

PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING **EL SALVADOR PROJECTS**

JUNE 2019 NEWSLETTER

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Dear friends and supporters,

I began this report with some anxiety, concerned that my goals for the report might be beyond my abilities. I want my in-country view to inform you about El Salvador as I encounter it daily, to give you my personal perspective on the political complexity and uncertainty that we are experiencing at the national level, and to describe the realities of immigration here, at the origin of the journeys you find reported in the U.S. by journalists and politicians when migrants who have survived their ordeal arrive at the U.S. border with Mexico.

Unlike past newsletters, where I have provided short updates about current and past students, this time you will hear from our current students in their own words, as they responded to a simple, direct question I asked about their options and life choices. Their answers surprised me, and also reassured me that we are, indeed, supporting young people who will change El Salvador's future.

You will also learn more about the communities and people our projects support, and how our approach has evolved through 30 years of experience in rural El Salvador. During my 15 years as Project Director notable changes have taken place in the work my mother, Carmen Broz, initiated in 1989 as El Salvador started to recover from the damage the civil war had caused at every level. Toward the end of this report, I'll set out the dates and locations of meetings that are planned when I visit the U.S. in July to attend Pacific Yearly Meeting of Friends, to meet with supporters, and to get acquainted with others who may become interested in our work to promote education and social justice in El Salvador.



Robert Broz



El Salvador's new president, Nayib Bukele

I sense in myself some of the wariness and withdrawal that I believe many Salvadorans have developed over the past two years, as supporters of both major parties, ARENA on the right and FMLN on the left, have lost optimism for positive change through political institutions, becoming resigned to corruption and the pillaging of public funds. I think that this is what has made it so difficult for me to

frame this article for our June 2019 newsletter. On the positive side, this may be a sign that my 24-plus years here and dual citizenship have transformed me into one of the 6.2 million Salvadorans who reside in this tiny Central American Country. I no longer have qualms that I may be just another expatriate do-gooder. I belong here!

President-elect Nayib Bukele will take office on June 1st in a climate of political uncertainty. The talk of the day is filled with questions. Will Bukele keep his campaign promises? Will he bring new, younger, unknown followers into his government? Will he and his appointees govern honestly? Will he be able to reduce crime nationally, as he did in the capital, San Salvador, during his term as Mayor? His credibility was weakened by his first three appointees – none of them new faces, and all with ties to the two major parties or the super-wealthy oligarchy. Although many see these appointees as capable and experienced, critics question whether there will be any real change.

GANA, the party he ran for, is a split-off of the right-wing ARENA party. Despite GANA founders' original claims that they had no ambition for political power, party leaders have started to negotiate with President-elect Bukele. As a candidate, Bukele insisted that he had nothing in common with the party, and that running as its presidential candidate was just a way to win the presidency as he continues to build his own new party, *Nuevas Ideas* (New Ideas). Both Bukele and GANA have a hard five-year presidential term ahead, with only 10 National Assembly delegates from the GANA party and no support at all from the parties that dominate the 84-seat Assembly, ARENA (37 votes) and FMLN (24 votes). Most people expect five years with very little improvement for El Salvador. Bukele supporters hope they have not been lied to, and that in the future New

Ideas will make the changes El Salvador needs. Like Trump, Bukele did not campaign on real ideas – just populist slogans depicting the other politicians and parties as corrupt, concerned only with their personal enrichment and not the common Salvadoran people. His lack of a political platform hit home with many, including his own supporters, when in his first visit to the U.S. (and for the first time since the peace agreements ended the Salvadoran civil war in 1992) a president-elect visiting the U.S. did not mention immigration, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or basic rights for the nearly 3 million Salvadorans who reside in the U.S. Bukele ignored the country's main problems of gangs, crime, and immigration in this first

U.S. visit. In contrast, he spoke of realigning El Salvador with U.S. politics, of commerce, and of distancing El Salvador from socialist countries such as Venezuela, China, Cuba, and Nicaragua. As I write, Bukele has just announced another official visit, so perhaps he will raise issues of importance to the general public then.



Caravan into Mexico

As Bekele's inauguration approaches, the Salvadoran media have carried very little news about immigration and the famous caravans of Hondurans and Salvadorans. Many Hondurans who traveled with a caravan to seek refuge in the U.S. have returned from Mexico, and their testimonies are common on the local news in Honduras. I travel to Honduras frequently, and on a recent visit I listened to several interviews with returnees. All felt they had been tricked, and used by local organizations that promised them support on the trip with a guaranteed entrance into the US. They felt abandoned. Finding life in Mexico as hard as in Honduras, or worse, they returned to be with their families.

From the start I suspected that the caravans in Honduras were politically motivated as a means to protest the recent presidential elections, in which

fraud was suspected – elections that the US quickly recognized as legitimate for the reelected president so many Hondurans consider corrupt. Hearing the testimonies from returned migrants, I wondered what had happened to the hundreds of Salvadorans who formed their own caravans. Are they still in Mexico? Did they ever reach the U.S. border? Did coyotes (smugglers) in Mexico make money shuttling them into the US illegally? Are they in detention centers? Here in El Salvador, there has been no mention of the caravans in months. Immigration, both legal and illegal, by Salvadorans has been constant since the 1980s, when the civil war forced many to leave. Many of these earlier immigrants were given US citizenship, which after the war made it possible for them to send money to pay coyotes to bring other members of their families. The recent caravans were a dream, for many, a means to get to Mexico at a very low cost compared to the \$7,000-\$8,000 that coyotes charge for the trip from El Salvador and much less than the \$1800 paid in northern Mexico. Today when tourists ask me what is El Salvador's main export, I tell them "Its people" – this followed by coffee, sugar, and textiles. However, it is clear that the famous *remesas* (remittances) sent to their families by nearly 3 million Salvadorans living in the U.S. and Canada are the cash flow that keeps the country going.

Crime by gangs who control large parts of most major cities is still rampant, and the major reason a large percentage of younger Salvadorans decide to make the treacherous trip to the U.S. This, in turn, helps President Trump gain support from his followers who fear and even hate immigrants. Perhaps the prospect of political gain from growing numbers of undocumented immigrants at the southern border is the real reason behind Trump's recent decision to cut \$450 million in financial aid to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (The Northern Triangle). This funding has been proven to reduce crime and illicit gang activities, and to help prevent crime and drug abuse by youth in these countries. To Central Americans this aid is vital, so Trump's suspension of funding appears intentioned to make the situation worse.

I recently read an article in the NY Times where the author speculated that Trump could be the first modern U.S. president who has no concern at all for the country and its people, but only with power, winning, and his re-election. His policy toward Central America is just one of many of Trump's decisions, in my judgment, that make things worse in both the U.S. and other countries around the world, but give his followers the impression that he is protecting white America.

In preparation for this newsletter, and prompted by members of our committee in the U.S., I decided to ask our 24 university students what I thought was a simple two part question, asking them to respond as briefly and precisely as possible: *If you were not studying at the university, what would you be doing today and where do you think you would be?* Like most of our committee members, I was expecting most of our students to reply that they would have gone to the U.S., yet of the 24 only five mentioned a possibility of having gone to the U.S., and of these only one gave that as his only option. Most spoke of working at a low-paid job to try to save money to continue their studies, and trying to help meet their family's needs. Several of the men said they would have returning to work in agriculture, and a few referred to continuing social activism within their communities or the municipality. All 24 responses would be too much to include in this newsletter, but I have selected several with the hope that you will learn a little more about the youth we support.

In Their Own Words –
from the students we support together

Karla Alfaro (fourth-year Modern Language student): "The answer for this question is easy. If I did not have a scholarship and were not studying at the university, I would be working as a cashier in a supermarket in the best



Karla Alfaro and her father

Miguel Barrera (third-year sociology student, in his late twenties when he decided to go to the university): “Looking backwards to my past and before studying at a superior level, my goal was to find a job wherever I could, like a supermarket, pharmacy, or restaurant. I even thought of enrolling in the academy to become a police officer. After I got out of high school, until entering the university, I could not find a job, and I ended up helping at home with chores or working in agriculture. If I were not studying at the university, right now I would be working in agriculture or in a job (as I mentioned before) like a pharmacy or a supermarket.”



Giovanni Chevez

Giovanni Chevez (second-year law student at the national university - one of the students who expressed a possibility of migrating to the U.S. without documents, but this was not his only option): “I would have tried to enter at the National Academy of Public Security and become part of National Civil

Police of El Salvador, this to help me continue to study law. Alternatively, I might have considered going illegally to the United States of America to find work and help my family here economically. Another possibility would have been to look into how to obtain financial assistance for studying a vocational program in auto mechanics for two years, and then have a chance to find a decently paying job in El Salvador.”

Julio Recinos (second-year psychology student) and **Sindy Galdamez** (third-year industrial engineering student) expressed very simply what I had

assumed the majority would have answered. **Julio** wrote: “It is likely that I would be in the United States working. Like many young people who have sought better opportunities outside of El Salvador.” **Sindy’s** short response was similar: “Probably I would be working, or maybe I would be in the United States pursuing



Sindy Galdamez

the American Dream.” Responses like these last two were what I was expecting from the majority of our students, as I said earlier. This would have reassured our committee members and supporters in the U.S. that our educational programs do help to keep youth in El Salvador. As I read the responses from our 24 students, I came to a different but very meaningful conclusion. I believe that the majority of the students we support are youth who will change El Salvador—whether we provide assistance for their university studies or not. What we do, with your financial support, makes it easier and surely faster for them to complete their studies, become professionals, find productive employment, and help support their families; while being able to do what they really want – live happily, make a difference, and improve conditions in their own country, El Salvador.



The whole group of sponsored students, with some parents

Despite their own speculations, I think that without our support some of these students might come up against obstacles that would put them on a different course, and in desperation they might leave El Salvador. Being forthright, I must tell you that we have even had a few past graduates who went to the U.S. illegally seeking the American Dream, each with a different story and for different reasons. Perhaps I will tell you their stories in a future newsletter. Of greater importance, many graduates from our program (now dozens) have good jobs, run small businesses, or work as public school teachers or nurses in the public hospitals, and almost all of our graduates have remained here in El Salvador. Of these, I know three who have obtained U.S. visas and have traveled to the US on their vacations to see friends and family, returning to El Salvador, respecting their visas, keeping their jobs, and supporting their families. It is evident that our educational programs continue to make very positive changes for the people and



Saturday teachers designed for seniors

communities we have worked with now for 30 years. Thanks to your support in 2019, our programs are going strong.

Thanks to your increased donations in 2017, 2018, and 2019 to date, this year we are supporting 24 students in this first semester, and we will most likely have 25 in the second semester – more than we have ever supported in any given year! Our coed and co-financed student house has 21 residents, of whom 12 are from our program this year.

We continue to provide support to the K-12 school in El Barío where we provide a stipend to one teacher, avoiding a need to combine 3rd and 4th grades. Every other Saturday we provide support and tutoring in the four main subjects (math, science, social studies, and language/literature – *Lenguaje y Literatura*), aiming to improve the high school exit exam scores and thus give the students a better chance to pass the entrance exam at the National University in October. The Saturday classes are designed for seniors, but about eight of the 22 juniors are attending voluntarily as well. Two of the four teachers are university students who are young and known by the high school students.



Wendy Hernandez at the university

We try to include mentoring, as there really is no career counseling covered within the public school system. Several other students will be doing their social work hours at the school, teaching English and French classes and formal physical education, helping out in the large kindergarten class, and more. One new student will be teaching welding to about eight seniors and juniors from the school. Many of our other university students are doing similar projects in other rural schools in Suchitoto.



Youth group's New Year party for elders

As of last year, the support and work of the Youth Group in El Barío has been my favorite, and very satisfying as well as being a great use of our limited funds. The youth last year decided they wanted to arrange visits to many of the elders in the community, concentrating on those who have few or no other family members close by. They visit 2-3 homes once or twice a month, rotating which seniors they visit with different small groups of youth. The number of youth varies but averages around eight. They bring some refreshments and spend time that is valued by both the seniors and the participating youth themselves, many of whom have no living grandparents. This year we are providing a small fund to be used if and when they detect specific needs in any given case, while the group raises its own funds to be able to provide the refreshments they bring. Seeing photos of the visits is enough for me to appreciate the value of this micro program. As you can see, our work continues, sometimes changing direction, but always geared toward improving the lives of those we support.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this report, I will be traveling to California July 3rd through July 29th, 2019. I will be presenting an interest group at Pacific Yearly Meeting of Friends. I am also scheduled to speak at Visalia Meeting on Sunday, July 6th; at Grass Valley Meeting on Sunday, July 21st; at Friends House in Santa Rosa on the evening of Tuesday, July 23rd; and at Palo Alto Friends Meeting July 27th evening and Fourth Sunday lunch on July 28th. I will be talking about the current political situation in El Salvador, immigration, and of course, our programs. As a new element, I hope to have several of our bilingual students with me virtually (using Internet video) so that you can hear directly from them. Please help us spread the word, and join us at any of these events if you can. I still have several weekdays and evenings open. If you or your meeting or group would like to host me for a talk, please contact me via email at rpbroz@gmail.com.

Thanks, as always, for your commitment and continued support for the people and communities we support in rural El Salvador! You make it possible, and now, more than ever, young Salvadorans need to know that visions of justice and peace can be made real.



YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS ARE SO APPRECIATED!

Robert Broz's report expresses the surprise and appreciation with which he reviewed student responses to his two-part question regarding what they might be doing without the educational assistance your donations provide. As you know, our selection criteria include the applicant's commitment to the community – to enriching the lives of others and improving conditions in El Salvador. From the students' answers to Robert's question, it's clear that these young people are determined to remain in their home country, living full lives with productive work, and helping to create a better future for all.

We know our loan program is a win/win for these students. First, they obtain the skills they need to contribute to their communities and nation, and to support themselves and their families into the future. Second, they are far less likely to feel compelled to emigrate to another country. In fact, none of the students we support want to live in another country. Perhaps someday they will visit the U.S. or some other countries, but not with the intention of creating a better life for themselves there. They want to build that better life in their own country. We are very proud of each of these fine young people, for whom this opportunity would not be possible without your generous support. Thank you for your continued support!

— **Jamie Newton and Bill Bauriedel**
for the El Salvador Projects Committee

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