



**Robert Broz with his children and grandchildren**

**Project Director Robert Broz writes,**

My report in this newsletter begins with startling political changes that shook El Salvador. I know that many of you count on my in-country perspective to fill in gaps and help you interpret accounts that appear in the mainstream press. Next, I'll bring you up to date on our work, share my inspiration about a new youth scholarship association, bring you close to a couple of past students as they are now – mature adults using their education – and introduce you to our 2017 Service Learning trip coordinators, Nate and Sarah. I hope my words will convey the value of the work we have been doing in El Salvador since 1989, made possible by your continuing support. **Thank you!**

**Electrifying political developments in El Salvador**

Nayib Bukele, the progressive FMLN mayor of San Salvador, has fallen from grace with FMLN party leaders. Like former President Mauricio Funes, Bukele is not a team player. He had publicly criticized the party and its members since becoming Mayor in 2015. On Oct 10<sup>th</sup> he was sanctioned by the party for accusations of mistreatment of one of his own city council members, and for creating division within the party. Most consider his recent expulsion by party leaders politically motivated, due to his increasing popularity among the rank and file of the FMLN. Within hours of his expulsion, Bukele changed his political status on Facebook to “independent,” and with the support of ARENA City Council members’ votes he fired 11 department chiefs. (FMLN is the leading left-wing party, and ARENA is the leading right-wing party)

Because of campaign deadlines, Bukele cannot run for reelection as Mayor of San Salvador in the upcoming March 2018 elections, giving the ARENA party a good chance of winning back the capital. Bukele has shown that without corruption there are adequate funds to make the city and country a better place. On Sunday, October 15, Bukele announced on a Facebook video that he will run for the presidency in 2019. Within hours the video went viral. As of October 21 it had been viewed 2.3 million times and shared over 60,000 times. Many Salvadorans believe Bukele could win as an independent or by forming a new party in 2019. Several political analysts are saying that if he did win, it could change the face of politics in El Salvador and perhaps open the way to changes that would truly benefit the people of El Salvador,

whereas others fear that he would face a political gridlock if the major parties, FMLN and ARENA, were to come together to block reforms that would limit political corruption and enrichment of officials, making improvements almost impossible. Some foreign analysts fear that Bukele would be assassinated before he could be elected.

Although most Salvadorans still consider gang crime and the failing economy the country's worst problems, in the news media these issues are overshadowed by Bukele's announcement, reports of political corruption, and a chief fiscal prosecutor who seems to be controlled by political interests.



***Will with mother and other relatives***

### ***Our projects at Work***

Another graduation! William Mejia recently finished his studies in computer engineering at the National University of El Salvador (UES). I have known Will since he was a child in the village of El Barío, near Suchitoto, where our Projects have aided education for many years, and our program supported him for most of his time at the University. At the small family event to celebrate his recent graduation, I was deeply moved as his mother, others in his family, and local pastoral leaders spoke of how much Will is loved and respected. Will is currently doing an internship with Tigo, a large telecommunications company. I hope this will provide the experience he needs to find a permanent job in the industry. Will is also in a relationship with a lovely woman, Eliza, who

graduated in Law with support from a program based in Santa Cruz, California. Will and Eliza met several years ago in our coed student house. In 2015 she moved out, and in 2016 Will and Eliza lived together as she finished her thesis and graduated. It's a very happy success story for them both!

### ***Our sixteen students, 2017***



Our university program began in 1999 and continues strong. We opened the year supporting 17 students, seven of whom are new students we were able to add because donations were higher than usual in 2016. *Again, thank you for your generosity!* As I'm sure you're aware, I do my best to assist each of our students, paying special attention to new students who often have academic deficiencies as they enter their university studies. This year, one new student had academic problems and withdrew from her studies after the first semester. Saddened by that outcome and attentive to the experiences of two of my own children who are in their first year in the university, I have initiated a short seminar in basic study practices that I plan to hold at the start of each academic year. I hope this will help students with their academic formation and provide skills many never learned in high school.



***English major Ercilia helps 2nd-graders***

As I mentioned in our most recent newsletter, this year we added social service

projects as part of our program. Our 16 students were required to do 40 hours of work and present a short report about their projects. Two of our students opted to support a municipal surveying project and an adult education program. The other 14 systematically developed their own projects, as diverse as sex education, recycling, and tutoring younger children. As a group, the students and I decided to place a monetary value on the project hours, and to add motivation a reward was offered for the best project – an additional \$250 deduction from the winner’s interest-free student loan. My hope is that the projects will improve and in some cases become permanent, providing benefits to many others in rural Suchitoto over the years. Social service work varies in Suchitoto, but will most likely be implemented in other programs with motivation and direction of the Scholarship Youth Association of Suchitoto (ABESUCHI)



***The Youth Association, ABESUCHI, board***

It once again did most of the work to organize our annual university fair, which brought 18 universities and other institutions of higher education to motivate young people from Suchitoto to continue in their academic formation. A past recipient of our program, Mirna Hernandez, was the master of ceremonies. The Association had its founding assembly just this past September, and is awaiting approval and legalization from city hall in the coming days. The current board of directors has students and ex-beneficiaries from five programs, including four from Palo Alto’s projects. This dream I shared with my late, dear friend Frank Cummings is now a reality, and I know that much of the work we have done to mentor, motivate, and promote higher education will be taken over by young students and professionals from the various programs in Suchitoto. It is reassuring to know that

Palo Alto’s programs are represented by one graduate, two who are close to graduating, and one current student, as we all see how our programs have improved the lives of those we support.

### ***Where are they today?***

Periodically we reach out to past students to see where they are and how their lives are going. Let me introduce you to Carmen Castillo and Romelia Chicas, two of the students we supported in the early years of our university loan program.



***Carmen Castillo and family***

Carmen Castillo finished high school in 1999 in the village of El Barío, and was included that same year with our first group of nine students who entered the university. She survived the terrible bus accident that killed six of her high school classmates in 1999, all of whom were recipients of small scholarships our program provided for high school students. She studied chemistry at the two-year technical institute, ITCA, graduating in 2001. Carmen had a hard time finding work but always stayed in contact as she married and started a family. In 2009 she found work in the pharmacy at the national hospital in Suchitoto, where she has been employed ever since. She repaid her loan of \$1307, receiving a discount of \$500 for paying punctually every year. She and her family live in the village of La Mora, very close to El Barío. I enjoy seeing both Carmen and her husband on a regular basis.



***Romelia and her family***

Across the country, in the northeastern state of Morazán where we have worked since 1993, I found María Romelia Chica Vasquez (her married name). Romelia, whom I find always smiling, was the sole survivor of a massacre in Morazán near the end of the civil war. She was raised by her aunt and supported by several uncles. She studied teaching at the university, living with my mother, Carmen Broz, in San Salvador and graduating as a kindergarten teacher in 2003. Romelia is both a teacher and the principal in a small, very remote public school in the municipality of Yamabal, Morazán. She teaches first and second grades in a mixed classroom of 30 students. She married a young man from the area where she works, and they have two beautiful children. Romelia's life demonstrates with beauty and power that with a supportive family and community, and just enough additional resources to open life opportunities, a determined person can emerge from tragedy to flourish and serve others.

**Nate Secrest and Sarah Ludwig, our service-learning trip coordinators**

This year's Service Learning trip to El Salvador was a complete success. I will leave details of the trip to Nate's report (below, in this newsletter), but I do want to briefly tell you about Nate and his partner, Sarah. I have known Nate Secrest for years, since he traveled on one of our early Service Learning trips as a young teenager. I met Sarah for the first time when they arrived at the airport with this year's Service Learning trip participants. Well over a year ago, when Nate asked about organizing a trip to El Salvador, I expressed

concerns. Organizing a trip is very different from traveling as a participant! In retrospect, I'm delighted to affirm that together Nate and Sarah did a great job. They reached out to motivate youth and adults to register, and here in El Salvador their partnership lightened my responsibilities and enhanced the experience for all involved. I hope in 2019 their directions in life will permit them to plan and organize another wonderful trip!

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**JULY SERVICE-LEARNING TRIP,  
VIEWS AND REFLECTIONS**

**Introduction by Sarah Ludwig, US  
coordinator:**

Just as there are many different perspectives in our global community, so are there many ways to describe the 2017 El Salvador Service Learning trip. It's perhaps simplest to begin with the statistics: 13 participants, eight of whom were under 18, joined two US coordinators and two El Salvador coordinators for ten days of integrated experiential learning, service work, reflection, and adventures. Together we swam under two waterfalls, spent three days at homestays in El Barío with seven different families, collectively taught more than 75 hours of English classes, and made/ate more pupusas than anyone could reasonably count. Many of these experiences were shared with more than 15 Salvadoran youth and young adults. Although we will never be able to fully capture the richness and depth of this cultural exchange in words, read on for a few stories that we believe speak to our shared experience.

**Yogi Sharma, participant:**

The trip was a magnificent experience for me – especially the local stay in El Barío with Chomingo. Being forced to speak and learn Spanish in a local environment was uncomfortable, but a great learning experience. The dinners with the family and trying to talk about their work, culture, and family were memorable. I keep in touch with Chomingo by Facebook messages, and we exchange photos. I appreciate that connection with him now.

The experiences of visiting local organizations will also stick with me (permaculture, women's group in Suchitoto, Cinquera park, San Salvador museums). The conversation with the women's group in Suchitoto was very meaningful for me. It reminded me of the impact of my lifestyle on the environment, and I came out with resolution to reduce my footprint on the environment. The visit to a San Salvador museum and learning about the civil war was a saddening and deepening experience. It made me more aware of the pointlessness of wars and how so many innocent lives are lost in wars!



*Chomingo, with his paintings, and Yogi.*

**Rylie Gabehart, participant:**

From the El Salvador Service Learning Trip, the experiences shared with us by the local people will stick with me most. Of particular impact to me were the experiences involving the civil war. Prior to preparing for the trip, I was ignorant of the massacres of civilians in El Salvador by militant representatives of their own government, or of the way the United States financially supported the government that carried out these acts. Seeing how people there are still feeling the effects of that war is not something I am soon to forget.

Ofelia, the Salvadoran woman who hosted me and Elinor in her home with her family, had built her house herself after being displaced during the civil war. She showed us photos that included pictures of her graduating from an adult education

program. She had not been able to attend school as a child because of the civil war and was proud to have completed the program as an adult despite many obstacles.

Nearly all in her community, El Barío, either share similar stories, have relatives who fought in the war, or fought in the war themselves. It was so recent and affected so many! A forester who guided a hike we took through El Cinquera, a natural preservation area, pointed along the way to trenches dug for protection during the war or at a makeshift wooden table that was used to treat the wounded. He described how tarps would be hung over the operating table so the enemy would not see the light being used in treatment.

Seeing the tattered clothing of priests shot at the hands of militants who were given guns from the United States and reading the sheer number of civilians slaughtered (most estimates are around 70,000) is revolting. El Salvador is a beautiful place with a dark history. Its people strive like we all do to survive and prosper, but the opportunities presented to them are not what we have come to expect in the United States. There are many social issues ranging from machismo culture to an educational system with little funding to the lingering effects of colonialism, but there are also the beginning signs of change in the form of programs being put in place to address these issues.

We also visited a women's center that disperses information about healthy relationships and a permaculture center that teaches ways of reducing waste and living healthily without damaging the environment, and we were given the opportunity to teach at a local school. I feel honored to have seen first-hand some of the ways in which the Palo Alto Friends Meeting is working to improve access to education and other resources in El Salvador.

**Nate Secret, US coordinator:**

Overall, this trip was a dream come true. When I look back on my experience as a teen participant in 2006, I remember feeling amazed at the country's natural beauty yet saddened by the

atrocities that were financed by US money. Only in coming back as an older teen and now as an adult have I been able to see the unwavering glimmer of hope that is the Salvadoran people.

Many people in the community of El Barío are fighting for change and improvements to personal safety and stability in their lives. This year I returned to the same family that I stayed with at age 18. My host brother (who is my age) greeted me as I arrived at the front gate, and I was surprised to see a new coat of paint on the house. Upon entering, I realized that the floor has been transformed by ornate orange tiles. What was once simply a concrete slab has been beautified ten-fold. However, my attention was quickly drawn away from the fine flooring to a rapidly grown young human by the name of Aron, my host brother's three-year-old son. Aron is growing up in a loving home environment with an incredible family that is working so hard to give him the best opportunities. My host brother constantly tells me how he wakes up at 4:00 or 5:00 AM for work every day to ensure that his son will be able to study whatever he wants.



*River cleanup, Nate & Sarah on right.*

My host brother and his family are just a few of the people we met who are part of the strong emerging culture focused on a commitment to education and change. One of the main groups we got to know was the Youth Group of El Barío. Together we played bilingual board games, swam in the hostel pool, and conversed about the issues we face in our lifetime. A moment that made me proud on this trip was when I walked in on one of the more advanced Spanish lessons during the afternoon to hear them all talking about changing the machismo culture. They were asking

questions like, “What does the younger generation believe about gender?” “How has the community reacted to this slow cultural shift?” “Who is pushing for this change?”

It made me proud to hear both Salvadorans and Service Learning Trip members having an equal exchange of ideas about radical topics for El Salvadoran communities as a whole. This commitment of young adults to being leaders in their communities going forward was powerful to see. Since my first trip, I have met many students from El Barío who have gone to college with the help of Palo Alto Friends Meeting's El Salvador Projects, have finished their education, and are now changing the community they grew up in.

Now, as I reflect on the El Salvador trip with the fires in Northern California weighing heavily on my heart, I keep being drawn back to questions about community, both local and global. I keep asking myself, “How will we stand up and support one another?” I would like to believe that we can always rise up from the ashes but sometimes that optimism seems unrealistic when confronted with such a grim reality. However, thinking about the people of El Salvador and my experience on the Service Learning Trip gives me such hope! I think about little Aron toddling across the orange tiled floor and remember that communities ripped apart by the Salvadoran Civil war are rebuilding and seeking out opportunities for their futures. I think about difficult conversations shared by young people from vastly different cultural backgrounds, and I remember that communication is essential to share our visions of a better world. In the Salvadoran people, I witnessed so many different communities standing together to fight the injustices of the world through sustainable actions, education, and acts of service to their community. This is what hope looks like.

For more pictures and stories from our trip, check out our trip blog at <http://elsalvadorservicelearningtrips.blogspot.com/> Also, our new photo album at <http://pafmelsalvadorprojects.org/en/project-news-letters>

**When there's really something to be thankful for...**

*We know that God would like us to be joyful even when our hearts lie panting on the floor...  
How much more can we be joyful when there's really something to be joyful for!*

*Fiddler on the Roof*

Many of us find our hearts lying panting on the floor, as each day brings news of widening conflicts around the world, hurricanes of unprecedented frequency and destructive power, wildfires raging through American towns and treasured public lands, a public promise by the Director that the Central Intelligence Agency will become more "vicious" with the full backing of the President, assaults on natural resources while global climate change accelerates, degradation of the institutions of democracy that Americans have cherished for generations...

So, are you looking for something to be joyful for? We hope you've found it in this newsletter. Your contributions earlier this year were unusually generous, enabling us to expand the number of talented young Salvadorans from poor rural families who are studying at the university level with your support. Robert Broz tells the stories of two graduates – both determined young women who emerged from tragedies to put their keen minds and bright spirits at the service of the community. Surely, the El Salvador Projects Committee and the devoted supporters of the Projects can be joyful about this program and the young people it lifts toward better lives with such a modest budget!

Please give what you can to sustain the unique, successful work of the El Salvador Projects. Please help us reach out to others who share your commitment to peace, justice, and equality for all the people of the world. We encourage you to give this newsletter to a friend or family member after you've read it. Thank you so much for your support, and your faithful partnership! ***Thank you so much for staying with us, extending your hand with ours to promising young people in El Salvador!***

**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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All donations are used for education programs. Most donations are used for our university loans, and some for other educational purposes, such as high school tutors or supplies. Your contribution is tax-deductible.

Contribution checks should be made payable to PAFM – E.S. Projects

# **PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING EL SALVADOR PROJECTS NEWSLETTER**

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<http://pafmelsalvadorprojects.org/en/project-news-letters>



## **NOVEMBER 2015 NEWSLETTER— WHAT'S INSIDE!**

### **The Director reports on:**

- Political changes in El Salvador,
- Our projects' work in El Salvador in the eyes of the Director,
- Our students social service projects in their communities,
- The success of two of our graduates,
- Service Learning Trip 2017—Views and Reflections of the participants,
- How your continued support matters.

El Salvador Projects  
Palo Alto Friends Meeting  
957 Colorado Ave.  
Palo Alto, CA 94303  
U.S.A.

Address correction requested