

## PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING

# EL SALVADOR PROJECTS

June, 2020 Newsletter

WWW.PAFMELSALVADORPROJECTS.ORG

### Dear Friends and Supporters:

We first envisioned this newsletter as a statement of gratitude for your generosity, with reports of the increased numbers of students being supported and their academic successes. Those reports are here for you, but in a much-changed environment. Project Director Robert Broz tells you how El Salvador has responded to the coronavirus pandemic, and how it has affected our students and Robert's personal and family life.

This newsletter also initiates a new column, *The Wind Beneath Our Wings*, that we expect to bring you in each future edition, chronicling the contributions to our work of dedicated supporters, living and deceased. We begin with appreciation for many years of service by Paul Engstrom, who died on March 29, 2020, at more than 100 years of age.

We know, of course, that many people have met financial hardship from the economic downturn due to the pandemic. If you are unable to donate to the El Salvador Projects until conditions improve, be assured that the Committee understands, and we gain strength from our confidence in your spiritual support. If you can continue to contribute, know that our work means more than ever to the students and their families in this very challenging time, and no donation is too small to be meaningful.

In Friendship and with appreciation,  
—**Hulda Muaka**, Clerk, El Salvador Projects  
Committee of Palo Alto Friends Meeting

### Director's report

The Committee and I are aware that my in-country perspective on events that impact the lives of the

Salvadoran people is of special importance to you, the donors whose generosity makes the El Salvador Projects possible. My observations and interpretations help you understand the needs that are addressed by your donations and the benefits they bring.

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic has transformed life in El Salvador and, as you would expect, it affects the least privileged most severely. My report begins with the pandemic itself and the actions taken by government officials and continues to the consequences for students, with insights into the lives of several of those we support.



**Robert Broz**  
Project Director

### Pandemic: El Salvador is ahead of the game

Several of you who sponsor university students have already received a detailed update from me on events related to the pandemic in El Salvador since mid-March. This newsletter begins with a summary. You're welcome to request the full report by emailing me at [rpbroz@gmail.com](mailto:rpbroz@gmail.com).

Compared to many other countries, El Salvador has taken the right steps at the right time, as I see it. Key decisions were made early in an attempt to flatten the COVID-19 contagion curve, and in that way to assure that there would be sufficient hospital beds and respirators for those who need them. Today we know that social distancing is essential to minimize infections and deaths, and to prevent health systems from being overwhelmed.

In late January, El Salvador's international airport staff started taking body temperatures of both arriving and departing passengers. Travelers from China were denied entrance to El Salvador. From that time, every country that reported over 1000 confirmed cases was added to the list of those denied entry. Beginning March 12, everyone wishing to enter El Salvador by land or air was put into a quarantine center for a minimum of 30 days. Since March 17, only Salvadoran nationals have been allowed to enter the country, also undergoing a forced 30-day quarantine in a government detention center. On that same day, President Bukele announced the closure of the international airport to all commercial passenger flights.

On March 12, all schools closed and the government called on the population to stay home



Beds in Quarantine Center-(Diario de Hoy.)

with a voluntary "Stay Sheltered" alert. On March 17 this was made mandatory, and all non-essential

businesses were closed. Employees who were pregnant or over 60 years of age could not report to work at businesses that remained open. The National Assembly passed a State of Emergency, which removed several constitutional rights. Since the implementation of what I now consider a police state, over 2400 people have been stopped and put into detention centers for what is called breaking quarantine, or not having what any police or military check point considers a valid reason for being out and about. As of May

20<sup>th</sup>, 9682 people had been released from now ninety government detention centers, with another 3049 still held. On May 5, the President announced two weeks with a higher level of quarantine. This was extended on May 17 for another 30 days. As of May 7, all businesses were closed except pharmaceutical and food production and distribution, and the general population was legally limited to circulate only two days a week based on personal Identification numbers, with even this for essential needs only.

In the greater San Salvador area, citizens can no longer leave their particular municipality for food or medicines. If found crossing city limits for these reasons, they are subject to detention. The numbers reported below and a spike in new cases starting in early May led President Bukele to increase the level of quarantine, as it was clear that many Salvadorans were not heeding the earlier measures implemented in March. I personally have not been outside of our municipality since March 17, which has led me to make several changes in how we get funds to our students, project management, and of course my personal family lifestyle. Like many of you, I feel fortunate that I have a home, a salary, and money in the bank, so I can pay my bills and provide for my now extended family. Since March 12, my oldest daughter and her two boys, ages 9 and 5, have lived with us. Our niece, who was attacked at her door in San Salvador and stabbed 3 times in the abdomen before the pandemic broke out, has lived with us since she was released from the hospital in early March. The department store where she works has been closed since mid-March, so she has no need to go back to her apartment in the city. With my wife Tita and our two children, eight people now live in my house, which is not large but has a nice patio and comforts like Internet, TV, and cable. The grandkids, our 14-year old daughter, and our niece have not been outside our home since March 12. My wife and I get out every 2-3 days to do banking and shopping for food here in town. Every few days our older daughter goes to the market instead of my wife, and our oldest son (21) helps with food deliveries in the evenings, as we reopened our small restaurant for takeout and delivery only on April 28. Like millions around

the world, we are making the best of the situation and feeling fortunate and blessed that we have what we have.

So, how well have all of these hard tactics worked? Let's take a look at COVID-19 and its spread in El Salvador: The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported on March 18<sup>th</sup>. As of May 20, we had reported 1571 cases of which 1009 were still active, 531 recovered and 31 deaths. There were 902 suspected cases, and more than 62,800 tests had been done. Daily updates by the Salvadoran government show most pertinent information at <https://covid19.gob.sv/>. Since April 28 the number of new and suspected cases has increased daily, with May 9<sup>th</sup> being the highest at 105 new confirmed cases. Since then, confirmed cases have increased by 70 to 90 new cases daily. I tell you, as I tell my family, that El Salvador is still way ahead of the game in prevention, tracking, and control of suspected cases, but given how things are in other parts of the world – especially in the U.S. – it will be a long time before we get to what I refer to as our “new normal”. Political and economic instability have made many people restless; after a two billion dollar emergency financial bill passed, and before receiving and distributing that money, President Nayib Bukele sought an additional billion to assure agricultural production and food for El Salvador's 6.2 million population. Both major parties, the ultra-right ARENA and left-wing FMLN, are under attack and criticized by the Bukele followers for considering many of his populist tactics and dictatorial attitudes unconstitutional. A new drop in popularity of El Salvador's main political parties will, I am sure, be reflected in the scheduled 2021 mayoral and national assembly elections, when most likely Bukele's New Ideas party will gain territory with cities and their first seats in the National Assembly. On May 19 a bill was passed in the National Assembly to start a gradual reopening of the country and economy starting on June 8<sup>th</sup>. That same day President Bukele met with several large business owners, agreeing to start the reopening on June 6 but only if the National Assembly leaves him the tools and finances he requested earlier to combat Covid-19 until that date. Again the struggle between the powers of state are obvious, but now all are hopeful that the

full and forced quarantine will end with these dates in early June now confirmed by both the executive and legislative branches of government.

### **Current Political and Economic Tensions and Their Implications**

Part of the two billion dollar emergency fund was initially meant to limit financial stress for around 1.7 million families who were to receive a stimulus of \$300 each month, April through June. At the time, there was no system in place and the public announcement by the President caused thousands to break quarantine and head to local offices to see if they would receive the announced funds. With thousands



Protestor being arrested

demanding to be considered for financial support, protestors organized as if it had been planned, and violence broke out in no time. Most think some of the current COVID-19 cases were contracted during the protests. In the next two weeks, at several financial institutions around the country, an estimated daily average of one hundred thousand families received the \$300 stipend. Even in little cities like Suchitoto there were hundreds of people standing, with the suggested six feet between them spread out over several square blocks. Many criticize the selection process for those to receive the economic stimulus, as it goes to those families who already receive a subsidy for propane gas and electricity. These are programs where several from the same families are considered, and where in some cases wealthy property owners receive the benefit for low-income housing they rent. There are obvious signs of the addition of large numbers of Bukele's New Ideas supporters to these lists to receive the economic stimulus, as well as being first on lists for upcoming support in the form of agricultural



packages that include seeds and fertilizer for the new season. Although agricultural production is vital and must continue as normal, in my opinion the President acted prematurely, announcing the importation of hundreds of tons of basics like



Man carrying sack of fertilizer (Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería)

corn, beans, and rice to assure that the country will have enough in case our own production fails. Many consider this a type of hoarding at the national level, thinking only about El Salvador, not other parts of the world where millions will most likely suffer famine before this is over. Many are questioning who is benefiting, what the costs are, and why we are supporting foreign suppliers, as this will only increase economic distress for the already poor local producers. After the disorder and public protests at the beginning of April, it was announced that the \$300 stimulus will not continue in May and June as initially planned. Instead, a food package with a value of \$50/family is being distributed to the same families to ensure that they at least have basic food stocks to survive, and hopefully reduce the number of times they would need to go to local markets. Due to political opposition and bureaucracy, none of the two billion dollars approved by the National Assembly has been received. The country is now getting close to facing a government shut down, as hundreds of millions of dollars on hand were used to fight the pandemic, leaving little money to pay government workers' salaries and other normal operating expenses. The lack of transparency on what funds were used and how much has actually been spent in the different areas leads to further division within the Executive and Legislative

branches, as both negotiate the reopening of the economy in early June.

Before the pandemic, Bukele brought police and heavily armed soldiers into the National Assembly in an attempt to pressure the Assembly to vote for a bond package to provide funds for the continued battle against gangs and crime in El Salvador. This led to opposition by both major parties and two independent politicians in the National Assembly. This political opposition against the executive branch and especially Bukele himself has been clear after every presidential decree during March, April, and now May. Bukele uses this opposition as an easy way to get his supporters to back him, just as he uses the battle against COVID-19 to make his opponents look bad and uses fear to keep the population at home. He commonly says and tweets things like "they don't care how many Salvadorans die," "they only think about their own jobs and salaries as politicians," or "if they cared about Salvadoran lives they would support the loans needed for the battle." For many educated voters, I think it is clear that the opposing parties and politicians and their votes in the national assembly are not against the loans or the finances needed for the battle against COVID-19, and it is clear that they do not take lightly the potential loss of lives due to the pandemic. They do oppose the open-endedness, lack of transparency, and lack of financial accountability in the use of these funds by the executive branch. This is normally expressed by suggesting and approving the addition or modification of more specific texts in the bills presented by the executive branch and Bukele before each new emergency bill passes. I think most of Bukele's supporters disregard the obvious concerns expressed, and because of his popularity think that everything he does is perfect, only accusing the opposition of fighting and delaying Bukele's actions as President. Many who do not support Bukele see much of this pressure for unrestricted access to funds through the bills for new loans and bonds as an easy road to financial corruption and enrichment by Bukele and his Cabinet of friends and family.

With all eyes and news on COVID-19, there had been very little news about El



Jail cell being covered with steel plates- (El Caribe Digital)

Salvador's main problem of crime by the large organized gangs, but this changed in late April. Gang activity and crime had been at its lowest in 20 years, and gangs were even helping families with basic need packages in urban areas under their control and promoting social

distancing. This changed the last week of April, with reports that nearly 90 gang-related killings had occurred over the four days from April 22 through April 25. Several days later gangs announced an all-out war after Bukele ordered the bars on prison cells to be covered with steel plating so that gangs can no longer communicate with each other using their complex system of hand signals. Some of you may have seen a report in the New York Times with a photo showing hundreds of inmates in a Salvadoran prison sitting very close to each other on the floor. Very few of the inmates were wearing masks, and now many local and international organizations are looking at these incidents in El Salvador, considering this type of treatment as inhumane and a clear violation of basic human rights during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Crime and gang activity is a complicated situation, with most of the police force and army currently assigned to control the COVID-19 quarantine throughout the country. With little coverage by the press on these social aspects in El Salvador, many do not even notice or hear about the government's actions or increases in gang killings.

I worry that President Bukele's dictatorship characteristics will lead to an open war with gangs and possibly civil conflict by the supporters of both opposing political parties. My worries increased after hearing one independent Assembly member, Velázquez Parker, propose a

bill to extend the terms for Mayors and Assembly members through 2024, another three years! His motion was quickly seconded by another independent and now is publicly supported by members of both ARENA and the FMLN in more recent proposals, based on established dates for campaigning that will be affected by Covid-19 and the current quarantine. Knowing that Bukele's New Ideas party is gaining strength and popularity will mean that in the 2021 elections, New Ideas will likely win several cities as well as their first seats in the National Assembly. It will not be a surprise if the ARENA and FMLN parties use these proposals as a way to guarantee term extensions and the opportunity to maintain their political control and nice salaries for the next three years. This comes at a time when it seems certain that they will lose control in different parts of the country, as well as seats in the National Assembly.

This month it has been very difficult for me to compose my report, with so much going on and all the uncertainty here and around the world, dealing with confinement, minor depression, worries and stress, as are so many people around the world. I hope the news on current affairs in El Salvador has not left you feeling too down. As always, there is some good news, and positive trends continue as well, as you'll see so from my update on our continued work here.

### **The K-12 School and the Youth Group in El Barío**

Our programs were started by my mother, Carmen Broz, after a trip to El Salvador in July of 1986. She met the families of El Barío by accompanying them on their courageous journey to reclaim their lives as farmers in the midst of the civil war, after massacres had driven them out and they had spent years in refugee camps. She started working formally with these families in 1989, as the war continued. Our work in El Barío has never stopped, but we have transitioned over the years. Today, as in the past few years, we continue to support the K-12 public school and the community's youth group in their work with elders. Not every year, but often, we also support other community organizations such as the women's group and the newer Alcoholics Anonymous group.

Like all schools in El Salvador, the El Barío school closed in mid-March and has moved to providing classes virtually. Fortunately, one of our graduates, Wilson Olmedo, who studied computer science and has worked as the administrative assistant for the past few years, has been active in getting the government-supplied digital material to both teachers and students. When I spoke with Wilson in April, expressing my concerns for those students with no access to a computer, smart phone, or Internet, he replied that they are asking those who do have a way to receive the information to share with those who do not. He also uses the school's equipment to download and print materials so that students without resources can come to him for the printed copies. Most schools don't make this effort, a lack that I see with my own grandchildren here in town. Solidarity, always a strength of El Barío, now enables education to continue. We have not yet been able to resume our Saturday classes to help the high school students prepare for university qualifying exams, but I have been considering how to implement this program virtually using our university students as mentors, for those who can connect and have an interest in improving their grades and their chances to enter the university in 2021.

As I mentioned last year, we continue to support the school in El Barío with a small salary for one teacher in order to avoid having two grades merged in a single class. In 2019, we were supporting teacher Rita, but sadly, Rita passed away in December. Her death was a shock to all, as she had never mentioned that she was having serious health issues. Only her son knew she was ill. Teacher Rita is dearly missed by all who knew her. Her death leaves a void at the school where she had worked since finishing her studies in education. In January I spoke with Rafael, the school's principal, and we looked at potential teachers to replace Rita at the school – not easy, because we have the funds for a small stipend only, not a full salary. This year we are supporting Marelin de Rivera, a teacher from Suchitoto who commutes to El Barío (when schools are open).

As in most years, we have a small fund for the youth group in El Barío. In January I

distributed part of the money to them, \$100, which they use for their work with seniors from their village with whom they visit on a regular basis. When the quarantine started, visits by the youth group had to stop. Considering the economic difficulties that are obvious since the country was shut down, I asked our youth group leader if the elders and general population of the village were okay, and if there might be seniors in need of food or medicines. Youth group leader Sonia Rivera reported that in early April the city had given out 15 care packages to families and another 15 packages were distributed by the communal board of directors of El Barío. I have asked Sonia to let us know if there are needs in May or June as the quarantine and pandemic continue in El Salvador, letting her know that we can get them funds that they can use at their own discretion. Sonia also told me that many families in rural Suchitoto have received the \$300 economic stimulus provided by the government and will receive the food packages that will be distributed in May and most likely in June. When I spoke with Sonia in late May, we decided that the youth group would use funds to put together some basic needs packages and distribute them to those in most need. These will not be food packages, but other items needed like soap, toothpaste, shampoo, none of which are provided in the other packages being distributed.

### **Changes in our University Loan Program and Coed Student house**

In mid-March and after the announcement of school closures, I decided that it would be best to close our student house until schools reopen in the future. Four of the twenty-two students asked to use the house through the weekend on March 17, as they had assignments that they needed to finish before going to their homes in rural Suchitoto. The last of these students turned off water and electricity and locked up the house. I have advised the owner that we have temporarily closed the house for the students and that I will pay the rent after the quarantine is over. I have paid the Internet, electric, and water bills online. The students normally pay these expenses as a group so this support will reduce their economic burden once they return to the house in San Salvador. (see p. 14 for a photo of the students)

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

On a very positive note, once again in 2020 our projects are fortunate to be in good financial condition. This increase in your donations led our committee in Palo Alto to agree to accept even more new university students than expected! This change in our budget in January again made my task of selecting new students easier than in other years. We finished 2019 with 22 continuing students, and in January we were able to add six new students to our program! All the students from 2019 continue to do well in their studies, even with all the changes and limitations. We have had to make some program changes, and since April students receive their stipends in cash at my home, where I take advantage of visits to talk to them about their lives and studies.

We have postponed the students' social work programs. Nevertheless, many are active within their communities, helping with sanitization and orientation about the importance of social distancing and hygiene within their communities. In my short visits with students in March, April, and May, I encouraged them to help orient the elders in their villages, as I felt they would be less likely to take seriously the government's recommendations. Surprisingly, I found from several of our active students that it is the youth in their villages who are not taking recommendations seriously, and they have been having problems with them still wanting to play soccer and hang out together. On the other hand, the elders have been following the recommendations very well. We will continue with these changes in project management until the universities and schools reopen.

Although all of our new students are of interest and I think wonderful additions to our program, this month I have selected two that I think will inspire you, and again show how our project support makes a difference.

Arístides Landaverde, or "Ari" to his friends, is the grandson of Valentín Landaverde, one of the founders of the El Barío Cooperative and community. Ari dropped out of school after finishing ninth grade to become active in a theater program in Suchitoto sponsored by some at the Stratford Ontario Shakespeare festival. From the founding of the Stratford-Suchitoto initiative, I

was critical of the program because several of the initial students had dropped out of school to participate. After so many years, I have found that the majority of the dropouts ended up going back to school and now many are studying or are university graduates.



Arístides Landaverde, actor

Ari excelled as an actor in the program, and traveled with its group to Washington DC and Stratford on a couple of occasions. As years passed, I noticed that Ari had returned to high school in El Barío. As an extrovert and older student, he easily became the class leader, pushing the younger students to do their best in school as well as to be socially active within their communities. Ari graduated from high school in 2019 and entered the National University in Anthropology. His way into the National University was not directly by passing the entrance test, which he failed by just one point. Not being a quitter, he found support in one of the university's student unions. Each year several student unions at the only public university fight against the biased entrance exam, pushing for the right to superior education for hundreds of students from public high schools who, like Ari, were within 1-2 points of passing.

When I heard about his efforts last year, and knowing he did not apply to our program in 2019, I asked him to come see me so we could talk. Hearing his story and noting his motivation, I told him to make sure to apply to our program for the 2020 year. Entering



Arístides Landaverde



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with the student union also meant he was in transition between study programs, and I learned that although he enrolled in Anthropology his dream is to study Journalism. University policy allows faculty and study program changes, but students must enroll and do well in their classes during the process that generally takes two semesters. Ari did well in his classes in Anthropology in 2019, switched programs, and continues to do well in Journalism this year. His transfer process approval, scheduled to finalize the week we went into quarantine, has not yet happened, but we are all hopeful that it will when the university reopens in the near future. I know Ari will go far in life, and I feel he is a wonderful addition to our program.

In March, while I was preparing to send letters written at the beginning of the year by our students for their sponsors, I found out much more than I had known before about another of our new students, information to me that was so inspiring that I knew I would be including her in this newsletter. Prior to receiving Diana's application, I really knew nothing about her. She was actually in the last of the six spots for new students that I was in process of selecting from 18 applications we received this year. I knew from



Diana Pineda

what I was seeing on her application that she was an excellent student. She had wonderful high school grades and exit exam scores and entered the National University in the first round of testing, a feat that only about 13% achieve. After meeting her in person, I initially had doubts about the selection; this most likely due to making a judgment prematurely and mostly based on her appearance. At only 17 she

arrived on the back of her boyfriend's motorcycle wearing what I would consider too much makeup, and she was dressed impeccably. Her informality in oral communication and expression increased my doubts, as I felt it hard to get any real or relevant information from her without rephrasing my questions several times. I realized later that this was due in part to her high level of self-confidence.

Well, I have to admit that I was wrong in so many ways! Diana started the year at the National University attending classes in her program of Psychology and complying with all project policies on time and very formally. Her mother works within the National Health system as a clinical lab technician at the health unit here in Suchitoto, and my family and I have known her for years. The letter Diana wrote really impressed me and revealed things about her that made me realize that not only was her entering and being supported by our program justified, but perhaps she should have been first on my list of applicants. As I reread her letter I first noticed the quality of English, as most students simply use a digital translator with many errors needing corrections manually before sending the letter off. Reading with care and interest her letters in both Spanish and English, I realized that Diana sets and meets her goals, rarely doubting herself.

As a sixth-grade student, Diana participated in an academic program sponsored by the Mexican Embassy. She excelled in the program, and she was selected to represent her rural school in Inchanqueso, Suchitoto, and one of several to represent El Salvador at a cultural event in Mexico City, all this at



Diana Pineda age 16 in Madrid, Spain



the age of 12. Being, as she says, “very proactive” in many areas like sports and especially soccer, she won a scholarship for high school from FUNDAMADRID and attended a national soccer school. Excelling in the program, in 2017 she won the title of “Most Integral Student of the Year,” and with that a trip to Spain to meet the players of the Real Madrid Soccer team, as she said “A dream come true, to meet the players and visit Madrid”.

This is not first time I have learned that appearances can be deceiving and that many times we all make judgments long before we know the people we deal with daily. As Program Director, I try not to let these types of prejudgments affect my decisions and work, feeling fortunate that in Diana’s case it worked out. It also makes me wonder about similar cases in the past, something that will in one form or another force me to change my ways in the future. I mentioned to Diana that I had been doubtful of my decision, and that now after reading her letter I am fully confident about her entering our program. I told her how impressed I was reading about her accomplishments at such a young age and that I know she will do well in her studies. She replied humbly, saying “Yeah, when I set my mind to something, I do my best to try to make it happen.” I am sure she will do well in her studies and even better in the future as a graduate psychologist. I hope hearing about these two new students you will feel as I do, that this work is vital and does help those who will make the world a better place in the future.

### **Two very different Nurses with two very different stories**

Another of our new students is Esmeralda del Carmen Alas Castillo. We will get to know her in the future, but for now I mention her because she is the oldest daughter of Carmen Castillo, who graduated as a nurse in one of our first efforts way back in 2001. Carmen had a hard time finding work as a nurse and for many years would tell me she would never be able to repay her loan. Her husband Rolando is what I would call a workaholic, but unfortunately he has never had any one well-paying job. I remember several years ago that he had three jobs, one of them a



Esmeralda Alas Castillo

full time job he still has with the city, a second after hours as a bodyguard for a local politician, and a third as a kind of do-anything at a local restaurant. For many years Carmen was a stay-at-home mother, but that changed many years ago.



Carmen Castillo

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Carmen finally landed a job as a nurse at the National Hospital here in Suchitoto, where she has been working for over a decade. Once Carmen started working, she and Rolando started making annual payments on the small loan she had received for her studies. We pardoned a part of her loan, as we do when students make an honest effort to repay in a way that motivates other graduates to repay their debts. Carmen finished paying her debt in 2017, and last year she and Rolando came to my home to ask if their daughter would be able to apply to the student loan program when she graduated from high school in 2019. I told Carmen and Rolando that



Esmeralda Alas Castillo, Carmen Castillo, and Family

yes, she could apply, but she would have to meet all requirements like any other applicant. As I said, Esmeralda did meet all the program requirements, and she entered our program in 2020. She is studying to become a dentist at the National University and lives with an aunt in San Salvador, or did until the national quarantine and school closures. Carmen and Rolando have one other child, a son Christen who was born with some hearing and speech problems. They are seeking support for modern hearing aid and speech therapy that are available only in San Salvador, neither of which is within their financial capability.

I will of course use Carmen's story to motivate past graduates who have not repaid their debts, hoping that others will follow her example,

and later perhaps see their children as recipients of our no-interest student loans.

I want to finish this month's report with an update about another woman who studied nursing in our program but due to uncontrollable circumstances had to relocate to the United States. Yasmin Claros, one of our students from Morazán in northeast El Salvador, graduated in 2014 from the private nursing school of IPROES as what I believe is called a nursing assistant, a 3-year program in El Salvador. Yasmin had twin girls in 2013, but with support from her mother and the father of the girls she was able to continue and finish her studies on time. She was fortunate, and soon after



Yasmin Claros with her students at IPROES

graduating she found work, actually two jobs, one teaching nursing with a specialty in the operating and delivery rooms at the same institute she graduated from, and another job part time with the non-profit FUSAL in a program working on healthy diets and weight control titled in Spanish "Libras de Amor" (Pounds of Love). This work was in some of the remote parts of El Salvador known as the ex-Bolsones, border areas that were disputed between El Salvador and Honduras many years ago.

After graduation, Yasmin married Andrés Caceres, the father of the twins, Lucía and Belén Caceres. Andrés at that time was a detective with the National Civil Police. In 2016, they had a son, Jafet, and soon after they started having problems with local gangs. Yasmin and Andrés had built their home close to that of Yasmin's mother Milagro. They were both working, and the kids were in school and healthy. In Yasmin's words "Our lives took a 180° turn, and for the worse."

In 2017 the entire family made the trip to the US as undocumented immigrants, relying on



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friends of the family who helped them out when they initially arrived in Nebraska. They later sent for Yasmin's younger sister, who much resembles

Yasmin and was being targeted by the gangs as well. Since arriving in the U.S. they have all applied for asylum, before things got so difficult in the US. They were all granted temporary status while awaiting their final court hearing in 2024. Yasmin and the family are now living in Maryland and she and her sister are studying English, both working at local restaurants. Yasmin is working on getting equivalency for her studies in El Salvador so she



Yasmin volunteering at school in Maryland Daughters and son in front

can continue her studies in nursing in the U.S. Yasmin's husband Andrés, once a fairly well paid police detective in El Salvador, now works in construction. Only Yasmin's mother, Milagro, remains in El Salvador. Yasmin told me recently that she was happy living in El Salvador and had no plans or dreams to come to the US. She misses her mother but tries to make sure her cousins still in El Salvador keep an eye on her. She is hopeful that the U.S. will grant the plea for her family's

asylum based on their problems with the gangs in El Salvador, and that soon she will be able to continue her studies in nursing to be able to get a job in her field in the US in the future. I hope too that her case will be approved, and I know she and her family will make wonderful, socially active, productive U.S. citizens one day.



Yasmin Claros with daughters, Lucía and Belén

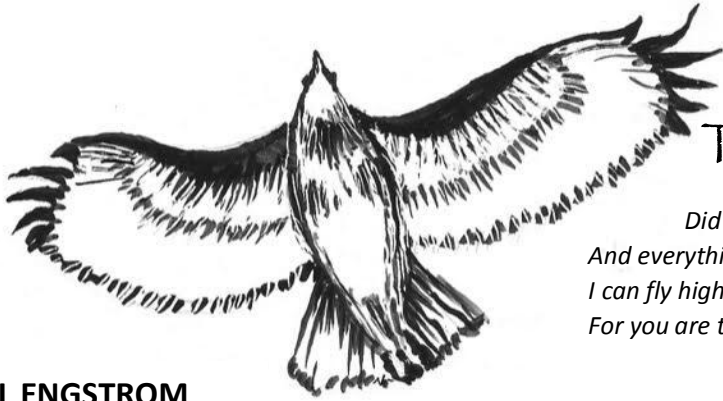
In my 21 years working with university students, this is the first person in our program who was virtually forced to leave El Salvador. Over the years a few of our graduates have gone to the US undocumented in hopes of a better economic future, and we now have several graduates who travel with visas to visit family and friends over vacations. Until Yasmin's case, this is the first time that crime and gangs have targeted one of our students, and this was most likely due to her husband's work with the police as for years the gangs have targeted police and military people and their families.

I hope that when you receive our next newsletter in November I will have much more to report on, and that the situations of our students, the schools, and the communities we work with will be much improved. To close, I send to each and every one of you all the Love and Light I can, hoping, as our students commonly say, "That God bless and protect you and your families" in these times of turmoil.

In Peace

— Robert Broz, Project Director





## The Wind Beneath our Wings

*Did you ever know that you're my hero  
And everything I would like to be?  
I can fly higher than an eagle  
For you are the wind beneath my wings*

Bette Midler

### PAUL ENGSTROM

by Trudy Reagan

Paul came from a poor, fatherless Swedish farming family in Minnesota.

He was drafted in WWII, guarding POWs from Italy. This entitled him to go to UC Berkeley on the GI Bill, where he became a licensed social worker and met his wife, Mary.

In the late 1950s, they went touring the world with their kids, to England, then to a Kibbutz in Israel. Finally, in the USSR, still behind the Iron Curtain, they did car camping.

He was so quiet and self-effacing, you would never know he was an adventurer! Later, when China was still a closed country, he traveled there on his own, knowing no Chinese but helped by friendly people. He was the first white person many had ever seen.

In 1980, civil war in El Salvador caused a flood of refugees. Palo Alto Meeting member Carmen Broz, who was born in El Salvador, made sure the meeting adopted refugees sent to us by South Bay Sanctuary Covenant (SBSC), a group of local churches formed to help. Both Paul and myself were involved with both groups.



Sketch of Paul Engstrom by Trudy Reagan

The Salvadorans' help group, urged SBSC to send an investigative delegation to El Salvador, still at war. It was made up of Paul, who was 65, and four others including myself. We departed, after some turmoil in the country, in January 1988.

After being carefully shepherded to human rights groups and base community churches by Salvadoran resisters for 10 days, we flew to Honduras to visit an amazing, well-run refugee camp of 10,000 Salvadorans. Three of us flew home, but Paul and I went to see Carmen teaching in León, Nicaragua, another war-torn country. It was Paul, with only his Italian from the POWs, who arranged for a pickup truck to León because buses were stuffed. The children there knew Carmen and took us right to her. Next stop was Costa Rica, for my flight home. He himself decided to take buses home.

Back home, Paul twice drove Pastors for Peace trucks with supplies to El Salvador, through adversarial checkpoints.

He would obtain refurbished computer donations, sending them to our El Salvador Project schools, and also to contacts in Cuba, where the American embargo was in force. He found aid workers going there to take them down with their luggage. For the next 30 years, he served on the committee that supports the Projects, started by Carmen Broz, always full of useful ideas.

## Remembering Paul Engstrom by Hulda Muaka

I served with Paul on the Palo Alto El Salvador Committee for several years. He was a man who cared about the welfare of others.

When he was in his 90s and not able to drive he still attended the committee meetings that took place in Palo Alto. I would give him a ride back to his Los Altos home after the meetings and during the rides he shared the joy of his travels in the world. He had visited El Salvador and Guatemala among others where he saw the need to continue helping the children from disadvantaged families get an education and work towards improving their societies.

He also shared that he had taken his children from school for a year and gone to tour England. He later felt that taking the children away from formal education and their peers for a longer period of time might not have been a good idea.

He also cared about the lives of the immigrants hence his association with the South Bay Sanctuary which assists immigrants in need. He believed in equality for all.



Group Photo of University Students

Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

**Please – if you can in this difficult time, donate to support education for rural youth in El Salvador**

Only a few months ago, few of us could have imagined the worldwide coronavirus pandemic that now dominates the news and shapes our daily lives. Robert Broz’s report begins with the extensive impacts of COVID-19 on tiny El Salvador, where infection rates have been kept low at the cost of lost civil liberties. In that context, your donations continue to illuminate the lives of young rural Salvadorans with hope and opportunities.

Crises that bring suffering to the privileged are truly catastrophic for the most vulnerable – the marginalized who barely sustain a meager living in the best of times, whose isolation from the circles of political and economic power makes it easy for elites to disregard their needs. All of us know this, but for the poor of El Salvador it is a reality that is experienced directly every day. By supporting the educational aspirations of gifted young people from disadvantaged communities, the El Salvador Projects enable them to overcome historic inequities and create a brighter future, one student and family at a time. Robert’s narratives of specific students inspire all of us, and affirm the encouraging outcomes we can achieve together.

“Of course, it is fairly common that times of crisis and suffering connect people with their capacity to love and care about one another.” [Pema Chodron, *The Healing Power in Your Heart*, in The Lion’s Roar, July 2020, p. 30.] May it be so for us! And if your experience is like mine, helping others can be a powerful antidote to that debilitating sense of helplessness that can hit us like an infection of the spirit from the twin calamities of pandemic and economic collapse.

**Please – in these difficult times when so many people are financially stressed, if your resources enable you to continue the generosity of the past year or two, your donations will be welcomed with deep gratitude. All of your dollars are carefully stewarded, and they accomplish so much! Thank you!**

Jamie Newton, for the El Salvador Projects Committee

**YES! I WANT TO HELP SALVADORANS IMPROVE THEIR LIVES!**

Mail donations to:

Palo Alto Friends Meeting–El Salvador Projects, 957 Colorado Avenue, Palo Alto, CA 94303

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\$25    \$50    \$75    \$100    \$250    \$500    \$1000    Other \_\_\_\_\_

Check here if you want your gift to support a college student.  
(Please specify on your check memo line “college loans”)

All donations are used for education programs. Most donations are used for our university student loans, and some smaller donations are used for other educational purposes such as high school tutors or supplies.

Contribution checks should be made to **PAFM – E.S. Projects**. Your contribution is tax-deductible.

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