

## PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING

# EL SALVADOR PROJECTS

November 2023 Newsletter

WWW.PAFMELSALVADORPROJECTS.ORG

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

Happy Holidays to you all!

The message from the Director, Robert Broz has enabled us to see the work in El Salvador through the lens of his tour company. All seem intertwined but separate. His tour guide role has unintentionally acted as an advertisement for our educational program. A good amount of donations have come in through sharing his story. This has been a blessing to the projects. His presence in El Salvador gives him the direct experience with the students. Good guidance and a father figure is an added advantage for the students, for which we are grateful.

The historic visit of a beneficiary of the education project, Wilson Olmedo, to Palo Alto Friends Meeting last month was an indication that our work continues to bear fruit. As we heard an enthusiastic young man talk about how he succeeded despite all odds, it left us feeling good about our work. He is one of the many success stories which have been made possible by your continued contributions.

One of our committee members, Bill Bauriedel, has served dedicatedly as treasurer for nearly 25 years. Thanks Bill! Read more about Bill in our column *The Wind Beneath Our Wings*. Bill is retiring from the committee as life work calls him elsewhere. That said, if you feel called to serve on the committee, please contact me ([huldamuaka@hotmail.com](mailto:huldamuaka@hotmail.com)). We meet once a month via Zoom.

Last but not least, the letter of appeal links many recent occurrence stories together into a neatly woven narrative of our work and our need for more donations. As we are thankful for the good in our lives let us share it with the less fortunate. Together, let us educate more students in El Salvador and continue changing their lives and those of their families, their communities, and the world at large. Be blessed to bless!

Thank You.

### Director's Report



Robert Broz,  
Program Director

Dear friends and supporters,

We near the end of 2023 with troubled spirits for so many reasons. COVID is still present in our daily lives, our news feeds are filled with the war in Ukraine, more recently the outbreak of war and related violence between Israel and the Palestinians of Gaza, and – closer to home for us here in El Salvador – protests by tens of thousands in Guatemala after obvious attempts at electoral fraud in the recent presidential elections. I have decided not to add to our concerns with bad news about the political situation in El Salvador, which may seem trivial by comparison. I will leave the political-economic situation in little El Salvador for a future report, praying that those suffering from war, daily violence, and natural disasters will find peace and safety as this year comes to an end. As we approach the holidays and a new year, I want to share with you how my work in tourism often brings like-minded people into my life, allowing me in turn to share my work for Palo Alto Friends Meeting's El Salvador Projects. I hope some good news will bring happiness into your lives as it does mine, especially during such troubled times.

As usual, I will bring you up to date on our students, past and present, and the communities we work with, which I also find personally inspiring. I have a saying I share with people I meet, and more commonly as I get to know new clients. I tell them that although I am not very religious, I truly feel blessed in life. This is

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

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because of my work with our university students, who in a way become like children to me, and I become like a proud father to them. This is especially true when they graduate from college, get a new job, start their own business, marry, have children, etc. That combines with meeting travelers from around the world, the majority of whom I have found to be kindred spirits. I refer to these people as “do gooders” because to do good for others just seems so basic to their character. I show them the “Other El Salvador,” visiting such places as rural schools, daycare centers, small rural clinics, and birding in the agricultural lands of villages where we are guided on civil war tours by former FMLN guerrilla soldiers whose children we have helped to gain an education.

I started Gringo Tours back in 2007 as a hobby and to add some needed income for the family. Although the DIY webpage I’ve renewed four times is still wordy and not very professional, it keeps me busy with clients who seem to be looking for more than just a tour. Over these 15 years, dozens of clients have either become supporters of our work or have brought down donations that have gone directly to the schools or daycare centers in the communities where we work. I could fill a book telling you all the stories, many of which I have briefly mentioned in past newsletters. Today I will tell you about some that are especially memorable and inspiring for me. With the vast majority of clients, I find that by the end of a day or two I have made new friends. This is especially true of those I’ll describe below. To avoid unwanted attention to these past clients I will not use their real names, and I’ll illustrate the stories with some photos of beautiful places and birds of El Salvador. I am sure those mentioned will recognize their own stories, and I hope they will enjoy knowing how they have improved my life and the lives of those who benefit from our work in El Salvador.

Joseph and Linda, from south Florida, came to El Salvador in January of 2012 for a very short visit. I think it was only four nights. Joseph, a doctor, asked in advance if he could bring some medication he wanted to donate to a local hospital or clinic. I told him I had friends at the rural clinic in La Mora, a small village in Suchitoto. On our first full day here we stopped at the clinic and Joseph gave the medicines to the local doctors. They were happy to receive what turned out to be specialized blood pressure meds,

needed by the clinic. The full day tours continued, and every once in a while, Joseph asked about my work with the programs. At the time I just shared



Chinchontepeque Volcano

freely and thought “Wow, how cool, this guy wants to know more about me and not only about El Salvador.” When our days together ended, I felt uneasy about taking his payment, as I felt I had made new friends and not just gained income from the tours.

Several months went by before I received the first of many emails from Joseph. He asked me to reconfirm the amount needed to support one university student for a year, plus the administrative costs above that. I clarified, and he sent a second email saying that he had just sent a donation to support two students and a little extra for the administrative expenses. I got an emotional high I hadn't felt in years. Joseph’s support became one of our largest yearly donations, but the story doesn't end there. A few months later Joseph emailed that he and Linda were planning a trip to Bolivia. He asked if I knew of any programs like ours working in education there. The prior year at Pacific Yearly Meeting I had met the local director of the Quaker Bolivia Educational Fund, and I forwarded her contact information to Joseph. A couple of months later he thanked me for the contact, informing me that he and Linda were now supporting two university students in Bolivia!

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

Since that first visit, Joseph and I have become good friends. We've both had severe challenges. After Joseph's wife Linda passed away and he had stresses with some of his adult children, he came for a second visit to just get away and spend a few days with my wife Tita and me. On a third visit, he brought one of his sons. I had some health issues and was diagnosed with advanced COPD, a smoker's disease. I accepted the diagnosis with no second opinion after recovering from walking pneumonia and not having smoked in over 10 years. Starting a changed life with oxygen prescribed 24/7 and feeling pretty depressed, I wrote my report for our newsletter explaining my situation to you, our supporters. Joseph, who had now been on our mailing list for years, immediately sent me an email asking to see my medical records and an explanation of what my doctor here had said. This was only a couple months after I had seen Joseph here in Suchitoto. Within 24 hours of receiving digital copies of my records he assured me that I was fine unless I went back to smoking or started running full time behind the smoky buses in El Salvador (a joke). He said, "I'm going to tell you what I tell any male over 50 with extra weight: start doing some regular exercise, eat healthier, and see a doctor regularly, and do not go back to the quack doctor who told you that you needed oxygen 24/7". Joseph's emotional and professional support sealed our friendship.

After that trip Joseph and his son went to Africa, and within a year of that trip they started a nonprofit working in health, water, education, and women's empowerment in Africa. The last I heard his son was the acting director of the non-profit! Joseph continues to provide financial support, and although we have not shared personal emails in some time, I do await a future visit. I should mention that Joseph has been fortunate, as he has actually met a few of the students he supported, on three trips after his initial visit. Joseph, I hope you are smiling as you read this particular newsletter, and I do hope to see you here in Suchitoto in the future.

Jumping in time over a decade now and looking at some post-COVID travelers, it seems that perhaps with so many changes in life because of COVID more kindred spirit travelers are coming to El Salvador.

A modern couple, Sandy and Martha, planned their first trip to El Salvador in August of 2022. In their last

email before arriving, they asked if they could bring school supplies, knowing of world shortages and supply chain problems. When they arrived, I found a full-sized suitcase filled with everything from pens and pencils to calculators, actually too much for any



Wilson and Robert with clients' donation

one school or daycare center. We had a very full schedule, and they agreed that Tita and I should decide when and where the supplies could go. They were not really interested in being involved with a direct donation. We ended up sharing the supplies with a daycare center in Santa Anita and with the K-3rd grade classes at the school in El Bario. Sandy and Martha, who live on the East Coast, are married and have, I believe, 7 children from their past marriages. They became almost instant friends to Tita and me. Just a few months after their visit I got a surprise message that they were coming back for a long weekend to celebrate their anniversary. No tours this time, just relaxing in their favorite place, Suchitoto. More recently they have scheduled some tours and activities around Christmas, so they are invited to Christmas dinner with us. For this trip they will bring one of their youngest daughters, around 17, and we have planned some family outings with my now 18-year-old daughter. I would estimate a dozen or more clients like Sandy and Martha have brought school supplies over the years that we have been in business.

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

The last family I want to tell you about is unusual, as I rarely get what we call here Hermanos Lejanos (faraway brothers and sisters), a local term given to Salvadorans returning to visit their country. Since COVID and reopening the borders and tourism I have had several Salvadorans hiring me for tours and transfers. One recent family trip was arranged by Maria, who left El Salvador in 1986 and now resides in Palo Alto, California. I had been recommended by a childhood friend as a “must use for your trip”. Maria had planned a trip with her two daughters, three nieces from Switzerland, her mother who lives in Nicaragua, and an aunt from San Salvador, so a diverse group of eight. I believe it was the first visit to El Salvador for her daughters and nieces. Maria wanted them to learn a little about their roots, and I think also to understand why she and part of her



Sister Peggy O'Neill with CA State Sen Josh Becker

family left El Salvador in the 80s. It was truly a pleasure to be able to share with them a little about El Salvador, the civil war and politics, other nonprofits (like the Art Center for Peace, and Santa Cruz al Salvador), as well as about my work in education with our programs. On a day we spent in Suchitoto, I arranged for a trilingual tourism student from the Santa Cruz al Salvador projects to join us so she could practice her French and English and spend some time with Maria's daughters and nieces, all of them in the same general age group. We also had the pleasure (not planned) of meeting and talking to Sister Peggy O'Neill, a Sister of Charity nun who has lived in Suchitoto since 1986 and who is the force behind the Art Center for Peace, a nonprofit of which I am also a founding member. Maria left me a stellar review, but

even more motivating was hearing of her substantial donation to our projects and that her oldest daughter is interested in visiting or perhaps volunteering in El Salvador in the future.



Anna Margarita and Cristina Del Carmen  
with black vultures on the fountain

I was surprised recently by how my work and participation in tourism here sometimes overlaps even with the local youth from Suchitoto. I think I have mentioned in the past that I also supervise/oversee a scholarship fund from a group in California called Santa Cruz al Salvador. This has brought me into contact with an additional 15 to 18 university students each year. About a year ago, Anna Margarita of the Santa Cruz program, who is in her last year at Don Bosco University in a program that teaches French and English for tourism, asked if she could come on tours with me to get more experience. Anna has now shadowed me on perhaps six Suchitoto walking tours, as well as joining me with the Bahamas Water Polo Team for a full day outing to Western El Salvador's famous Ruta de Flores (Flower Route). More recently, and with the support of a good friend and biologist, Melvin Bonilla, we have started training Anna Margarita as well as Cristina del Carmen, also from the Santa Cruz program and an English major in her last year of studies, as bird guides. I have been personally financing this training in birding as well as Anna's basic training as a tour guide. Once Anna Margarita graduates, she will most likely be my first full-time employee, providing local tours as well as helping in communications and social media

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

management. I hope this work together will open up doors for both of us as she gains needed experience and income, and as Gringo Tours grows with a need for more bilingual guides.

So now talking about local youth seems the perfect place to transition into news about our continued work with youth and education in rural El Salvador. Let me start with our section of “Where they are today” and bring you up to date on three of our past students.

Wilson Olmedo, a young man from El Barrio who went through our program several years ago, was recently in the U.S. on a Fulbright scholarship. I have highlighted him a few times over the years, and I am confident that this will not be the last time I share about his successes. Wilson has been working at the school in El Barrio for several years, mainly as the administrative assistant. Throughout that time, he has also taught English and Computer classes to the middle and high school students. Simultaneously, he continued his studies. Now with a B.S. in English, he will soon finish a virtual master’s program in Technology in Education. During his seven weeks in the U.S., mostly at Montana State University learning more and teaching both Spanish and English at local high schools, Wilson took a long weekend to visit friends and family in the S.F. Bay area, and he included time to speak on September 15th at the Palo Alto Friends Meetinghouse. It was amazing for me to



Wilson Olmedo in Palo Alto

see him virtually from Suchitoto, with several supporters participating in person or from their homes virtually. This was the first time one of our university students has been in Palo Alto in person, a truly historic event. Those who heard Wilson speak saw what I have described in the past, his motivation so strong that he has pushed his entire family and those at the school where he works to follow their dreams. He is an outstanding example of the positive

qualities I’ve seen in many past recipients. His level of motivation is exceptional, but I see similar potential in the majority of students we support.

One of these I know will go far is Giovanni Chevez, who has now defended his thesis and awaits only the formal act of graduation. Giovanni is a law student who watched Wilson speak in Palo Alto via Zoom from my house. When I asked what he wanted to do after graduation, he answered “I want to become a prosecuting attorney in El Salvador.” I asked him if he was certain of that, given the current political situation and knowing that he might have to compromise his principles. He responded that he “would never compromise my values!” His partner, Deysi Avalos, who is also awaiting her graduation and was also present to see Wilson, responded to the same question: “I hope to continue learning French,



Deysi Avalos and Giovanni Chevez

as the French school where I did my professional practice is offering me a job as the school’s psychologist. This is perfect, as it will be a good start with decent pay and allow me to open my own practice in San Salvador in the afternoons and weekends that I will have free.” Both have held back on the romantic part of their relationship until after graduation, but they both agreed that they will one day get married, so yes, I have that proud father feeling once again!

And now I’ll bring you up to speed on our continued work with those we support in rural El Salvador. This year we will finish with 15 university students, all doing very well in their respective universities and programs. Of our current students six will graduate or

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

finish in our program in December, leaving only nine continuing students in 2024. This will help us manage with the reduced budget we are likely to have after the two recent years in which our budget has been substantially more than the income from donations, thus reducing the small reserve we try to maintain. As I write this report I have yet to receive any applications, after opening the process on October 1st as in past years. Since June I have had two direct inquiries about our program, one from an interested parent and another from a university student who is about halfway through her studies. This I see as part of decreased interest from graduating high school students since COVID and the virtual studies that started in 2020. This was worsened when the National University (UES) continued virtual studies in 2023 because of recent remodeling and improvements to campus infrastructure for the Central American Games, which concluded in June. I expect to receive several applications before the Jan 15th deadline. In El Bario, where Wilson works, I have heard news of some eight of the graduating high school students taking the entrance exam at the National University, but results and second round testing won't be in until late November. Like our committee members in Palo Alto, I always have faith that if we have many deserving applicants a way will open to support them all. At least, this has been our experience in the past.

Support to the school in El Bario was less than budgeted in 2023, and with the exception of the funds we provided for Wilson to teach English and Computer classes as well as some sports equipment, we did not support the extra Saturday tutoring classes as in the past few years. This was mostly my responsibility, as I had hoped to open the program to a much larger group of students and offer the classes at the high school in Suchitoto, but the time spent with no firm decision by the current principal there



El Bario Youth Group visit injured elder

made the school year pass and now finish without results. This program will resume once again in the early part of the 2024 academic year in the school in El Bario, with full support from Wilson and Principal Rafael. This Saturday tutoring done by teachers from Suchitoto has proven to improve the academics at the school and the results on the national high school exit exam, as well as increase students' chances of passing the National University entrance exams.

It makes me happy to report that the youth group in El Bario is once again growing and very active. They continue to work together, with a small fund we provide to visit elders in the community. With support from other groups they are active in many different areas, and it seems like more youth are coming to the weekly meetings they hold. I am pushing them to form a newer board of directors, or perhaps look at a co-coordinator and committees to



Yeni Gonzalez

get more of the group involved in the decision-making process and the general direction of the group. I have seen the group go from five or six participants to close to 40 over the years we have worked in El Bario, due mostly to the

leadership of the group. These are generally older youth, a term that in El Salvador can apply to people 10 to 30 years of age. For the past 2-3 years Yeni Gonzales has been the leader of the youth group in the community. She is very active within the community as well as with other youth and environmental groups in Suchitoto. I am trying to motivate others who come to weekly meetings to get involved, so it's not all on Yeni's shoulders. My suggestion at a meeting I attended in September seemed welcomed by the group, but as usual no one volunteered. I am hopeful that the group will continue to grow, and that the modest support we offer will continue to be well received. One of the things we have pending is a possible visit

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

by a new Service-Learning trip to El Salvador, and for that we have always needed to coordinate activities with the youth group and community in El Barrio. My mentioning the possible visit opened new interest, as these trips always include the direct intercultural exchanges between North Americans and Salvadorans from the communities where we have worked.

Our last trip was initially scheduled for the summer of 2020, then postponed due to the COVID Pandemic. It seems likely that Nate and Sarah Secret, our North American coordinators, will plan a trip for the summer of 2025. As always, I hope this will be an intergenerational trip, with youth and young-at-heart adults from 14 to 100 invited. Dates will be decided soon, but generally 10 to 14 days in June or July have worked for the majority. If you or someone you know is interested in joining our 2025 summer trip to El Salvador, please contact Nate Secret at

deboodude@gmail.com or Robert Broz at rpbroz@gmail.com . Once we have firm dates and our formal trip package, it will be found on our website at:

<https://pafmelsalvadorprojects.org/service-trips/> . As I always mention, if you would like to come to El Salvador to explore or to see our programs at work, meet our students or visit the communities on your own, just let me know.

Once again I thank you for your continued interest and support for our work in El Salvador. I do hope this newsletter reaches you at a time when you can read it with care and enjoy the good news that is often all too scarce during these difficult times.

In peace and with gratitude,  
Robert Broz, Project Director



Birding in the mangroves



Wilson  
Sketch by Trudy Reagan



Rufous Collared Sparrow



7  
Chaparrastique Volcano

# The Wind Beneath our Wings

## Bill Bauriedel

*- Bill Bauriedel and the El Salvador Projects Working Group*

Bill Bauriedel knew Carmen for several years before he became active with the El Salvador committee in 1998. Carmen Broz was passionate about working with poor families in rural areas. Her passion was contagious and when she asked for help it was almost impossible to say "no." In 1998 she gave several programs, one of which was at a shared house on Bryant Street in Palo Alto. Lynn Mitchell and Peggy Thompson were living there at that time. Peggy reported that she was moving to Santa Cruz and needed someone to take over keeping track of the donations for Carmen's work. Carmen looked around and asked if anyone had computer skills and could keep track of the donations. In 1998 there were about 40 donors and Bill thought that would be something he could take on and so he did. He moved the "accounting" from a simple Word file to Excel and then realized that donors need to be officially thanked with a letter and a statement that their donations would be tax exempt. Bill helped Carmen and others persuade the Palo Alto Friends Meeting to make the El Salvador Projects a project of the Meeting and allow donations be made to the Meeting with the memo line designating the El Salvador Projects. Bill wrote many thank you letters by hand for many years until Tim Huntley took over thank you letter writing in 2017 and Marion Bowers Newton took over from Tim in 2018 and has been faithfully doing the letter writing ever since.

Bill's optimism helped ensure that there would be enough money in the budget and in the reserves in most years to allow several additional students to attend college. This was a little risky because the money wasn't a sure thing and the safe thing to do would have been to not allow a few students to benefit from the loans that the Committee approved. Bill believes that it is important to put faith into practice wherever a match of project needs and his skills overlapped. He also has been very active with the Friends House Moscow Support Association and gets the same kind of fulfillment from serving on that board.



The most important benefit of this service has been to get to know others with these common interests. He feels he has gotten so much more from being part of the El Salvador projects committee than he has given and feels very close to each member of the Committee. In September of this year he decided that it was time to step down from the Committee due to other pressing priorities in his life. He is thankful that David Hinson has taken over the Treasurer responsibilities and expanded the reporting to make it more transparent. He is grateful to all the Committee members for the valuable work they are doing.

We are deeply grateful for Bill's many years of faithful service to this project, for his calming presence at committee meetings, for his warmth and generosity in hosting countless meetings in his home, for his careful shepherding of project resources, for his integrity, and most of all for his friendship.



***Doing Good... and finding a spiritual refuge among kindred spirits***

A Florida doctor and his wife bring specialized medications to a rural clinic during their first short visit to El Salvador. A few months later, they donate support for two university students in our program, with extra for administrative costs. After several more months, Robert learns that thanks to the connection he made for them in Bolivia they are also assisting two university students through the Quaker program there. Some years later, the doctor’s medical expertise releases Robert from the burden of constant oxygen and limited activity due to an incorrect diagnosis by a local health care provider. Another couple donate school supplies, fall in love with El Salvador, and plan another trip when their teenaged daughter will join them. A Salvadoran who emigrated to the US decades ago hosts a tour for her extended family, then sends a significant donation to the El Salvador Projects. Robert describes these *kindred spirits* who are introduced to “the other El Salvador” through his tours as “do gooders” because doing good is central to their character, rising spontaneously into action when they recognize needs they can help to meet.

Young people who are educated with financial assistance from your donations gain much more than knowledge and marketable skills, as important as those benefits are. Their awareness of community needs and opportunities to contribute to the wellbeing of others is nourished by training and example. Robert’s report tells of a student who is learning to introduce visitors to El Salvador as Robert does, with guided tours that include “the other El Salvador;” a law student determined to bring integrity to El Salvador’s legal system; a gifted and highly motivated graduate who serves as a dynamic model for others as he pursues his own higher degrees; an advanced student who has a job offer to serve as a school psychologist upon graduation; a youth group leader whose energy and vision have sustained and expanded the youth group in El Bario. You’ve read about lots of others in previous newsletters, and you’ll read about more here in the future if this newsletter successfully encourages donations to keep this program flourishing.

What do I mean by the phrase “finding a spiritual refuge among kindred spirits”? I refer to that inner sanctuary of deep peace that we discover when we are in the company of people who inspire us, give us courage, and bring out the best in us. When we join together in a community of common endeavor, guided by values and vision that validate our lives with meaning and purpose, we enter a place of refuge that can sustain us despite the chaos and suffering that surge around us in these troubled times. Although you may not be personally acquainted with other supporters of the El Salvador Projects, be assured that we are linked to one another in a living network of kindred spirits.

***Please continue to sustain hope and light in El Salvador with your donations!***

*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 \_\_\_\_\_

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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**Inside:**

Page 1: **Clerk's Letter and Director's Report**

Page 8: **Wind Beneath our Wings: Bill Bauriedel**

Page 9: **Appeal**



El Bario Youth Group recent outing