

## PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING

# EL SALVADOR PROJECTS

November 2021 Newsletter

WWW.PAFMELSALVADORPROJECTS.ORG

### The Clerk's letter, by Hulda Muaka

Happy Thanksgiving! It is that time of the year when we reflect on the past, present, and future. We appreciate all the assistance you've given, enabling us to continue to make lives better for our students in El Salvador.

The Project Director, Robert Broz, has given us an update of the political situation in El Salvador, as he does for each of our newsletters, with stories of resilience by the students as they deal with COVID-19, a worldwide pandemic. Despite many challenges, education goes on. A student, Jeaueline Casco, points out the positive side of the pandemic – inspiring compassionate support for each other, families, and communities. Students have taken the initiative to visit the elderly and deliver some food, commendable acts indeed!

The story of Amilcar Antonio Montoya, who successfully completed higher education with our assistance and supported his family as an employed professional, is a sad one. Amilcar is in a coma due to cancer. His example inspires us, and others – his youngest brother has applied for educational support from us, determined to live up to Amilcar's example. Robert asks that we all hold Amilcar and his family in the Light.

El Salvador has made world news as the first country to use the cryptocurrency, Bitcoin, as legal currency. It is also now a Bitcoin "mining" country. It was also among the first countries to approve a COVID vaccine for children aged six and older.

As we continue to make our way through the pandemic, and as we give thanks for the privileges and wellbeing many of us still enjoy, let us consider continuing to donate to this good cause of assisting students in El Salvador to achieve an education, and thus better their lives and those of the community at large. Please read our appeal near the end of this newsletter, where our dedication to assist the rural poor of El Salvador is set in the context of the circumstances that affect all of us at this time.

Thanks so much, from all of us on the El Salvador Projects Committee, and from the communities with which we are connected!

### Director's report



Robert Broz  
Project Director

Dear friends,

In this newsletter I hope to acquaint you with recent and ongoing changes in El Salvador – the Covid-19 pandemic and puzzling responses to freely available vaccinations, the legalization and now mining of Bitcoin, political trends that

include proposed changes to our constitution. I'll offer some insight into our President Nayib Bukele, who has reacted to critics by calling himself "The Coolest Dictator". I will also bring you up to date on our continuing programs in rural Suchitoto, and share with you how some of our university students have adapted to the situation that has evolved over the past 18 months.

Although public anti-vaccination campaigns are not present in El Salvador as they are in the US, the national health department has found that many are not getting the voluntary vaccines. Since early August, publicity campaigns by the Ministry of Health have been constant. Walk-in temporary vaccine centers are open daily to all with no first dose and those who still need a second dose, in addition to the hundreds of centers where appointments are required. The

Government estimates that just over 50% of the population have received the initial full vaccination. In late September, boosters for all brands were made available, and later they were offered to all age groups four months or more after the second shot. My wife Tita and I received our booster shots in mid-October. On October 18 the government opened COVID-19 vaccinations to foreigners independent of their migratory status, announcing that an average of 60,000 doses available daily were not being used.

Assuming that all our students had received their COVID-19 vaccines, in September I made it a requirement to show the digital certificate to receive their monthly stipends. I was surprised that six of our twenty-one students made appointments only after it was required. One of these even questioned my reasons for making Covid-19 vaccination a program requirement. Vaccine certification was initially required when reopening our coed student house in San Salvador, after thirteen residents asked to use the house in the second semester of 2021. The vaccine requirement for all students came a couple of weeks later, when I realized that some residents were not vaccinated.

COVID-19 cases and deaths have been rising, with numbers sometimes surpassing the initial wave in 2020. Ironically, our government waited until the day after our national soccer team was eliminated from the games to qualify for the World Cup to announce the suspension of all large public gatherings through December 8,



Full stadium, Oct 2021

2021, after two home games in a stadium that was filled with some 30,000 spectators. The country

suffered spikes in infections after each game. On a positive side, the vast majority of the population in urban situations use masks and follow biosecurity protocols to enter any business. I have noticed a lack of social distancing and use of masks in the rural villages. Most of those who oppose president Bukele and his New Ideas Party use the term “Pantalla de Humo,” “Smoke Screen,” in reference to official government news about things like Bitcoin as a technique to move public attention away from more important news like the pandemic, economy, and lack of transparency.

El Salvador’s venture into the use of the cryptocurrency Bitcoin as legal currency – the only nation to do so – dominates discussion of political and economic issues as our newsletter is prepared. President Bukele and Bitcoin



Bitcoin Logo

enthusiasts tout this as a bold initiative that can take El Salvador into a prosperous future based on high-tech innovation, whereas domestic critics and such sober analysts

as the IMF (International Monetary Fund) are concerned about high-risk gambling with the national treasury in an economic experiment with many unknowns in a small country where every available resource should be applied to meet urgent human needs. Few people even know what cryptocurrency is. President Bukele initially purchased 700 Bitcoins at prices ranging from \$52,000 down to \$43,000 each as prices dropped, and then bought another 420 when prices dropped further, based on hope of profits when prices next increased. The owners of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies hold their wealth in digital “wallets” that allow transfer to others or payment to merchants who accept them. A government-controlled Bitcoin wallet named *Chivo*, which means *cool* in local slang, was developed and released in only three months, raising concerns that it would be plagued by technical problems. A

\$30 bonus is given to every Salvadoran who downloads and activates the wallet, and now over two million people have done so. 205 bitcoin ATMs have been installed in El Salvador and in parts of the US where larger populations of Salvadorans reside. In fact, the Chivo wallet has proven easy to hack, and close to a thousand Salvadorans have claimed that their identities were stolen, used by hackers to obtain the free \$30 provided by the government.

The law was sold to the public as a way to offset an estimated 400 million dollars in fees paid by Salvadorans who send an estimated 6 billion dollars annually to families in El Salvador. Using the Chivo wallet, money can be transferred via Bitcoins and changed instantly into good old US dollars, with no fees for sender or receiver. Cryptocurrency and Bitcoin experts don't know how the Chivo wallet can work without fees, but most suspect that the wallet is being subsidized by the Salvadoran government to cover what is commonly a conversion fee charged to both buy and sell cryptocurrencies including Bitcoin.

Since Independence Day on September 15, when there was a massive march with tens of thousands



People protest against President Bukele (AP Photo- Salvador Melendez)

protesting the Bukele administration and Bitcoin law, there have been several small protests. Even some New Ideas politicians have expressed their opposition to the use of Bitcoin as legal tender in El Salvador. In October President

Bukele announced that he would take 40 million

dollars from the government-held Bitcoin fund to build a large modern veterinary hospital. Although many Bukele supporters like the idea of a National Veterinary Hospital, because veterinary services are private, costly, and scarce, most think the money would be better spent improving the educational or health systems, both of which had their budgets cut in 2021.

Bitcoin “mining” refers to production of block chains where energy-sucking super computers with high-end graphics cards create unbreakable codes that are then valued and used worldwide. Although no Bitcoin mining is found in other countries with tropical climates because the high-speed CPUs and graphics cards need to be kept cool, in early October a self-contained Bitcoin mining unit with 200 computers was installed at the geothermal plant in Berlin, Usulután. President Bukele says that El Salvador will both mine and promote Bitcoin mining investments with its cheap, clean, renewable energy source, but fails to mention that El Salvador still buys electricity from neighboring countries and that the Salvadoran population pays more for electricity than most parts of the world. Critics argue that improving and expanding renewable energy sources like solar and geothermal should be done to reduce the cost to consumers and slow global warming, not to service the extremely high-energy consumption needed to mine cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin.

Cryptocurrency advocates see it as a decentralized form of currency, and an alternative to the current economy backed by gold. If this seems mysterious to you, you aren't alone! For a detailed commentary on Bitcoin, the Salvadoran experiment, “mining,” and concerns by the International Monetary Fund and others about volatility and ease of speculation with Bitcoin, please see these articles in the October 25 / November 2021 issue of *Time Magazine*: <https://time.com/6103299/bitcoin-el-salvador-nayib-bukele/>, and

<https://time.com/6103573/bitcoin-crypto-el-salvador/>.

As the smokescreen around Bitcoin, the Chivo wallet, and Bitcoin mining gets thicker, very little is heard about the concentration of power by Bukele and the 61 New Ideas congress members. The dismissal of the five Supreme Court judges and attorney general, described in my last report and still considered a political coup, was just the start. More recently, a constitutional provision that Presidents cannot run for a second consecutive term has been overturned. Scorning worries that even a dictatorship that shows some benevolence can easily lead to tyranny, President Bukele changed his Twitter account to say “El Dictador más Cool” (The Coolest Dictator), and more recently “Emperador de El Salvador”.



President Nayib Bukele  
(Secretaria de Prensa)

As you can see, I hold reservations about President Bukele and the New Ideas party, although some of their projects have been beneficial for education and other areas of

public need. On a local level, our new mayor, Denys Miranda, and the pluralistic city council seem to be working well together. However, although both the Mayor and legal representative had told me after being elected that they would want a meeting to discuss ideas about education and tourism, I have yet to be invited. I have also lost confidence that support from the city for our coed student house will be provided, as it was over the last six years, making our 2022 budget for the El Salvador Projects even harder to meet.

I do think that in mayoral and assembly elections in 2024 both opposing parties may win back support, as it is obvious that changes promised by

Bukele and New Ideas politicians are not happening. Control by the central government of funds that were formerly managed locally has caused even some New Ideas mayors to realize how little power they actually have, especially within their own municipalities, and how much power the president has obtained in the first two years of his five-year term.

Despite all that is going on in little El Salvador and prolonged changes of the Covid-19 pandemic, I have started to see some positive changes within the communities and among the students we support through the El Salvador Projects. The village of El Barío, where our work started in 1989, celebrated its 35th anniversary on July 15th. The founder of the El Salvador Projects, my mother Carmen Broz, was involved when the families, refugees in Calle Real, a camp outside of San Salvador, were accompanied by twenty or so internationals as they made their way back to reclaim their lands just some five miles from Suchitoto in July of 1986. Due to Covid-19, celebrations in both 2020 and 2021 were reduced to a minimum. I was pleasantly surprised to find the youth group in El Barío reactivated, visiting many homes and especially those of the elders in the community. Since then



El Barío youth bringing food to elders

the monthly visits with elders have been constant. In October I met with the leaders of the youth group to talk about our continued support for the remainder of this year and 2022. Up until 2019 a large Christmas celebration had been organized

for the seniors in the community each year. Of course, this was not possible in 2020 so the youth found a work-around and brought tamales and small gifts to each of the seniors' homes. This will most likely be the case in 2021 as well.

The pandemic has hit the public school system hard, especially rural schools like the one in El Barío. Dropout rates skyrocketed in public schools around the country, predominantly at middle and high school levels. In our school, eight of the eighteen enrolled to graduate from high school in November not only dropped out, but packed their bags and made the dangerous trip north to the US. I have seen similar numbers at the four other rural schools that offer high school in Suchitoto. The only positive thing I see is that we may have fewer applications for our university program, which will help make the selection process easier as our lowered donations will most likely lead us to reducing our overall budget in 2022. Fewer applications to our program may be offset as eight of the ten set to graduate from the school are trying to get into the National University of El Salvador, which had in-person entrance testing over two weekends in October. As in past years, a second test will be offered in November for those who nearly qualify on the first exam. Our program supported tutoring to junior and senior students in math and science during the months of August and September. An average of 17 students from both grades voluntarily attended Saturday classes prior to the university entrance exams. In 2022 we hope to start the Saturday classes in March and continue through September, and include not only math and science but also social science and Spanish as we did in 2019.

The school year for public schools ended as usual in the first week of November. As we have in past years, we will support the graduating high school and kindergarten students with a small fund to offset graduation expenses. Students at both the National University and private universities will

continue their studies as usual through late November and December, in some cases. As for the past decade, our annual budget will go mainly to our sponsored university students. In the 2021 academic year we have had ups and downs, with most students doing well but some having to drop out. We started 2021 with 19 continuing students and 5 new students. As we close the school year we are down to 21 students, having had 3 students drop from our program during the first and early part of the second semester.

Considering a reduced 2022 budget due to lower donations in 2020 and 2021, it is comforting to know that 4 of our 21 continuing students will finish our program this year, leaving 17 students in 2022. This should allow us to accept 3 or 4 new university students next year.

I know you will be interested in what one of our students said when I asked them to write about how they have adapted to Covid-19 in their personal and academic lifestyles. Jeauqueline Cristina Alas Casco is finishing her second year in modern languages, studying French and English at the National University. Her response



Jeauqueline Cristina Alas Casco

expresses changes I have seen as this timid high school student became a confident, mature university student. She is an example of the

resourcefulness I have seen in many students.

*Since I was in high school, my dream was always to go to study at a university. At the beginning of 2020 it seemed that my dream was beginning to be fulfilled, I was very happy about it! But suddenly the Covid-19 pandemic came to our country. That was horrible! Face-to-face classes were suspended.*

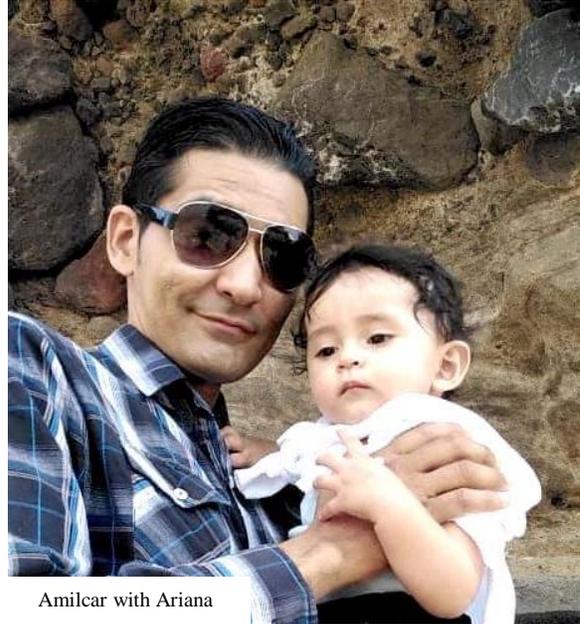
*This has been a real challenge. For me it hasn't been easy to deal with the poor Internet connectivity and the different technical problems that happen when I want to take classes online. One day I thought about not continuing with my studies because I really felt that my academic performance wasn't very good. But as the year went by I gradually adapted to the online modality, I learned to be a more self-taught person, I learned to organize my time very well. I also know that by putting a lot of effort, patience and love in what I do, I can achieve a good academic performance.*

*The pandemic hasn't only caused negative things, we must also recognize that it has brought positive things to our lives, it has taught us to help others in difficult times, it has united many families, but above all it has taught us that we must be very supportive people and help others when they are going through a bad time in their lives.*

I often end my reports with a section on *Where They Are Today*, to illustrate how our programs improve the lives of students and their families. This report concludes differently, with the story of a determined student who became a productive professional, a pastor, a husband and father, only to be left comatose by an aggressive cancer. And yet, despite the tragedy that breaks my heart, inspiration and hope come to us from the life journey of Amilcar Antonio Montoya, from the courage of his wife and the love of his lively toddler daughter, from our former students who have become a community of support for this family, and from Amilcar's younger brother who has resolved to become the strong foundation of his family now that Amilcar is disabled.

Amilcar graduated in 2003 with a two-year degree as a chemical lab technician. He completed his studies at the Technological University of El Salvador, (UTEC), working full-time, supporting his family, and studying nights

and weekends. From graduation through the end of 2016 he headed a quality control lab at our largest bottled water company. He went on to another company, in quality control for food production. In 2017, Amilcar was diagnosed with cancer and underwent intensive chemotherapy. In late 2018, his doctors said the treatment had worked and he had no signs of active cancer cells. Throughout his treatment Amilcar prayed, telling



Amilcar with Ariana

me in 2018 that he had promised God that he would dedicate his life to Him if he recovered. In full remission, Amilcar became a pastor and started a small church in La Mora, the community where he was born in rural Suchitoto.

In September of 2021, when Amilcar's younger brother Kelvin contacted me about our Student Loan program, he told me that Amilcar's cancer had returned and the doctors hoped to remove a tumor from his brain. Prior to the surgery the tumor blocked an artery, stopping essential oxygen, and Amilcar fell into a comatose state. He was released into his wife's care, with only periodic check-ups at the hospital.

Amilcar was the second of several students to receive financial support from Berkeley Friends Meeting. He became much like a son to me, communicating over the years his successes,

family matters, and health problems. On October 29 my wife Tita and I visited Amilcar. I had not known that he had married and had a child, and I really felt a need to see him and know more about the family's situation.

Amilcar and his wife Aracely were married only two years ago. Their beautiful baby girl, Ariana Alexandra, just a year and a half old, is open, active, and as vocal as a child that age might be, smiling immensely when I said "hi" in English. They live outside San Salvador in the house that Amilcar built in Ciudad Delgado. Aracely told me how Amilcar's health collapsed so recently. He returned from a visit to the US in February, felt poorly in March, and fell into his comatose state only a couple of months later. I was moved to tears when Aracely told me how friends from Amilcar's high school class had stepped forward to help, both emotionally and financially, when Amilcar needed a wheel chair and a respiratory pump. Several of these students were also ex-scholarship students in our program. I was especially moved to hear that a student I had lost contact with, Agustin Morales Rivas, helps when Amilcar has his checkups at the hospital, providing transportation and getting Amilcar out of his house, into the car, and into the hospital.

Aracely had prepared me to see Amilcar, telling me that he was unresponsive but did seem to recognize voices and sense when people were present. I found my friend in a state I had never experienced outside of a hospital. Tita told me to talk to him. Almost instantly there was some movement in his left eye, which Aracely had said was the side that he could still hear and see from. In a few minutes his eye was wide open, this after Tita joined me in speaking to him. Knowing his strong religious beliefs, I told him that I and surely those who would read his story here will do what we each know to do – some will pray, and others will hold him in the Light. I assured him that I will do what I can to make sure he and his wife and daughter are well.



Aracely de Montoya with Ariana and Robert

I can't promise Amilcar's youngest brother Kelvin a spot in our program in 2022 – he will have to qualify and earn the spot – but I do see the motivation expressed when in a recent message he stated "Amilcar was the person who supported the family, and now that he can't I think it's my turn. The only way will be if I can study and get a good job." Amilcar, 39, is the oldest of 7 brothers and sisters; Kelvin, 18, is the youngest.

As I wrote this report, I experienced many emotional ups and downs. I am not sure if this is part of my reaction under Covid-19 conditions, or perhaps related to what I feel as personal successes and failures in my work as Program Director. I am distressed that eight high school students saw no hope in El Salvador and left for the US, and I felt great joy seeing little Ariana happy to hear some English and just be close to her father Amilcar, even though he is unresponsive. That said, I am convinced that I live a truly blessed life, and that through the work I oversee for the El Salvador Projects even in these difficult times, we are able to directly improve the lives of the people and communities we support. Everything we accomplish is made possible by the ongoing financial support from people like you. Thank you for your generosity!

— Robert Broz, Project Director

# The Wind Beneath our Wings

**Ronald Jay Sax** (1/2/1933-2/13/2021)

**Katoko Inoue Sax** (4/8/1934-2/23/2013)

- *Hulda Muaka*, Clerk, the El Salvador Projects



Katoko and Ron Sax were both longtime members of Palo Alto Meeting and both had a passion for travel which enlightened their vision to help others. They were also longtime contributors to the Palo Alto Friends Meeting El Salvador projects.

Ron was born on January 2, 1933 in Benton Harbor, Michigan. His upbringing in Benton Harbor brought him in contact with various classes of people where he witnessed and sometimes experienced the sting of racial and religious bigotry. He absorbed black culture mixed with Jewish immigrant culture while working at his father's junk shop and at other odd jobs in "the Flats," the largely poor black and immigrant section of town. He often felt himself a

bridge between cultures and religions.

Katoko was born on April 8, 1934 in Tokyo, Japan. During the pre-war years she lived in Kobe and later Morioka. To escape the bombings, her family moved to the countryside. She became opposed to all wars from this early time. She attended Tsuda College for two years and in 1957, she became a student helper at the World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs where she met delegates who encouraged her aspiration to study in America. One was the British Quaker Reginald Reynolds. Another was a representative of the Michigan Council of Churches, which would in 1958 bring her to the U.S. as the first Asian student under their Youth for Understanding exchange program. She lived with her sponsors, the Delamarter family, and attended Central Michigan University, majoring in economics. It was there that she met her husband, Ron, whom she married in 1962 in Chicago. She then spent the next 50 years as a devoted wife, mother, grandmother, friend, activist and steward of the environment. The last 44 of those years were in Palo Alto in the neighborhood she loved.

Ron and Katoko moved to Palo Alto, California in 1967. Ron was a computer programmer and spent most of his career working for SLAC (Stanford Linear Accelerator Center), Stanford University and finally RLG (Research Libraries Group) from which he retired in 2000. Ron and Katoko became members of Palo Alto Friends Meeting around 1969.

Through connections between SBSC (South Bay Sanctuary Covenant) and Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (Center for Exchange and Solidarity), Katoko was able to travel to El Salvador in March of 1999, March of 2004 and March of 2009 to monitor presidential elections. In February of 2011, she took her 16-year-old grandson to El Salvador to help build a school in a remote village. Katoko helped in the kitchen while Nathan worked on the building. *(This section was adapted from the memorial minutes of Ron and Katoko Sax)*

## **Nathan Simmons's reflection of the trip to El Salvador:**

I went into the trip to El Salvador thinking that I was going to help people. I came home knowing that they had helped me more than I could have ever helped them.

My grandma, Katoko, wanted to help people, but she had the wisdom to know that experiencing a world completely different from your own can change your perspective on life forever. That's what the trip to El Salvador did for me.

My grandma always encouraged me to seek discomfort so that I could see what it was like to suffer and therefore learn and grow. This trip was certainly uncomfortable, sleeping on hard surfaces in the heat and dealing with things I was never exposed to in my normal life. What I remember is that my grandma seemed so at peace and content in the midst of that discomfort.

Most of my identity at the time was as an athlete, so I think the things that had the biggest impact on me were experiencing the softball game and the daily soccer games. I had an ignorant preconceived notion that the people in La Loma were in constant suffering because they were living in poverty, but playing sports with the kids of the village showed me the true joy of life on their plateau.

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***You're asking me to help fund Quaker projects for education and wellbeing in El Salvador? Why? Shouldn't we put "America First" ???***

Many Americans ask questions like this seriously now. It's true, of course, that there are urgent needs in the United States. Catastrophic storms and fires driven by accelerating climate change have left many people homeless or forced to relocate. The new experience of empty shelves and meager choices in supermarkets inspires fears that the pandemic and a disrupted economy may leave middle-class Americans hearing a store clerk say what the poor of El Salvador have so often heard: *No hay* – there just isn't any. As this newsletter is being prepared, on average 1,400 Americans are dying each day from COVID-19, deaths made even more tragic as officials of the previous administration declare candidly that tens of thousands could be alive today had it not been for self-interested mismanagement at the highest levels. So shouldn't Americans keep our generosity to ourselves, within our own borders?

Readers of this newsletter know that an "America first" approach is short-sighted and ultimately self-defeating, as well as a betrayal of the deepest values we share – values that include the inherent worth of every person, community that excludes no one, and awareness of a universal truth articulated in words the New Testament attributes to Jesus: *Even as you have done it to the least of these...* International health experts remind us that pandemics are unavoidably global, defying nationalistic efforts to restore health in one or a few privileged countries while neglecting large populations that lack resources for prevention and treatment. Similarly, concentration of wealth by elite minorities while multitudes suffer increasing poverty guarantees that conflicts and crises will proliferate – and that is the present we humans are living right now, and the future we are crafting. It doesn't have to be this way.

When talented but poor young people in El Salvador can pursue educational success and find fulfilling vocations, fewer families will be separated and fewer desperate immigrants will seek asylum at the US border after surviving the life-threatening journey north through Mexico. In that way, generosity toward Salvadorans also helps to resolve divisive US domestic issues. Education in El Salvador costs a fraction of what it does in the US, so our modest budget brings big results, and your donations go a long way. We are not forced to choose between irrational nationalism and a broader perspective. Most who donate to the El Salvador Projects are also actively engaged and generous in their responses to domestic needs in the US.

So please, if you haven't donated to the El Salvador Projects recently, consider a gift as 2021 comes to an end. Just do what you can, knowing that no gift is too small to be meaningful, and every expression of kindness to a person in need ultimately enriches us all. The Committee is especially grateful to supporters of the Projects who are able to donate most or even all of the cost of a year at the university – about \$1,200.

Be safe and well in the year to come, and thank you for sustaining the El Salvador Projects.

Jamie Newton and Bill Bauriedel, for the El Salvador Projects Committee

YES! I WANT TO HELP SALVADORANS IMPROVE THEIR LIVES!

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