spanish: *Limon*  
Kaqchikel: *Limonix*

English: *Banana*  
Spanish: *Platano*  
Kaqchikel: *Saq'ul*

English: *Coconut*  
Spanish: *Coco*  
Kaqchikel: *Wachxan*

English: *Cherry*  
Spanish: *Cereza*  
Kaqchikel: *K'oxk'ob'äl*

English: *Tomato*  
Spanish: *Tomate*  
Kaqchikel: *Ixcoya'*

Students settle into the worn, wooden chairs for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic forced the school to close their doors. After two years, teachers and students are eager to meet in-person once again. | Photo by Gina Miller

can understand. Not all of his 37 students will join the Google Meet lesson, nor does every parent have the skills to know how to help their child understand the material.

García longs for a return to normalcy.

“As teachers, we are really eager and hopeful for students to come back,” García said. “They’re not the same, being in person and learning online.”

García and the other teachers at Colegio Angelitos de Dios hope to obtain a permit to return to in-person classes by March 2022. The Ministry of Education has not yet approved this because of the low vaccination rate in the *pueblo*.

“All of the teachers are vaccinated, but not a lot of other people in the *pueblo* are,” Ortiz said. “They aren’t educated and so they don’t understand [vaccinations], and so they don’t want it.”

Without improving vaccination rates, the obstacle preventing Colegio Angelitos de Dios from reopening remains in place. But the school found a loophole — a chance to reopen for one day for a meet-the-teacher event.

•••••

The groundskeeper unlocks the black iron gate at 7 a.m. Jan. 17 and sets a liter of gel antiseptic on a wooden stool near the entrance. Teachers slowly file in, sanitizing their hands, chatting about the events of their vacations. They open their classrooms and begin to prepare for students to arrive, scribbling schedules on whiteboards, printing homework packets and disinfecting desks. The small, splintering wooden chairs await the arrival of students for the first time in almost two years.

Meet-the-teacher marks the beginning of the school year. Jakelin, accompanied by her 17-year-old

brother Kevin, walks through the black iron gate, sanitizes her hands and skips toward Tercero A to meet her new third-grade teacher. Jakelin and Kevin’s parents sell vegetables at La Terminal market in Guatemala City, an hour-and-a-half *camioneta* ride away, leaving Kevin to accompany Jakelin, as he is responsible for taking care of her during their parents’ working hours.

Receiving their lessons via WhatsApp text messages, the education of Jakelin and the other 190 students of Colegio Angelitos de Dios has changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students with internet access now attend two one-hour Google Meet calls a week: one to explain the homework assignments and one to review the answers. Those without access rely on text messages. Currently, the school’s enrollment is down by 38%.

Despite gathering in person for meet-the-teacher, this school year is

not starting off any differently. No hugs. No playing with friends. No in-person learning.

Yet each teacher, student and parent walking into the school smiles behind their mask.

After meeting her teacher in person for the only time this school year and receiving her weekly homework packet, Jakelin sprints into the courtyard of the school. Leaping and twirling, waving her homework above her head, she smiles through her red and yellow cow-print medical mask.

Despite having class online again, not getting to see friends or learn in a classroom, Jakelin dances. She’s finally back at school. Jakelin spins, smiling behind the mask. ✂

(Additional reporting by Nataly Basterrrechea.)





## Books that fill

16 SENIOR WOMEN REWRITE THEIR STORIES THROUGH THE POWER OF READING AND SHARING IDEAS.

By Ella Roberts



**Y**a queremos pastel ... Ya queremos pastel, aunque sea un pedacito ... pero queremos pastel.

Jan. 13 marks the ninth anniversary of the book club Primas Lectoras. Members throw their hands up in celebration as they grin widely at one another underneath their masks. The women circle around a pristinely decorated lemon meringue cake topped with a large number nine candle.

Since she was a young girl, Maruja Roldan had a desire in her heart. A desire for literature. For years an untouched bookshelf took up space in her home, filled with stories she had never read.

“My dream is to be able to translate the legacy of reading first to my grandchildren and also to any person who wants to enjoy reading. I would love

for people to have book clubs like the one we have in Antigua,” Roldan said.

What started as a love for books, mostly prompted by father figures, became an established group of 16 women wishing to grow intellectually and spiritually together. The group meets about every two weeks in a gated community on the edge of Antigua to chat over coffee and snacks while they reflect on the chosen literature.

However, over the years, members are finding that their group is much more than just reading a good book. With many of them widowed or retired, this club combats loneliness, especially after an isolating time during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The idea of the book club was born in a McDonald’s in November 2012 where Roldan and her friends Ana Muñoz and Silvita

Left: Lucky de García and Maruja Roldan were both inspired by their fathers’ love for reading. When García moved to Antigua eight years ago, she heard about the club and connected with Roldan about joining as a way to get to know more people like her. | Photo by Matt Teigland

Días, who has since passed on, discussed their hopes and dreams for a book club. At the time, Muñoz was married to Roldan’s cousin, which is how the name Primas Lecturas, or “cousins who read,” came about. By January 2013, the group was formed and within nine years Roldan had recruited 16 women, ages 58 through 80, who all felt called to the group for different reasons.

Lucky de García describes it as a hole that needed to be filled. Lillian Contreras says after years of working, she finally has a social life. Marína de Roca describes it as being reborn.

To María de España, Primas Lectoras is about creating a movement to break the imbalanced patriarchy members have been confined to.

“Women can say ‘I can, too.’ A woman has value as a human being that is not only a vehicle to have babies, but is also a human being that needs to grow, needs to project itself with its expectations,” España said. “Those of us who are teachers, those who are housewives, those who are graduated doctors, each of us are putting in our grain of movement. You have been allowed to come to a special group of women who are walking on that new path.”

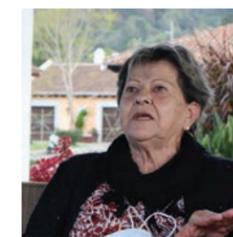
España also says that having a book club where women share ideas would not have been feasible 30 years ago.

“Women weren’t allowed to grow in different aspects like academics because it would be a waste of time,” España said.

España has been a teacher for 40 years in rural parts of Guatemala and has observed families closely. She has seen how much *machismo*, or strong or aggressive masculine pride, affects society. Instead of challenging themselves intellectually, women were confined to the roles society gave them in the kitchen and at home while men worked and were the providers.

Many of the women describe longing for a social life of their own. Years later, these women are being transformed with literature that transports themselves to any country, with any lover, in any fantasy world they want.

“And here I am, grateful for each and every single day spent with my friends,” Edna Rodas said. “Friends who have become teachers, because all of them have taught me through their strengths, enriching and nourishing our friendship to grow stronger everyday.”



Rocío Uribe, 80

“They are patient with me, because I am a little bit of a rebel. If I don’t like a book, I don’t like it and if I don’t like it I’m not going to read it and I will protest. No, really.”



Lucky de García, 69

“I recently lost my husband and the book club was a way to fill the emptiness in my heart.”



María de España

“A commitment that we have as human beings, from the point of view of women, is to be able to help each other to be able to empower ourselves. Not to be better than the gentlemen, but to accompany them and be a team.”



Lillian Contreras, 66

“I used to read a lot when I was a teenager. Later, I started university and working. I created a family, raised my children and I put a pause on my life. I was working 10-12 hours a day, seven days a week, so I didn’t have time for myself.”



Maruja Roldan, 73

“I do not come from a macho family, but I figured it out from my father. My mother was a very submissive woman. I have four children, all boys, and thank God I think I have been able to break these barriers a bit, because I don’t see many characteristics of machismo in my children.”



Marína de Roca, 72

“The club fulfills my heart. For 40 years we have had this great friendship. I had to move to Antigua because I married a Guatemalan and when you start from scratch with friends or family, you get very lonely. I was never taught how to be friendly... And also I was getting married when I was in college and I got married without my parents’ permission.”

# ✕ The weeping of the grapes

WINEMAKING IN GUATEMALA'S CLIMATE AND VOLCANIC SOIL MAKES FOR A CHALLENGE AND ART FORM.

By Makenzi Johnson

The vineyard's castle is the first thing to greet tourists as they arrive at Château Defay for a tour and tasting. Behind the building sit the acres of grape crops, as well as coffee and avocado fields. | Photo by Clark Frederickson



Right: Winemaker Alvaro Guillermo Andrade is passionate about the story of Château Defay. "My goal here is to teach the consumers about wine and I'm also constantly learning," he said. | Photo by Davis McElmurry

Left: Château Defay owner Jacque Defay looks at his harvested vines Jan. 13, 2022. "I love making the impossible possible," Defay said while the agriculturists worked the soil for the next harvest. | Photo by Javier Anleu

The vines slowly bleed, drip by drip, as they are cut into. The grapes cry out, weeping as they are plucked from the vine.

The tendrils that once stretched up to the sun, full of fruit, are now bare — the harvest is done.

Alvaro Guillermo Andrade, winemaker, doesn't just cut the vines to watch them bleed or pick the grapes to make them weep for the purpose of making wine — he says he has a relationship with the vines and fruit.

"People from the Middle East have told me that I have to talk to [the grapes], tell them that you share their pain, that you feel their suffering," Andrade said. "You hug [the vines] because it is in part that they respond better."

Château Defay represents a rare success — Guatemala has a unique harvest schedule, a climate that supports only a few grape varieties and little interest in wine from its population.

This harvest happens twice a year

at Château Defay in Santa María de Jesus, Guatemala — in June and December. Vineyards in Europe and the United States only get one harvest per year due to the grapes going dormant in the colder months. A vineyard in Guatemala doesn't have to worry about dormancy or winter.

Even the 300 microclimates and average temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit do not guarantee a winery and vineyard will be successful in "the land of eternal spring." Château Defay owner and founder Jacque Defay bought land in 2000 and started a vineyard in Guatemala for a challenge.

"I thought it would be difficult... to make wine in a place where nobody knew what wine was about," Defay said. "The idea was to make wine no matter what."

The winemaking process isn't just about making a profit and proving agriculturists wrong, claims Defay. It's about creating a space on someone's dinner table for a bottle of wine, along with the coveted rum,

whiskey and tequila bottles that Guatemalan society has held in its hands for centuries. Only 2% of the Guatemalan population drinks wine, while beer is at 56% and spirits at 42%, according to a 2018 study done by the World Health Organization. In the U.S, 18% of the population drinks wine, 47% drink beer and 35% drink spirits.

Andrade also argues that winemaking and drinking wine are spiritual experiences. He likes to remind vineyard visitors that Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine and that one of His last moments on Earth was giving His blood as wine.

The grape vines, grown where the volcanic ash mixes into the soil and the bougainvillea flowers hang down from balconies, have wept.

"It's not just about the wine," Andrade said. "What you are doing here with a glass of wine, [that] is poetry." ✕

(Additional reporting by Javier Anleu and Clark Frederickson.)



## 'A case without a solution'

GUATEMALA'S WATER CRISIS RAGES DESPITE HELP FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS, WATER FILTRATION SERVICES AND NEW DEVELOPMENTS.

By Makenzi Johnson

Water dripped from the silver faucet, falling into the large metal sink at a steady beat.

*Plink. Plink. Plink.*

The water is clear, but it's deceitful. Jonatan Suárez, owner of a small shop in San Cristobal El Bajo, does not let himself or his family drink or use that water. Instead, they must wait.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE >>>

A local truck used to deliver water sits in San Pedro Las Huertas Jan. 12. The car goes around the city exchanging empty jugs of water for full jugs so entrepreneurs like Oscar Sol can clean the empty jugs and use them again for new batches of purified water. | Photo by Clark Frederickson





»» Their source of clean water comes from the government of Antigua, but it doesn't flow all the time. The faucets only stream the clean water at certain, unpredictable times of the day and when the faucets allow water to flow, families rush to fill up jugs, bottles, bowls or anything they can find to store water.

"Sometimes ... we have to stay up until midnight to find recipients to store water," Suárez said. "Sometimes laundry has to be done at night because there is no water during the day."

The Suárez family is not alone in that sense, as many families living in impoverished conditions only have access to water at certain times of the day. Water can be found almost everywhere: alongside roads, in the large wells in town squares, out of a household faucet and more, but only 61% of that water is safe enough to use, according to Globalwaters, a project of USAID. A study done by the Environmental Ministry and Habitat for Humanity affirmed that

95% of all surface water sources in the country are contaminated. Even nonprofit efforts of water donation and purification are not enough to support the 10% of people in Guatemala who do not have access to water at all.

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A woman stepped into Suárez's shop with a bag of corn and paid three quetzales (\$0.39) to use the grinder in Suárez's shop to make dough for tortillas. She rinsed her hands with the tap water and hastily dried them off on her pink buffalo-check sweatshirt, the water soaked into the worn fabric. Suárez closed the gate to the shop after the woman stepped out.

Kevin, an 11-year-old boy, ran up the road, eyes trained on the closed shop door. His small hands gripped the iron bars of the gate as he talked to Suárez and paid for a bag of rice. Kevin quickly shoved change into his pockets and ran back down the dirt road, then hopped down a steep path leading to his house on the

hill. There, his mother, Natividad, waited for him. Their house is small, with one full-size bed for his mom and dad and a set of bunk beds that Kevin shares with his two younger brothers, Bryan, nine, and Oscar, five. Along one wall is a divider separating the shower and the toilet, colorful hanging sheets acting as doors. The rust-colored *pila*, a large sink with three compartments, is filled with dirty dishes – but no water.

The middle compartment of the *pila* is meant for storing water, the faucet hanging over this section. Natividad fills up the middle compartment, plus old plastic soda bottles to use throughout their day. If they did not have receptacles to store water, Natividad would have to walk 10 minutes down to the communal well, then 10 water-heavy minutes back up, a physically draining and repetitive commute.

"I don't go down [to the well]," Natividad said. "The water we store is enough for us."

One house below Natividad and her children live María García Bautista, Ervín Lopez and their 12-year-old daughter Fátima. Their water situation is almost the same as Natividad's: fill up the *pila* and jugs with as much water as they can when the water is on. Dirty dishes and laundry accumulate in the sink throughout the day. Bautista waits until the end of the day to use whatever water the family has left to clean, but the *pila* usually runs out of water halfway through the day. Bautista's family cannot afford to buy jugs of purified water, so they have no choice but to drink straight from the faucet when they can. Lopez worries about his family and others in San Cristobal – the population is growing and the water source is becoming more scarce each day.

The mayor of San Cristobal El Bajo wants to take the existing water from the well and relocate it to wealth-

ier families. With the population growth, there's supposedly nothing he can do about the well. Men and women, Lopez and Suárez included, have tried to negotiate with the mayor about the well, but Suárez said that consequences arise if someone tries to speak up.

In the rainy season, May to October, the well water only gets worse. Due to increased rainfall, Lopez said dirt and trash get mixed into the mouth of the river, which then is pumped into the well. People who walk to the well expecting to find drinkable water see brown, cloudy water with pieces of grass, trash and debris in it.

"We only reconsider buying [jugs of water] then," Lopez said.

About two miles southwest of San Cristobal El Bajo lies the village of San Pedro Las Huertas.

Oscar Hernández takes one last walk around San Pedro as Deputy Mayor. Later that night, a new mayor will be sworn in and Hernández's 2021 mayoral term will come to an end. Hernández said he worked to improve this village's water problem.

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Store owner Jonatan Suárez takes care of his shop in San Cristobal El Bajo Jan. 10, minutes before he closes the store to have breakfast with his family. He was attending to some customers when his son told him breakfast was ready. "I look for clean water because of my kids. They're young and I can't give them dirty water," Suárez said. He is one of many neighbors concerned with the water problems in San Cristobal El Bajo and is frustrated that all his initiatives have been shut down by the municipalities of Antigua. | Photo by Clark Frederickson



Above: Julia Griselda laughs with a neighbor while explaining how they get water from her *pila*. When asked if she knew about Ecofiltro, Griselda said, "They haven't come around here to give them away." In her *pila* sits a dirty Ecofiltro bucket, which Griselda uses for holding dirty laundry. | Photo by Javier Anleu



“A second well is practically 75% done,” Hernández said.

Prior to the second well being built, a single community well served the 8,500 people of San Pedro for several years. But one well can’t provide for everyone.

“The houses in the higher grounds are the ones that have more water problems because it’s harder for the water to reach them,” Hernández said.

Houses closest to the well at the base of San Pedro get water first while houses further up the hill have to wait. Gravity works against those living in the higher grounds as they are the last to receive the naturally downhill-flowing water.

For the past six years, people in San Pedro have tried to get a second well built, but the local government of Antigua has been hesitant to comply. Hernández said one of his main goals and roles as the mayor was to convince the mayor of Antigua that San Pedro was worthy of a second well.

“Unfortunately, we depend on Antigua’s municipality,” Hernández said. “It’s not like [the people of San Pedro] can go and make the well. We need permission.”

With Hernández prodding the mayor of Antigua, the construction of a second well finally began in 2021.

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In the higher grounds of San Pedro, Oscar García Sol stands in front of a large black tank filled with water. He reaches over to turn on a water purifier, the dull sound of a motor

spreading throughout the small room.

The process begins with water from the community well and with Sol’s water purifier somehow using ozone as a cleaner, the first round of purification is done. The water then passes through several small filters, collecting dirt and chlorine. The water is run multiple times through these filters. If for some reason the filters don’t catch something, a strong ultraviolet light zaps the leftover bacteria. The water purification is complete, but Sol must prepare the jugs.

Careful not to touch the mouth of the five-gallon jug, Sol places it upside down over a spigot. The jug is disinfected, filled with the newly cleaned water and capped. Sol holds a layer of plastic film and melts it over the cap, the seal of cleanliness. Depending on the size of an order, Sol will either load up to three jugs on the back of his motorcycle or load them in the bed of his pickup. The work of Agua Purificacion Sol is done for the day.

“In the seven years of us being a business, no one has ever said, ‘Oscar, your water doesn’t taste good’ or ‘Oscar, your water is dirty,’” Sol said.

Oscar Sol isn’t the only one in the water purification business. Entrepreneur Philip Wilson started a company called Ecofiltro in 2000 in hopes of solving Guatemala’s water crisis. He realized a majority of rural families with water problems were receiving donations of water treated with chlorine from nonprofits, missionaries or non-governmental organizations.

“Chlorine is really cheap and it’s really effective, but it has zero cultural

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Marlon, an Ecofiltro factory employee, gives the proper Ecofiltro form to the clay. “For us, the company gave us the opportunity to buy two Ecofiltros at a lower price per year so we can enjoy the benefits of our product,” said Marlon when asked if he had benefits from working at the factory. Marlon has been working for Ecofiltro for roughly a year and now is able to get all the clay filters shown in the picture ready for the next step in production in one day. | Photo by Javier Anleu



*Chlorine is really cheap and it's really effective, but it has zero cultural acceptance. Do you like drinking pool water? Neither do the poor.*

Philip Wilson

acceptance,” Wilson said. “Do you like drinking pool water? Neither do the poor.”

Ecofiltro, originally designed by Guatemalan native Fernando Mazariegos, uses layers of clay, colloidal silver and sawdust to filter water from virtually any source, including wells, rivers, faucets and more with the exception of salt water. An Ecofiltro can also eliminate any chlorine from water.

“[Ecofiltro users] have doubled their intake of water because when you put water in clay, it drops the temperature and gives it a very natural taste,” Wilson said.

Ecofiltro originally had a goal of helping one billion rural Guatemala families by 2020, but recently pushed its timeline to 2025 due to the pandemic.

“If you walk into any village, almost every family will have an Ecofiltro,” Wilson said.

For families in San Cristobal El Bajo and San Pedro Las Huertas, that is not the case.

Suárez knows about Ecofiltro, has heard about the benefits and knows some families receive one for free, but cannot receive one for free himself since he owns a store. One of the main issues holding Suárez back from purchasing the product is how effective it would be realistically when his family already struggles with getting water in the first place.

“If there’s no water, what are we going to put inside the Ecofiltro?” Suárez said.

In Bautista and Lopez’s house, an Ecofiltro is considered a luxury. Bautista’s sister has one and everyone in the family can agree that the water from an Ecofiltro is better because it is colder — but Bautista and Lopez cannot afford one. Bautista stays at home during the day and Lopez gets unsteady work as a construction worker. The financial insecurity means they would have to save money for an Ecofiltro when they could be using that money to buy food or other necessities instead.

Julia Griselda, a mother of three young children, has never heard of Ecofiltro, even while an Ecofiltro sits in her red *pila*.



Griselda doesn’t use the Ecofiltro for the purpose of water filtration. She doesn’t know how. She doesn’t even know what it is. To her, it’s just an ordinary white bucket that sits collecting dirt and dust.

Oscar Sol recognizes that Ecofiltro is a positive thing, but it’s bad for his business. Customers of Ecofiltro pay a minimum of 218.90 quetzales (\$28) for the smallest, most basic version. Wilson purposely priced most of the Ecofiltros below 400 quetzales because “it will pay for itself in three months or less” and “[someone] is going to have free water for two years.” With a two-year warranty on the Ecofiltros, Wilson argues that they are more economically feasible than other filters or methods of getting water.

Sol’s customers pay 30 quetzales a week for one jug. Unlike an Ecofiltro,

his product will not “pay for itself” in months or years. Some of his customers have already left him for Ecofiltro.

“With the pandemic and Ecofiltro, we are talking about a 40% decrease in our business,” Sol said. “Right now I am trying to rescue the business.”

The rise of Ecofiltro means the fall of Sol’s business. Chlorinated water, while purified, means fewer people drinking water. The governments of Antigua controlling the small villages means hundreds of families do not have access to pure water. Suárez said that the water crisis in Guatemala keeps worsening, especially with population growth.

“It is a case without a solution,” Suárez said. ☒

(Additional reporting by Javier Anleu, Davis McElmurry and Clark Frederickson.)

Above: Deputy Mayor Oscar Hernández, on his last day in office, explains how the municipal water system works through the well while walking through San Pedro Las Huertas. “The city has grown so much that a second well was needed,” Hernández said. “It’s a pity I wasn’t able to finish the second well before my term finished, but I have the satisfaction that it is practically done so the new Deputy Mayor will help to improve the water problem even more.” | Photo by Clark Frederickson

Left: Entrepreneur and water purifier Oscar Sol goes through the final process of cleaning a jug while the water runs through the pipes. “I’m very quick at doing the whole process, but I want to teach some kids from school how to do it so they can work with me,” Sol said. Because of the pandemic, his son, Oscar Jr., had to quit because he found a better job. Now, Oscar is looking for young people who want to make some money in these hard times. | Photo by Davis McElmurry

Gabriela and Carlos Rodrigo were married Jan. 15 at Iglesia San Pedro, following Catholic tradition. The wedding reception was held at Conventa de las Capuchinas, a historic church and convent in Antigua, as they danced to “Noche de Luna Entre Ruinas” by Marimba Maderas Chapinas. Gabriela said “it meant the world” to be married in the church in front of family and God. | Photo by Hannah Hobus



## A Guatemalan ‘I do’

**WHILE EVANGELICALISM RISES IN GUATEMALA, A MODEST PANDEMIC WEDDING SHOWS THE COUNTRY’S DEVOTION TO CATHOLIC TRADITION.**

By Makenzi Johnson

**G**abriela Zamora and Carlos Rodrigo sat facing the altar inside of Iglesia San Pedro, a Catholic church decorated with four Corinthian pillars, statues of Jesus on the cross and various saints and gold ornamental details.

After dating for one year and being engaged for another, they were finally married Jan. 15.

Roughly 45% of the Guatemalan population identifies as Catholic while 42% identify as evangelical, according to a 2020 U.S. Department of State report. Only 2% of the country still practices traditional Mayan rituals and beliefs. Per Catholic tradition, Zamora and Rodrigo had invited guests to celebrate the sacrament of matrimony with Mass and Communion.

Some of the 30 guests arrived early, some while the couple promised to love each other through sickness and in health.

Regardless of arrival time, the first step for each person – including Zamora in her lace gown and long train — was to take their temperature and use hand sanitizer before they could enter through the side door of the church.

The pews were dotted with guests sitting six feet apart. Young women scowled at people who sat too close to the person in front of them, not asking, but telling them to move.

The priest greeted guests and opened with a prayer. A young woman with a blue scarf draped over her head stepped forward to read the Liturgy, a section from Genesis about the creation of Adam and Eve, and the Nicene Creed was recited by the congregation soon after.

Altar boys and girls, clad in white and red robes, grabbed the chalices

of the blessed sacrament from the tabernacle and placed them on the altar. The priest stepped up to the altar, quickly bowed his head in silent prayer over the gold chalices, grabbed a piece of bread and held it over his head. Bells rang out, summoning the Holy Spirit to convert the bread into the body of Christ before doing the same with the cup of wine — transubstantiation.

Zamora and Rodrigo moved to kneel before the altar. A silver silk scarf was draped over both of their shoulders by Zamora’s mother and a long cord, often referred to as the “wedding lasso,” was hung on them next, symbolizing that they were now united by God.

Zamora’s mother carefully removed the silk and lasso from the couple, then joined Zamora’s father and Rodrigo’s parents in a line, each holding a shallow bowl filled with pale yellow flower petals. Just as American wedding guests would throw rice at a newly married couple in a Hollywood movie, family and friends generously shook fistfuls of flower petals over the newlyweds’ heads. Yellow petals littered Zamora’s intricate updo of pins and curls and settled atop Rodrigo’s shoulders. Some guests hugged the couple while some simply threw the petals and some prayed over the couple as they received a blessing.

The sun shone on Gabriela and Carlos Rodrigo, light dancing off of her tiara onto the cracked pavement as the couple exited the church. They were married.

“[I’m] very happy and grateful to God because even with everything we’ve been through we are still standing together and loving each other,” Zamora said. ✕

**✕ Religious affiliation in Guatemala**

**45%**  
of Guatemalans are Catholic

**42%**  
are Protestant  
*(includes evangelical groups, Baptists, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Lutherans and more)*

**11%**  
profess no religious affiliation

**2%**  
actively practice an ancient Mayan religion

Data acquired from 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Guatemala, U.S. Department of State.

## 'A language of love'

AS YOLI BUCU LEARNS SIGN LANGUAGE ALONGSIDE 13-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER GABRIELA, THE BEAUTY OF COMMUNICATION FORMS RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE STAFF OF A SAN LUCAS SCHOOL.

By Rachel Blood

Yolanda "Yoli" Bucu smiles down at her daughter with tears in her eyes. Clad in the intricately woven blue diamonds and colorful chevron stripes marking her indigenous identity, her hands rapidly form signs to correlate with the silent movement of her lips.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE >>>



Gabriela, 13, wipes a tear from Bucu's cheek as she expresses the struggles of the deaf community. "I try to be strong and not cry in front of her, because she also suffers," Bucu said. "I wish I could understand everything, but she still struggles." | Photo by Hannah Hobus

»» **D**o you love me? she signs as 13-year-old Gabriela watches with wide brown eyes.

Gabriela reaches out her arms with a nod, hands hidden under the sleeves of her Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, and wraps them around her mother in answer.

Yes.

Bucu has spent 13 years watching her daughter grow up in a world with no sound.

Born deaf, Gabriela found herself unable to communicate with her peers and family.

“It was a slap in the face when I found out she was deaf,” said Bucu, who spoke Spanish and very minimal Kaqchikel before learning Guatemalan sign language. “My world fell apart, but ... she has made me strong.”

Though sign language programs exist throughout Guatemala in modern areas such as Guatemala City, Gabriela lives an hour and a 100-quetzales (about 13 USD) bus ride away. Most teachers at these schools are also hearing and know only minimal sign language, contributing to the slew of difficulties the deaf community faces trying to access education and workplace equality. Bucu and Gabri-

ela find strength in one another and in a school aiming to break down communication barriers between deaf and hearing communities.

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Gabriela and Bucu found hope in a four-room schoolhouse filled with mint green doors and mirrored walls, separated from a narrow but busy road by a green metal fence covered in signs advertising *Lengua De Señas de Guatemala!*

Through word of mouth and the internet, Bucu found En-Señas when Gabriela was 8.

The school aims to break down communication barriers by teaching *Lengua de Señas de Guatemala*, or *Lensegua*, to both deaf and hearing students. The small building sits in San Lucas, a city of around 36,000 noted for its mountainous terrain and location between Guatemala City and Antigua. There, Gabriela became the student of Gabriela Velázquez and Bucu entered a series of classes teaching sign language led by Hilda Bran.

At Comité Benemérito de Pro-Ciegos y Sordos de Guatemala, a deaf and blind assistance organization where Gabriela would go for homework help beginning at age 3, other kids would sign to her, but she wouldn't understand because she spoke her own language. Although Pro-Ciegos provided some support and tutored Gabriela in basic school subjects, it didn't teach sign language, and that was what Gabriela and Bucu needed more than anything.

As Bucu and Gabriela learn Guatemala's official sign language, Velázquez watches her come out of her shell. In front of a wall of mirrors, Gabriela watches the combination of her facial expressions and hand movements and develops her sign language vocabulary.

“Gabi is a powerhouse,” Velázquez said. “She learns fast ... I started teaching her signs so she could have more vocabulary and that she could know more words. Little by little I started to see her development and that she was more confident while using signs. Then, she started trying to communicate with her mom.”

.....

While Gabriela and Velázquez work on improving Gabriela's fluency in sign, Bucu learns from Bran, who has been with En-Señas since the beginning.

En-Señas founder Vilma Lorena García learned sign language from Bran. After each session, the two worked on building a friendship over lunch and coffee. Day by day, the concept of a sign language school teaching not only deaf, but hearing students was born.

In February 2017, En-Señas opened for business in San Lucas, emphasizing teaching sign not only to the deaf community, but to the hearing, in order to make the hearing community a more accepting and inclusive place for people who are deaf and to provide jobs for deaf teachers, like Velázquez and Bran.

Velázquez, 57, has taught at En-Señas for two years and also teaches elementary-level classes for students 18 and older who haven't had the chance to study at the Continuing Education Center for Adults with Hearing Disabilities, an academic division of Pro-Ciegos.

Velázquez received a hearing aid in the United States at 8 years old, learning to communicate using her voice because she did not speak sign language. When she met her husband Héctor through mutual friends at age 21, he taught her *Lensegua*, which is now her preferred form of communication.



Though privately owned, En-Señas focuses not on profit but on helping the community. Interpreter Johana Pérez says students pay only what they can afford, the school offering scholarships to cover the remaining tuition.

En-Señas also teaches hearing students to be *Lensegua* interpreters. The process for deaf students to learn to interpret is very different, so students like Velázquez attend outside institutions such as Fundación Manos que Inspiran to become certified interpreters.

En-Señas teaches three levels of *Lensegua* to hearing students ranging from basic to advanced, all taught by deaf teachers. Deaf students work

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Johana, a teacher at En-Señas, signs expressively, making Gabriela smile. Through her teaching career, she has translated and taught sign language to many students and their families. | Photo by Hannah Hobus

*My world fell apart,
but ... she has made
me strong.*

~~~~~  
Yolanda Bucu



with teachers on a more individual basis.

“Seeing my daughter communicating with other people like her is beautiful,” Bucu said.

When the COVID-19 pandemic reared its head in 2020, En-Señas resorted to Zoom classes for hearing students and was forced to put classes for deaf students on hold. While Bucu continued learning, Gabriela had to put her progress on the backburner temporarily.

Wearing masks eliminated the ability to read lips, making communication an even greater challenge for the deaf community.

In spite of the obstacles, there were bright spots in the shadow of COVID-19. Teaching classes on Zoom allowed En-Señas to reach students from all over Guatemala and even from Costa Rica and the United States. The school plans to continue teaching classes online while some students return to the school in small numbers for COVID-safe, in-person learning.

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In their hometown of Santa María Cauque, Gabriela’s days spent drawing, beating the boys in soccer at family gatherings or baking *pan francés* at the local bakery where Bucu works became punctuated with Gabriela and Bucu developing a language of their own. With no lessons available to learn Guatemalan sign language, the two gave hand signs to different household objects and built a relationship on patience and trust.

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Pérez signs to Velázquez and Bran while colleague Antonio Barrientos assists in translation. Velázquez and Bran, who have been at En-Señas for two and five years, have seen their teaching experiences change during the COVID-19 pandemic. | Photo by Hannah Hobus

Kids at school slapped a label on Gabriela and teased her for it: “Different.” “Weird.” She would come home from school in tears, the result of bullies who didn’t understand that being deaf is not a negative difference. Bucu says discrimination against people who are deaf and people who are indigenous starts from a very early age. Gabriela is both.

Even after the discovery of En-Señas, Gabriela’s father Arbulfo made no effort to learn sign or communicate with his daughter.

“It hurts,” Bucu said. “She comes and asks her dad ‘Why not?’ Nothing.”

Though Gabriela’s relationship with her father may lack communication, studying at En-Señas has opened up pathways for other relationships. Gabriela’s brother Jonathan, 15, speaks a little *Lensegua*, and Gabriela is teaching the other members of her family sign, such as her grandfather. When she tries to teach him a phrase and he doesn’t pick it up, she smiles teasingly and holds both hands vertically just above her head. *Dumb*, she says, her favorite word to sign.

Bucu wishes the world would recognize people who are deaf not as “weird” or “wrong,” but as blessings. “Learning sign language is beautiful. It is an open language, more expressive,” she said. “For me, it is a language of love.”

.....

In 2018, Velázquez’s husband Héctor got into a bike accident and was in need of medical care. Because nobody else present spoke sign language, he was unable to express his

Wooden hands bent into the universal sign for "I love you" decorate the rooms of En-Señas, founded in 2017. "We started our idea from the inspiration of having an inclusive society and that people knew the importance of sign language," Bran said. | Photo by Rachel Blood



needs. The healthcare system isn't the only system inaccessible to the deaf community.

According to Velázquez, there are only two certified *Lensegua* interpreters within the Guatemalan justice system. According to the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers, United States cases involving deaf parties will often have up to four interpreters in a single courtroom.

En-Señas Vice President Pablo Urías serves as the school's representative in any committees or organizations while also teaching intermediate sign language. He played a role in passing the January 2020 Sign Language Law, making *Lensegua* an official language

in Guatemala and mandating access to public education and translators in the workplace for deaf people. The law took five years to pass, he said, and involved heavy communication between the government and the deaf community through Urías, who had to gauge which aspects of the language the community was and was not willing to alter or give up.

But new laws don't always come with the resources needed to implement them. The deaf community faces a slew of difficulties trying to access education and workplace equality. Gabriela will begin seventh grade this year at Telesecundaria, a system of rural schools meeting basic education requirements without hiring separate instructors for each subject, and while the school could not deny her admission, its administration offered no support or interpreters to enable Gabriela's studies.

"They can say no, she won't be able to graduate, she can not make it to college," Bucu said. "I know she will. Teachers say that she helps them teach others because instead of them helping her learn, she teaches."

Gabriela, who always takes care of Bucu when she falls ill, wants to be a doctor.

Through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the United States education system guarantees free public education for students with disabilities. Paired with economic packages and assistance efforts for deaf families, making it through school in the United States – while not without its challenges – is common. While United States schools have to tailor education to the needs of disabled individuals, Guatemalan schools simply must grant deaf students admission.

Bran studied at Universidad Mariano Gálvez for one year, but dropped out because of the lack of interpreters for deaf students. She would have to

track the movement of her professors with her eyes to read lips, but if they turned to face a whiteboard, she was out of luck. One of her friends knew some American Sign Language and was able to help Bran through some lessons, but when she was in a different class, Bran was on her own.

In Urías' work as Digitizer and Programmer in the municipality of Mixco, nobody else speaks sign language. His employers do not allow him to bring an interpreter into private meetings, so he is constantly out of the loop.

ASL and other sign languages still hold influence in some regions of Guatemala, sometimes making communication difficult even between members of the deaf community.

Pro-Ciegos ran a program until a few months before the pandemic in which seven students were sent every two years to Costa Rica to learn ASL, then to Gallaudet University – a school for deaf and hard of hearing students – in Washington, D.C. to study. Graduates would return to Guatemala eager to get a job with a

college degree in hand, but ASL was not a known form of communication in most workplaces, rendering the program economically unsustainable.

"My wish is that, in the future, there is better education for deaf people," Urías said. Between the justice and healthcare systems and education of both deaf and hearing students in Guatemala, there's a long way to go – but En-Señas, for Bucu and her daughter, has been a very welcome start.

En-Señas has been a place of support and acceptance for Bucu and Gabriela. Each time the pair leaves through the entry room decorated with wooden figurines of hands bent into the universal sign for "I love you," they do so with a little more hope.

"I do not know how to explain the change that this girl has done for me," Bucu said. "She is my strength." ❧

(Additional Reporting by Talia McWright and María Isabel Castañeda.)

Bucu pulls Gabriela into her arms as they prepare to leave En-Señas for the day. "I admire her a lot," Bucu said. "She is my support." | Photo by Hannah Hobus



Learning to live

a reflection



By Rachel Blood

It was ten in the morning, and I had tears in my eyes.

Across a white table, backlit by the sun streaming through the patterned windows of En-Señas, Yoli cried as she recounted the struggles of watching her husband refuse to communicate with her daughter, of her daughter returning from school in tears, of the discrimination against both indigenous and deaf people in Guatemala.

She spoke Spanish, her hands moving in time with her lips as she signed, and I didn't know what she was saying at the time — just that she was hurting. It was hard to watch. Hannah's eyes watered as she lowered her camera. Talia and Marís watched and listened intently on my left, offering Yoli silent support as she laid her heart bare to journalists she'd met only hours ago.

Yoli needed her story to be heard.

I felt like I had been emptied out and filled up again.

I realized communication is more than words. My life has been dictated by words. Captured by them. Guided by them. I study

them, read them, write them, hear them. I've devoted a future career to them. The reason I met Yoli was to tell a story. With ... words. We had photographers and designers and editors, but words were my wheelhouse, the tools with which I was supposed to be able to spin and manipulate stories into the perfect form, the most moving sentences and paragraphs and pages. Words are powerful. But there at the table with Yoli, nine people in a tiny room, I had no idea what was being said.

And it didn't matter.

I still understood everything she needed me to understand.

It was the tears in her eyes and the crack in her voice, the way it would lilt upwards as she exchanged glances with her daughter, a cry built on years of frustration and misunderstanding and desperation, the way even her sharp hand motions seemed to be pleading with the world, with God, to help her.

I don't speak Spanish. I don't understand sign language, much less Guatemalan sign language. But the beautiful thing about the human connection is that we will always find a way to say what must be said, words or no words, signs or no signs. We somehow find a way to understand each other on the most fundamental level of emotion and react accordingly, to empathize with a person whose circumstances we can hardly imagine.

The idea of spending three weeks in a country I knew nothing about scared me. I had never been outside of the United States.

The extent of my Spanish was a 200-level college class and the only word I really remembered was *lechuga*. But Textura Guatemala pushed me to my limits and then over them, and I grew more than I thought possible in less than a month.

My team taught me to trust and find joy in communication. Our Guatemalan partners taught me how to dance, how to live life vibrantly and also where to find really good chicken. My sources taught me the best stories take time to tell. COVID-19 taught me things don't always go as planned, and sometimes that's OK. Guatemala taught me to see beauty in places I'd never have thought to look.

Yoli's tears were a window into the hardships of the deaf and indigenous communities of Guatemala, but they were also a mirror in which I could evaluate my own changing beliefs. Gabriela was silent next to her mother. Thirteen years old and living in a world of silence, wide brown eyes and hands hidden beneath the table, she watched her mother's hands, her lips, listening the only way she could.

She reached up and wiped a tear from her mother's cheek.

I smiled at them, eyes watery. There was nothing I could think to say except *thank you*. But it was ten in the morning, and I had tears in my eyes. And Yoli understood. It was enough.

Rachel Blood



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Bucu (right) and her daughter Gabriela laugh as they communicate in sign language about their fond memories made at En-Señas. | Photo by Hannah Hobus

Meet the Textura team...



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This magazine is the product of a collaboration between students from Guatemala City's Francisco Marroquín University and Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Friendships were made, stories were told and challenges were embraced. We are grateful to have shared this unique experience. | Photos by Hannah Hobus

Thank You!

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So, thank you to...



Check out seektextura.com to discover more content including depth stories, cultural content and student reflections!



Nataly Basterrechea, our lovely Guatemalan instructor who lights up the world with her smile and spends quarantine doing yoga. Thank you for your organization, attitude and translation work.

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The **2022 Textura Guatemala team**, for the good attitudes, PowerPoints, photos, memories and laundry trips. Each and every one of you is valued beyond belief.



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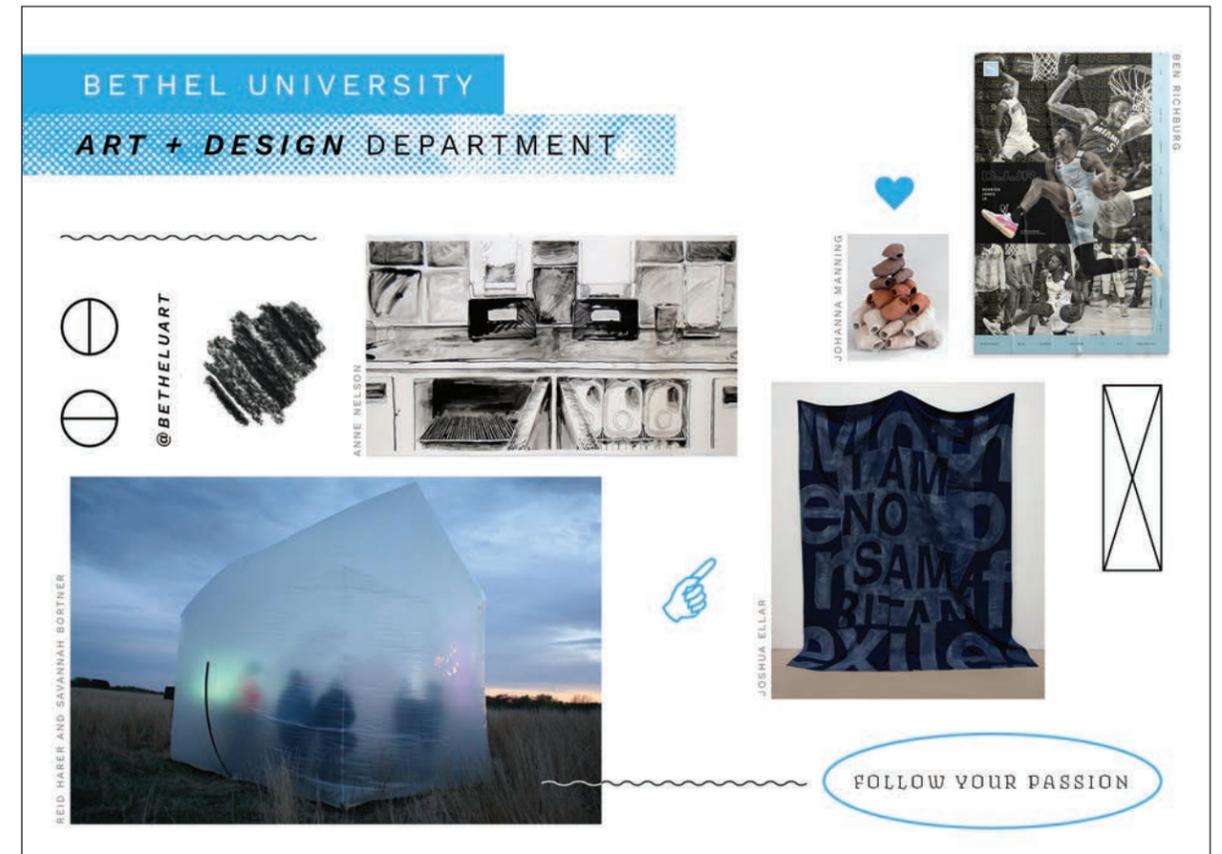
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