

# PALO ALTO FRIENDS MEETING

# EL SALVADOR PROJECTS

June 2023 Newsletter

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## The Clerk's letter, by Hulda Muaka

Greetings to you all!

It's that time of the year when we come to you again, with updates of our work in El Salvador and the political environment that we operate in. Thank you very much for your contributions that go towards changing the lives of youth from under-privileged families in El Salvador.

The founder of the Palo Alto Friends El Salvador Projects, Carmen Broz, envisioned education as a tool for changing lives and rebuilding her country of origin, then suffering from civil war. As we carry on this vision, we see firsthand the results of positive changes in individuals, families, communities, and the country at large. This newsletter brings you firsthand information from the Director, Robert Broz, son of the founder, who resides in El Salvador and works one on one with the students. Please read his report and see how far we have come!

Collectively, we can make the changes that the world needs. The story of The Wind Beneath our Wings illustrates how interwoven our lives can be, with each chipping in what skills they have. The Teen Service trips that we had in the past and hope to resume in the near future were eye openers to the youth and young-at-heart adults from America who went to El Salvador, and vice versa, the El Salvador youth who had so much to teach. Lots of lives were changed by this experience.

Finally, our letter of appeal says it all. It notes that the political situation that we operate in sometimes hampers our progress, but the struggle continues.

Please donate to this program, with its focus on education and overall wellbeing, and together we will continue to change lives and make this world a better place.

Thank You!

## Director's Report



Robert Broz,  
Program Director

Dear friends/supporters:

I begin this new report feeling inspired and encouraged by many aspects of my life and work, despite the continuing deterioration of political and economic conditions in El Salvador. I will happily share with you my appreciation of like-minded travelers who have visited recently, each in their own way making the

world a better place, often surprising me with spontaneous acts of generosity. You will also learn about the recent successes of Wilson Olmedo, a past recipient of assistance from our programs whose service and achievements fill me with hope. As the 2023 academic year continues, I am greatly encouraged to recognize in the students we now support the great potential I saw in Wilson when he began his academic preparation. I remember vividly the poverty and malnutrition of post-war subsistence living in the villages where we started our work back in the 1990s. Today I see them as well-organized, developed communities, most with several small businesses, improved schools, and much more modern housing. It brings me great satisfaction to know that our programs contributed to these positive changes. I'm grateful that I can start my report with uplifting experiences and heartening accounts of students and visitors to El Salvador before I bring you up to date on the troubling realities that confront Salvadorans currently.

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

Since 2007 I have owned and operated Gringo Tours, a small tour company in El Salvador. Over the years, my reports have mentioned what I refer to as “like-minded travelers”, and because fortunately the vast majority of my clients have fallen into that category it has been easy for me to show them what I call “the other El Salvador”. Often this involves visiting a school, a clinic, an agricultural cooperative, and even families in the communities where our programs have worked. Let me share a bit about two such visits just recently, in 2023.

Fred W. and his family from Canada came to explore El Salvador for several days. After our first day together, Fred expressed an interest in education, so I took them to visit the K-12 school we support in El Barío. When we met with some of the teachers, many of them former university scholarship recipients, I actually felt a little embarrassed when one of them, Ana Cecilia, said very directly “A donation for school supplies would be very much welcomed.” I hesitated, then translated her words to Fred, his wife, and their children. Fred asked me in English if he could leave a cash donation, so I checked with our former student, Wilson Olmedo, who was showing us around. He said it would be best to support the teacher/parent association Fred pulled out his wallet and gave \$200, saying his donation was for any uncovered expense the school had. Still



Wilson Olmedo receiving supplies from Bill J.

embarrassed, but with a big smile, I told him how far that money would go for basic supplies that the government’s school budget does not include. Later in the week, Fred told me that part of the reason they decided to use my company was my work in social development. A few days later Fred’s wife told me that Fred does not talk much about

what he does, then told me about an internship program he started with indigenous peoples in his

part of Canada some 15 years ago that has changed the lives of several dozen over the years. We shared a beer together, speaking of how the world would be a much better place if everybody gave just a little to help others.

Bill J., a solo traveler from the Atlanta area, told me at the very start of our email exchange that he wanted me to be his guide and show him “the real El Salvador,” although he also wanted to see some of the touristy parts of the country. Two days before he arrived, Bill said he would be bringing a suitcase of school supplies and clothing, hoping that I would know of an organization that could use them. When Bill arrived, I asked him if he would like to deliver the supplies directly, adding that it would be on the way for one of our outings. Bill works in systems technology, so besides visiting the school to drop off the supplies to Wilson, we also visited Ruben Lopez, an IT major from some 10 years ago who now works for *Indeed*, a US-based company, from his home office in El Barío. They talked technology, and since Ruben has learned English I just left them



Bill J. with Robert’s wife’s family

to share about their respective jobs. Bill was so interested in knowing about El Salvador and its people that he even came to visit my wife’s family on a day he had planned to just rest. He loved my father-in-law, Alejandro, who talked to him in Spanish non-stop even though Bill understood very little.

I’ve mentioned Wilson Olmedo a few times here, and you may remember hearing about him in past newsletters. He seems unstoppable, never tires, is always full of energy, and looks like he won’t slow down anytime soon. I have chosen to feature Wilson in the “where they are today” section of this newsletter, and don’t be surprised if in the future his

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

successes make him the subject of yet another article!

After earning a two-year vocational degree, Wilson went on to graduate from the University of El Salvador with honors as an English teacher. Last year he participated in a Fulbright scholarship program managed in coordination with the US Embassy. This *Excellence and Achievement* program aims to improve teaching skills and the implementation of technology in teaching in foreign countries. Basic English is required, and teachers represent four subject areas. At the end of the course all students participate in a competition, explaining what they have learned and how they plan to implement that in



Wilson Olmedo Excellence and Achievement Fulbright.

their classes. Wilson won first place out of close to fifty participants! He and other winners from over 80 countries will participate in a 6-week program in the US where they share their techniques and fine-tune teaching skills. Finally, they will be put to the test,

teaching classes at US high schools. Besides this new success, Wilson has been elected to preside over Suchitoto's Youth Scholarship Association ABESUCHI, a dream of my deceased friend Frank Cummings, who left funds for its founding and some years of scholarships he had set up. After several years, the association is now looking for outside financial support. It recently received a grant from the Focus Central America Foundation for seven scholarships for 2-year and 3-year technical programs for youth in Suchitoto. As the legal representatives of ABESUCHI, Wilson and one other board member went to a weekend event in Costa Rica where representatives of non-profit organizations around Central America met to share about their programs as well as getting to meet and thank the private foundation's founders. Wilson is now applying for another Fulbright scholarship, this time to obtain a Master's in English from a US University. If approved, this will most likely be for the 2024-25 academic school year.

I know one day Wilson will not be working at the school in El Barío, as he has now for several years as the Administrative Assistant, also teaching English and Computer Science to middle and high school students. I also know that he will be missed by both the students and staff at the school. This will be a loss for many, but I know in my heart that he will continue to help those around him, making the world a better place for those in his path.

I see potential like Wilson's in the majority of our university students as well as in many of the community leaders, so let's take a look at our programs as they are now, in 2023. We continue to work with the school of El Barío, supporting the Youth Group when requested and providing support for both the kindergarten and high school graduations (see photos of both 2022 graduating classes). We will most likely purchase some more



Kindergarten Graduation

sports equipment for the school, as well as funding Saturday classes for students who want a better chance to pass the National University's entrance exam. As in 2022, most of our university students have developed their social work hours in coordination

with the school in El Barío or public rural schools in their communities. For personal reasons and with travelers, I often visit the communities of Santa Anita, El Gigante, and Jocoaitique, where it brings me great pleasure to see how these communities have developed. The ties we have built for more than three decades are long-term. One example was the surprise visit of Luis Chicas, father of Luis Chicas, Jr., who went through our program some 10 years ago. Luis was in Suchitoto for a seminar and came by to say hi and let me know how the family was doing. On a different note, the son of one of our US committee members will be visiting El Salvador and has requested some home stays in one of our



## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

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communities. He will spend time getting to know El Salvador, discovering its culture, history, and foods, and meeting many of the people we have worked with. I am hopeful that through his time here he will better understand how his mother, Trudy, came to love El Salvador starting back in the 1980s.

Since the start of our no-interest university student loan program, most of our annual budget is given directly to students to offset the expenses needed for them to obtain their university degrees, and so it continues in 2023. We started the academic year with 11 continuing students and accepted 6 new applicants. Jeacqueline Alas, who suspended her studies in 2022, may enroll in the second semester, which would bring us to a total of 18 students. Of those studying this year, 6 will finish in our program or graduate in December. This is good news, opening new spots for applicants for the 2024 academic year. Of our 6 new students, all but one are doing well academically. Johanna, a first year medical student, had some problems with her first exams in April. I have connected her with two other first-year med students from another program, as well as put her in touch with our recent graduate Dr. Milton Palma and Keira Pineda, a 7th year medical student. I hope that she will recover, gain confidence, and be able to pass her first semester courses. It is always for this first semester that I worry most about our new students, both academically and emotionally. Most have been the best of their class in high school, but then everything is new, with much more advanced studies and being alone among hundreds of other students from around the country. That said, I always enjoy seeing how the students in our program change from timid young boys and girls to outspoken, mature, and responsible adults ready to conquer and change the world that surrounds them. For many, living in our coed student house in San Salvador is what helps them learn to adapt and live harmoniously under difficult situations and not-so-large living quarters.

Our coed student house is getting more and more use as schools return to in-person classes. This semester we have 10 students using the house full time and another 4 or 5 who use the house in San Salvador only when they have laboratories or exams. By next semester, when all faculties at the National University return to normal classes, I think our house

will once again reach its maximum limit and all 22 beds will be used.

Throughout the years I have found that my relationship with our university students becomes more than just the roles of project director and scholarship recipients. This emotional attachment is not automatic, and I find takes time to develop, sometimes years and otherwise just a few meetings and a semester or two. Over time I find this personal/emotional attachment happening with most of our students. This year is no different, and when one of our bright young second-year students, Wilson Casco (yes, the same first name as Wilson Olmedo) asked to speak with me, my heart dropped. In the past, this has meant something like "I am going to the US undocumented" or "I am getting married and won't be able to continue my studies", so I am generally prepared for the news that the student will not be continuing in our program. What I found when talking to Wilson Casco did mean he would be dropping out, but the reason was much more understandable and emotional. Wilson explained to me that his mother had been diagnosed with advanced brain cancer with little hope of any viable treatment and an estimated life expectancy of no more than 4-5 months. Although the family has decided to try to raise funds for an operation, the doctor says it most likely will not be effective and could even cause her death. (If you would like to help the Casco family with the cost of the operation there is a GoFundMe campaign at <https://gofund.me/259831c2>.) Wilson, the oldest at home, told me he just wants to spend as much time with his mother as he can. I have told Wilson that I hope someday he can continue his studies, and when that time comes he should let me know so I can see if our programs can assist him again.

Before moving on to current events in El Salvador I would like to include three short announcements:

- 1) I will be presenting from El Salvador by Zoom, with several of our students, for an Interest Group at the annual gathering of Intermountain Yearly Meeting (IMYM). This is scheduled for Friday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, from 1:30 to 3:00 p.m. I will be joined by two of our committee members, Jamie and Marion

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

Newton. We will record this event, and it may be possible to post the video on our website in the future so that you can view it.

- 2) I will also be sharing an Interest Group at Pacific Yearly Meeting with Friends House Mexico, probably between July 21 and July 26. I will once again participate virtually from El Salvador, joined by 1 or 2 university students.
- 3) Nate Secrest hopes to organize a service-learning trip to El Salvador during the summer of 2024. Those interested can contact Nate at: [secrestnm@guilford.edu](mailto:secrestnm@guilford.edu).

I often tell people I meet that I have a truly blessed life. I meet like-minded travelers from around the world, and I'm able to see local youth – many who might not have even finished high school without our support – become young professionals with a desire to improve their own lives, families, and El Salvador. This is inspiring even in a time when the political and economic conditions of El Salvador are discouraging to many.

I have found myself in a quandary on how best to help you understand the complexities and uncertainties of El Salvador today. After decades of feeling that El Salvador was improving for the majority and that I could express my opinions freely, even in my daily life I am now cautious. With that understanding, I will do my best to acquaint you with the realities I observe and experience. I'll start with changes in El Salvador since my last report, in November of 2022.

As you know, I am a strong critic of policies of President Bukele and his New Ideas party that I see as weakening democracy. At the same time, some of their initiatives seem clearly to be positive and good for El Salvador. Two of these have improved the quality of education in the public schools. In late 2020, with the whole world dealing with the pandemic and trying to keep education open to the kids, President Bukele started pushing technology and improving connectivity. By the end of 2021, El Salvador had developed a completely virtual/digital curriculum for public K-12 schools. As a parent with access to the system, I have ventured into the

programs for elementary and high school classes in the four main subjects: math, social science, language, and science. Frankly, the system is wonderful. Although in-person classes are again open, El Salvador can now offer virtual classes to an unlimited number of students. Unfortunately, this has not stemmed a decline that started in 2014 with students simply not enrolling in public schools. For 14-18 year olds, in 2022 non-enrollment ranged from 20% to 60%. Despite the increasing and prolonged decline in enrollment, a phenomenon which is yet to be understood, another good central government program was implemented during this same period. In 2021 El Salvador started providing laptops to 4th-12th graders and tablets to K-3rd graders, and in 2023 all preschool students (four, five, and six-year olds) received tablets as well! In less than three years,



Children with new tablets  
(Government of El Salvador)

in this country where the minimum wage is only \$360/month, with many “informal” workers making much less, and most would have

never been able to purchase these devices for their children, El Salvador has bridged the digital/technical gap. The government says that over 770,000 laptops and 298,000 tablets have been given out, many under the new program “Growing Up Together,” which makes education the legal responsibility of schools, students, and parents! You can imagine that even those who are typically critical of the President and the congress controlled by his New Ideas party would find this nothing less than wonderful. So why are many opposed to current political trends? Let's explore just a few developments of concern.

With complete lack of fiscal transparency, no one outside the government's inner circle knows how El Salvador continues to operate. It is clear that the benefits I've described could not have been accomplished with funds from the limited annual budget of the Ministry of Education, which for decades has not been enough to cover even basic needs of the public schools. The same is said of the

## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

many new major road projects being built in different parts of the country, where most observers consider these impossible with the limited funds from the Ministry of Public works, and even with funds from a gas tax that was removed with the onset of the war in Ukraine. Some critics wonder if funds from China could be involved, or perhaps hidden funding from Bitcoin millionaires who want the law that made Bitcoin legal tender in El Salvador to become a success and hope that pushes the value of the cryptocurrencies even higher. It appears that El Salvador is selling out to China, with the new 50-million dollar library moving along, all constructed with Chinese steel, cement, labor, and machinery, leaving nothing to El Salvador but the building itself. It is also clear that Bitcoin investors are buying apartments in the cities, beach rental properties on the coast, and land around the country, and in this way laundering their virtual cryptocurrencies into real estate and cash-generating rental properties. These practices have little benefit for El Salvador's economy besides limited salaries for caretakers and construction workers. Fortunately, the projected Bitcoin city has been put on hold, but we still hear some Bukele supporters talking about El Salvador becoming the Dubai of Central America, as if that would be a good thing for the country.

Let me now turn to what worries many people the most. Currently, El Salvador is advertised as one of the safest countries in the world, with a historic reduction in violence and gang-related crime – but what has this meant to the average Salvadoran?

Bukele's government now sells El Salvador as the model for the world on how to reduce crime, claiming that today it has a nearly zero murder rate and common crime is at a historic low. This was made possible by a law that eliminates due process and many basic constitutional rights. Human rights groups around the world have spoken out against Bukele's prolonged use of this type of martial law, which was originally written to be used under wartime conditions, is normally valid for only 30 days, and must be approved by Congress. Since March of 2022 it has been renewed by the New Ideas-controlled Congress over a dozen times, with an estimated 70,000 arrests being made since then (the actual number is not known). At one point Amnesty International estimated that more than 100,000

Salvadorans were in jail, close to 2% of the total population, at a time when there was only space for some 30,000 in existing prisons. The massive increase and lack of space has led to accusations of inhumane conditions and human rights violations for detainees.

Bukele's solution – a well-kept secret until mid-April, when the US State Department published documents proving that Bukele and some of his staff had negotiated with gang leaders prior to the last elections – is a huge prison. It's now being enthusiastically promoted by the government as a



MegaCarcel- New Prison  
(Government of El Salvador)

Megaprison, set to hold 40,000 or more prisoners; isolating inmates from society in a basic but high security prison. It seems that Bukele's solution for El Salvador's longtime gang problems will be life in prison for an estimated 60,000 alleged members. It gets worse: On January 11th the Salvadoran Attorney General had police arrest five members of the communal organization ADES. The charges, from a murder case dating back to 1989, would be considered war crimes by many. ADES and its members were actively protesting mining in a part of the country where mines could contaminate the drinking water source for thousands. The protest came after rumors that the central government was considering permitting a foreign mining company to start operations in El Salvador. Some ten years ago, Pacific Rim had its permits revoked in the same area after the previous ARENA government had taken kickbacks to allow the cyanide extraction of gold ore. The five who have been arrested under the Law of Exception are still being held with no date set for their hearing. This is the first clear case of the law being used for political persecution and to quiet those who publicly oppose Bukele, although local and



## Palo Alto Friends Meeting - El Salvador Projects

international human rights groups estimate that some 5000 citizens with no criminal background have been arrested over the last year. What worries many and is much more concerning is the precedent that may be set if the ADES activists are found guilty for this wartime crime in 1989. This would open the door to arresting and prosecuting cases of thousands of alleged war crimes by Bukele's opponents within the FMLN and ARENA parties, revoking the amnesty law that was passed in 1993.

Although the current situation in El Salvador has made many people less vocal, from fear of being silenced if they are publicly critical of Bukele and his New Ideas party, I think that many hope that through the remaining democratic processes El Salvador will come to its senses. I continue to hope that all involved will realize that there are better ways to change a country than locking up tens



Protestors of detained ADES activists  
(ADES Santa Marta)

of thousands of people, selling out to China, or betting on cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin to improve El Salvador. As I mentioned above, some steps are already in place, such as improving the education system and making it accessible to the majority of Salvadoran children. I am sure that many of our graduates, current university students, and even elementary and high school students at the schools we support will be active in making El Salvador a better place for all Salvadorans.

On that positive note, I will conclude this report. Despite the darkness of diminished civil rights, the light of education brightens tiny El Salvador. Your donations sustain that light, as our stories of students and graduates illustrate. My mother, Carmen Broz, emphasized that education is the fastest way to lift people from poverty. In that same spirit, I believe we all recognize that educated people are motivated to claim the full rights of citizenship in a democracy, for others as well as for themselves – and education empowers people to act effectively for justice and a sustainable, better world.

With appreciation for your continuing support – Robert Broz



# The Wind Beneath our Wings

## Barbara Babin

- *Trudy Reagan*, the El Salvador Projects

Barbara Babin has served as a member of the El Salvador Projects committee, serving several terms from the committee's inception (1990) until a few years after she left Palo Alto (2010). As a donor, Barbara and her husband, Jim Avera, have supported many of our students over the years. Barbara's life has been full and she drew on that richness in her service.

Barbara was raised in Oakland. Though her parents were not churchgoers, when she desired to go, her father took her to the Methodist Church. The teen group there planned their own program and events. When her family traveled to Louisiana to visit relatives during the Civil Rights movement, Barbara saw Jim Crow firsthand. In high school she joined a race relations club and later became disillusioned when she found her congregation had little interest in helping the poor.

She continued her interest in social issues after high school. At UC Berkeley she majored in sociology. When she became a teacher, there was a need for bilingual teachers. Barbara knew some Spanish and took summer workshops in Mexico and Costa Rica.

Barbara, a violin player, started playing country fiddle in the 1980's, and then a folk music friend introduced her to Palo Alto Friends Meeting. She was attracted by the silence, but also the deep involvement with social issues. She continued playing fiddle, and folk danced at Planina, a folk dance hideaway belonging to Friends Hiram and Arden Pierce in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The Pierces added a little worship time to their folk dance weekends and explained Quaker values. There she met Jim Avera, a software engineer, and they began to play Bulgarian music together. One Sunday, Jim showed up at Palo Alto Meeting. Marriage followed.



When Barbara Babin was on the El Salvador committee, Carmen Broz wanted young people to experience the project's communities in El Salvador. Barbara was able to imagine how to organize a trip with adolescents! It took a year of planning, many conversations with Robert Broz, and advice from another experienced trip leader. They planned carefully, asking applicants to agree with a conduct code and engaging willing parents. Andrew Secrest, a Spanish speaking nurse, joined to help with any medical issues. After the first trip when a young adult, Bren Darrow, offered to help, the team always included a younger leader. Following the trips, Palo Alto Friends were inspired by what the young people wrote about their experiences.

At Palo Alto Friends Meeting, she initiated Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP) workshops in 2000. This volunteer program of experiential education began in New York to help inmates reach youth and spread from there. In 2005 Barbara felt called to do AVP in prisons, later facilitating AVP workshops in Spanish with the help of native speakers.

When she was hired in Santa Rosa to be the principal of an elementary school, she and Jim, who had retired, moved there. Now retired, she serves as assistant clerk of her Friends Meeting, and on the Ad-hoc Committee on the Future of College Park Quarterly Meeting. From 2017-2019, she served as an elder for a week-long Service Learning Project for Quaker and Indigenous youth to develop mutual understanding and to enhance their well-being and spiritual life. Inspired by *Healing Haunted Histories* (Enns and Meyers), she's tracing one of her lineages through Louisiana.

We are thankful for her service to the Committee and the people of El Salvador.



***Please continue to sustain hope and bring light to the darkness in El Salvador***

*A society should be judged not by how it treats its outstanding citizens but by how it treats its criminals.*

*Fyodor Dostoevsky\**

When authoritarian regimes disregard fundamental human rights to imprison alleged criminals en masse without due process of law, greater safety in the streets is likely to come at a high cost, as precious democratic institutions weaken and collapse into ineffectiveness. Who can doubt that along with hardened gang members innocent bystanders have been swept into crowded prisons? El Salvador's civil rights, gained through arduous struggle only a few decades ago, are now nullified by the state of emergency that has been repeatedly renewed. We hope this loss can be reversed.



*El Salvador's chilling mega-prison*

(The Week magazine, April 14, 2023)

The projects your donations make possible have helped to educate and empower young people whose parents and grandparents once fled to refugee camps from massacres and indiscriminate bombing when their homes and the land they worked were included within free-fire zones. This newsletter and previous issues have described the flourishing lives and service to their communities of these young Salvadorans in teaching, nursing, medicine, law, accounting, information technology, and other fields. They will not readily surrender the freedoms and the quality of life that they and their elders have struggled so valiantly to achieve. Surely they will be among the leaders of community-based efforts to preserve democracy in their small country.

Please donate what you can to sustain the assistance offered to courageous, visionary youth from poor rural families in this time of extraordinary challenge – this defining moment for El Salvador.

\* <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7646988-a-society-should-be-judged-not-by-how-it-treats>

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

*Mail donations to:*

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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:  
Barbara Babin**

**Page 9: Appeal**



Carmen with a women's sewing project, San Salvador 1991