

Mayan cultural legacy to children through teaching art, music, and dance. ACG is also committed to documenting human rights abuses.

Through the Global Ministries division of the Disciples of Christ/UCC, 2 people from the U.S.A. have worked as missionaries at ACG (**Linda McCrae** and **Garry Sparks**), and **Paul Pitcher** will soon become the third. Thank you so much for the help that you give through the UCC/Disciples by sending missionaries, funds, and moral support.

NOTES FROM  
GERMAN HERNANDEZ REYNOSO'S  
ACCOUNT OF HIS "EXILE" AND "RETURN"  
OCTOBER 12, 2003  
ADULT CHURCH SCHOOL CLASS

My name is **German Hernandez Reynoso**. I had 5 brothers and 3 sisters while growing up, and I am the oldest. [German is the cousin of **Virgilio Vicente**].

In 1980, my parents started struggling against the injustices of Guatemala, working as civilian leaders for change through the churches. The whole family left our village and moved through the mountains from village to village, working in different communities as we went. My parents had to keep moving to stay ahead of the army, which had targeted church people who were leaders for change.

In 1982, the army came through the village we were living in at the time. My parents, 3 of my brothers and 1 of my sisters were in our house and were tortured by soldiers, then were left in the house as the army set the house on fire and burned to death. My mother was pregnant when she was killed. One of my brothers, who was 3 years old, was taken out of the house and later adopted and raised by one of

the military officers. (German had a great deal of difficulty talking about all of this. He stopped to cry for a while, then continued.)

I am sad that my parents couldn't live to see the changes for which they struggled. But even seeing the horrible things that happened to them and others, the people left alive kept looking for ways to continue the struggle against injustice.

2 younger sisters (ages 9 and 11), one younger brother and myself (age 17) had not been in the house when the army came. We managed to escape into the mountain forests. My brother, who had been participating in the civilian struggle against the injustices of the Guatemalan government, now joined the guerillas in the armed struggle. The massacre of our parents and other people in the village filled him with hatred for the Guatemalan military and empowered him to join the armed resistance.

We were left as orphans and had to figure out how to survive in the mountains without food or tools, without anything. We were in the mountains for 5 or 6 years, and after a while the clothes and shoes we had decomposed. We found sources of water, herbs, small fruits and wild plants to eat in the forests, but it was not enough and we had no regular meals. We had no salt. Sometimes I was so hungry I had to crawl on my hands and knees – I didn't have enough strength to stand up.

After a while, we found others wandering in the forest who had suffered the same way we had. We gathered together to organize ourselves. We learned the places through which the army wouldn't pass and planted some crops under the tree canopy. It helped increase our food supply, but it was difficult to find a way to develop ourselves beyond the level of survival, because the army would randomly bomb the mountains, knowing people were living out there somewhere. I never have lost my fear of bombs.

Gradually, our group grew in number as we encountered others wandering in the forest. At this time, I learned to respect greatly the diversity of skills people carried in them as we got to know one another. Each person's skills aided our common task of survival and



made it more possible. It is a lesson and a feeling I carry with me to this day.

Eventually, our community formalized itself – we elected leaders and formed committees. In 1985-86, I was assigned to be a health promotor, and working in this manner, I gained skills and achievements. At first I didn't know much about medicine and my knowledge was very limited. The guerillas found our community and wanted to help us, so they assigned a medic to work with us. He had a great deal of medical experience, and I learned from him how to attend to people. We worked with the daykeepers (Mayan religious leaders) and had them bless our work.

Also, after formalizing, we realized we had to risk sending some people to Guatemala City to denounce the violence and make people aware of our plight. The army was randomly bombing the mountainsides, claiming that they were fighting against the guerillas, but the result was killing many civilians as well. We were able to make a formal declaration, which was publicized by journalists, that large civilian populations were living in the mountains, having been burned out of their villages, that we were not guerillas, and that we were being bombed and murdered [these civilian communities came to be known as “communities of popular resistance,” or CPRs]. Many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and churches entered into relationship with the CPRs at this point, so our effort brought some results. With the arrival of these groups, such as the International Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders, I learned much more about medicine, knowledge about the human body and nervous system. I also learned techniques for the alleviation of pain, treatment of diseases, and how to do injections and extractions. These groups were able to get training manuals and medical texts to me – I have no idea how they managed to do this – and this was a major benefit to me and my community.

In 1988, we faced another struggle, the struggle to regain land that had been taken from us. The government bought some land on the coast for us. My family and I moved there and at first thought it was fine. However, eventually we made the decision to move to Saq Ja where I had inherited a small piece of land. Everything had been destroyed by

the army, but I built a house on the land, and others moved back as well. We were put in touch with University Church through **Virgilio**. With his help and because of our relationship with University Church, we formed committees to determine the needs of our community. The water system and corn grinding mill that are now installed and working well seemed to me at the time like huge projects, almost impossible to imagine completed. Since then, we have completed still other projects, like building a community house and a marimba, so that we can practice traditional music, dancing, and other cultural activities. Two years ago, Saq Ja started working with ACG (Guatemalan Christian Action), and through ACG has begun new projects, such as learning animal husbandry.

Saq Ja is in some ways like a sick person who has many needs. Its future depends on its relationship with strong and secure organizations based on action such as ACG and on its relationship with churches. I personally thank the people of University Church who have donated money for the materials we needed to complete our projects, which have improved the quality of life for us in very real ways. I am thankful also for the way that the UCC/Disciples of Christ denominations have also responded to our needs.

It is my great sorrow that the two other delegates who planned to come to Chicago were denied visas by the U.S. embassy in Guatemala and could not make this journey. Each of them play unique roles in their communities, **Lucia** in ACG and **Cristobal** in Saq Ja. Cristobal is chair of the Saq Ja education commission which is constructing a new school in Saq Ja. I am sorry he is not here to talk with you about that work.

Our vision in Saq Ja is not just to have a school, but to have an institute capable of housing students from other communities that have suffered a similar fate as ours. Many communities like Saq Ja were totally destroyed and need schools. We hope through the institute to exchange and develop new ideas for creating a just society in Guatemala. At this point, the actual building of the institute is almost complete; they are constructing the roof while I am here in Chicago. What we will need in the future are salaries for teachers, scholarships for students, and educational supplies. We intend this to be an

alternative school, not a government school, so that we can teach our version of the history of the civil war in Guatemala, our vision for the future. If anyone knows of agencies that would fund such a school, please share this information with us.

I appreciate your listening to my story. This is not the whole story – we would need weeks, not one hour, for that – but I have tried to share with you some of the main features. Through all my experiences, including my suffering, I have been strengthened to work for peace.

**--submitted by Sharon Hunter-Smith**