

MONDAY

Hi all,

Monday was very successful, invigorating and memorable for every single kid and adult in our group. We rode the vans from Antigua into Guatemala City and to the dump. We had a meeting, with all the teachers and social workers introducing themselves and then each of us reciprocated. Quite a passionate and effective group at SP.

Hanley then led us on a tour of the dump, including the new wall-garden area, dramatically different than the dump space of a year ago. This will contain the preschool kids, a soccer field, and a garden area. The kids were visibly impressed with the poverty and waste at the dump, and they will see even more tomorrow when they view the entire dump from a high point and visit with the social workers at some homes. The families are very supportive.

We then toured the new facility, a vast improvement over last year. The library is fully operational, they have a Montessori-style classroom set up by a Canadian woman earlier this year. The classrooms seem elegant compared to the squalid conditions of last year.

After our bag lunches, we helped serve lunch to the afternoon classes, probably the last full meal most of them have received since Friday.

We then went to our assigned classrooms. Every single one of us reported a great experience with the kids today. For example, Marnie is in my classroom, first grade, and she announced as we departed our first class that she never wanted to leave Guatemala! We collected our thoughts and reviewed our assignments for the rest of the week. We will be kept very busy.

Tonight back in Antigua, we celebrated Marie's 17th. All really enjoyed it, with a large birthday cake at the hotel after dinner. We just returned from a quick trip to the outdoor Antigua market, for Guatemalans more than locals, and got all back to the hotel before 8, with no complaints! The girls are all getting along great, joking and supporting each other. Terrific team!

All reported good sleeping last night, and every single one of us was asleep by 9, most by 8, last night. All up between 5 and 6 this morning. More energy tonight, we shall see.

We have almost no time to keep in touch, and no kids have even expressed a desire to do so with you! I did not even tell them that I just bolted out of the hotel to this internet cafe to email you with progress. We not only have no time during the day, but we also have no access to phones or email during the day, unless we asked to use some volunteer's cell to call home, in any emergency. So, no news is good news. We have a later night Tuesday night, with a film about the Guatemala Civil War. But there is a good chance that this internet cafe will be open late enough for me to keep you updated.

Chip

TUESDAY

Hi all!

Today was another, incredible day, the most powerful of our days here. First and foremost, everybody remains happy and healthy. Unlike last year, nobody has even gotten the cough or diarrhea.

We started the day after another good sleep, grabbing breakfast at 7 and leaving the hotel at 7.45, arriving at the dump, but at a lookout place, different from last year. We traveled through an elaborate cemetery with burials above ground and vultures perched atop the huge grave monuments and atop the trees and circling the dump. Right out of a horror film. We stared, stunned, at the immensity of the dump. Marty remarked later that it reminded us all of Ground Zero shortly after 9-11, too immense to comprehend. Tiny, but life-sized dump trucks and tractors were pushing the garbage, with tiny specks, the working pickers of the dump, scampering around the heavy vehicles, grabbing whatever might be of value, Fiona later remarked that it reminded her of kids chasing the ice cream truck. We took lots of photos, as we learned about the methane gas fire throughout the dump back in January lasting a whole week.

We then returned to our classrooms, except that each of us received tours of the family homes for an hour at different times throughout the day, accompanied by Rachel Meyn and a social worker. We met parents and the children in their tiny, squalid conditions. But we met people full of pride and amazingly clean, considering, but drinking and eating filth, but trying their best. Heart-rendering.

The kids continued in their kitchen, carpentry, and classroom duties in the afternoon, while we adults, who are also doing fine, went to the Pan American hotel in Guatemala City's central area and met Juan Forster, the Rotarian who has accomplished so much for us in Guatemala. We had an amazingly successful meeting with him and have some solid plans for more successes in the coming year, from microlending projects to help the carpentry shop and the women of the dump, to a milk machine matching grant project, to wrapping up the van purchase next month, to some other ideas of collaboration with other people and agencies for Safe Passage, a likely trip by some in January of next year.

We returned to SP and brainstormed and reflected with Rachel and the kids. Then we took the van back to Antigua, but not to the hotel. Rather, like last year, we met Freddy Mantenango who is about my age and has served SP for the past 6 years and has devoted his life to serving Guatemala's poor, after surviving the civil wars of the 1980s and 1990s, witnessing deaths and devastation. He has inspired me and obtaining the van, wall, and farmland in the past year. All the adults and kids were visibly moved, even the four of us who saw the same movie and talk last year.

We just returned to the hotel, ate a hearty Guatemalan meal reminding me of the old New England boiled dinner, and Mary Jo, Fiona, Betsy, and I are madly dashing off these emails before this internet cafe closes at 10 PM.

Tomorrow should be easier, only a half day at SP and the other half at the foster care facility, Casa Hogar, in Antigua and shopping for the kids, while the adults visit the farmland of SP.

Hasta luego, Chip

WEDNESDAY

Hi again,

Just dashing off a quick message tonight, earlier than usual, just before dinner, as we are headed out to Salsa dancing tonight in Antigua.

We are having a long, but much easier, day today. Not the dramatic scenes of yesterday, giving us pause as to why we are here on earth, what can we do to make a difference, and why.

We, except for Frank who took the day off and wandered around Antigua, were delayed a bit enroute in Antigua this morning, not due to our crew -- the girls have been extremely punctual and really reasonable. The long-term volunteer was late, and so we hit heavier traffic enroute to Guatemala City, but got a different view of the roadside and arrived at SP around 10 AM. We quickly joined our duty stations, with Betsy, Kathryn, and Feona manning the kitchen, and the rest of us took various classrooms until 12. Some of us, like me, Marnie, and Liz, went to the campo and played a soccer game with the kids, first time for me in 35 years, but we all had fun and Marnie and Liz showed off their skills. We also had fun playing pinata, with the kids blindfolded, and they let me handle the rope for the pinata, dangling it all around the blindfolded kids.

After lunch we trekked to Antigua and visited the office briefly and then Casa Hogar, the residential site for foster care. Hanley showed us around and we listened to the social worker other volunteers, and the kids report to us about the program and give us hugs and cards. All were impressed with the level of care for the 43 kids who have been abused or neglected far more seriously than the 90 percent of the neglected and abused children of the dump. They are in heaven at Casa Hogar. But we need to raise \$700,000 for this or another, facility in three years, as it is only a leased facility, having been a failed condo development a couple of years ago.

At 3.30 we split, with the kids, for good behavior, getting to be on their own, going to the local artisans market, about 100 yards from the hotel, and the adults going on a bumpy journey to the farmland, purchased this past year. This volcanic soil is incredibly rich, and we enjoyed the Mayan farmers in colorful garb atop their donkeys, returning from their day's work along the dirt road. We passed a scenic village enroute as well. The farmland appears to be about 2 to 3 acres of rich soil. The reasons for obtaining the farmland are therapy for the kids who have only known a city environment, some cash for the program from the sale of macadamia nuts, corn, beans, and other crops and perhaps animals, and also a farming business for some of the kids.

We returned to our hotel, where the kids have returned safe and sound, after some successful conquests of jewelry and straw hats. Dinner has started and I will be a few minutes late.

After dinner we will walk up the street, just past the town center, to Salsa dancing which begins at 8 PM. I am not looking forward to it, but the girls sure are. We will take taxis directly from the dancing back to the hotel, to be on the safe side, before 10 PM. A SP volunteer coordinator will be meeting us at the Salsa place.

Tomorrow will be our last day at SP, since Friday is a day off at the Lake country and marketplaces.

All remain healthy and in great spirits. Not one case of coughing or diarrhea. Only Fiona has had a slight nasal condition, not noticeable to me, since the airplane ride in. All are getting along very well with each other as well. Great group! Hasta luego, Chip

THURSDAY

Ola,

We had another thoroughly invigorating, exhausting, and productive day, our last day at Safe Passage. We arrived early, well before 9 AM at the dump, and off to our work stations, all day. Kathryn, Denise, Mary Jo, Rhonda, and Frank went to the Guarderia, the preschool program which has been shuffled off to a warehouse temporarily due to the government taking over the rented preschool housing a couple of months ago, and of course leaving it vacant. They reported very touchy feely young kids, and we have seen some of their hovels, making it even more poignant. Fe and Betsy went to the carpentry shop, and Fe also went to the maternal, bilingual class, based on the Montessori model. Marnie and I were in first grade, and Marnie was terrific, reading to the kids in Spanish from a Clifford book and from another Spanish book, as well as us demonstrating how to play Twister, and they showed us how to play musical chairs and many other games, as well as us helping them with homework. Moira and Jenny worked with the older kids in elementary school. Liz worked in kindergarten and maternal. Betsy and I met again with our sponsor child, Marco Tullio, a shy but adorable and cute four year old boy. Frank, Marty, Rhonda, Mary Jo, and I were out of class more than we were in, having some incredibly productive meetings with Hanley and Ed, the accountant, for some wish list items, many of which we are helping to accomplish. Marty and I traveled with Fredy, a long term employee of SP and native Guatemalan, who had related his experiences of the civil war and showed the dramatic film to us Tuesday night, to buy a van, purchased by Rotary for approximately \$19,100 -- this will save that much in less than a year, as well as provide more opportunities for the children of the dump and shuttling the volunteers back and forth.

The highlight, or at least the most emotional part, was the farewell celebration given by the kids and teachers at SP for us. Nobody had a dry eye. They regaled us with songs, speeches, and cards. And, I have no doubt that you, Bill and Leigh, will not be shocked that Jenny was bawling away. I confirmed that they were mostly happy tears. All, even before this event, have professed wishes to return to SP next year. The children of the dump taught us more than we could ever teach them -- Spanish, how to sing and have fun, and compassion. And the extent of their poverty is so immense, but probably not dramatically different than 90 percent of the world's population, as Frank poignantly pointed out last night, outside the Salsa place.

And, yes, last night I endured the full hour of Salsa, not elegantly though. The girls thoroughly enjoyed the Salsa dancing, and we got quite a workout in the process. Everybody gave it a try and most had great fun.

We stopped at the Santa Domingo, a five-star hotel on the return, here in Antigua, just a short drive from our hotel. Santa Domingo is a super place to stay, if you want to visit this charming town and lush country in comfort. Most of us will be happy to stay at the SP hotel, which is doing ok considering its first week or two in operation, but those who want all the modern comforts, will find them at Santa Domingo. Plus, we quickly took a look at the ruins surrounding the hotel, dating back to the 1500s, including human skeletons and other relics, as well as glancing at the pool, hot tubs, and art exhibits.

We ate another dinner, this time of pork and potatoes, never enough, but we have a supermarket within yards of our hotel. Believe it or not, only Fe and Betsy expressed any interest in walking around Antigua tonight before 9 with me, as they are exhausted again. Fe and Betsy only came here to the internet cafe, also mere yards from the hotel. Mary Jo and I went looking for film, but with no luck, but we had a nice walk to the village center and back. I miss my morning jogs, although I have noted several joggers in the morning, probably mostly gringos!

It is now 8.30 and all are safely in the hotel. We will be up very early tomorrow AM, by 6 AM, to travel to the Lake country, where we will have some sights on the way and go on a ferry to some island market towns and see the native Guatemalans, shepherded in the SP rented van and by a SP volunteer.

First signs of some discomfort in Betsy and Liz, a little diarrhea, that is being addressed only by pepto bismal today, but may have more medicine if needed later tonight or tomorrow. Every person is functioning well, though. Nobody is sick. Fe still has a slight nasal condition, a bit worse at night, but better today than yesterday. Rich, we just picked up some dramamine for Rhonda for tomorrow, for the car ride and the short 30 minute ferry ride, and she rides in the front of the car, and she and Mary Jo are doing terrific.

And all are in good spirits, but emotionally and physically exhausted. Tomorrow should be a day to take it easy, shop a bit, and take in the sights. Just be tourists. Tons of Americans, Germans, and other Europeans all over Antigua.

Hasta manana, Chip

FRIDAY

Hi again,

Today was easier in most ways, since we played tourist. We traveled two hours to the Lake District, visiting Pana, a tourist town, and then off across the lake for 30 minutes each way in a small ferry where most of us got thoroughly soaked by the waves. The two remote villages were interesting, but we had to rush through them, eating a hearty lunch at a good restaurant and shopping a bit, as well as visiting two churches. We saw Mayans in their colorful garb, different in each village we saw from the bus and by foot. The lake is a huge volcanic crater, surrounded by three volcanoes, a gorgeous sight. We headed back to Pana by ferry in a torrential downpour, with us getting another soaking, but with calm seas on the return voyage. We arrived, tired back at the hotel. We just finished dinner and discussed the project and fundraising progress for this week. Our little group has or is about to accomplish great things at SP, in addition to the volunteering.

Thursday, Marty and I went car shopping with Fredy Maldonado from SP, and it looks like we will have the Rotary money of \$19,100 by month end and thus the van by then as well, hopefully. This will save SP more than that amount annually in van rental fees.

Marty, Frank, Rhonda, and Mary Jo also began on Tuesday a longer range plan of building microlending for SP's women and carpentry shop, with a Guatemalan Rotarian acting as the bank, as he does for numerous projects for the poor. Essentially, he loans a group, usually about 35 women, \$100 each, getting repaid \$10 every two weeks by each woman, or by the group if the woman defaults, and getting paid in full every four months or so, and then lending money again for their business enterprise.

We also hope to implement another matching grant project through Rotary, and led by the Boothbay Harbor and perhaps the Casco Bay Sunrise clubs, for \$35,000 for two pickup trucks and a car for Hanley. The costly repairs on the present, old trucks is outrageous, and these trucks are necessary to provide food for the children every day and for other needs of SP. The car is a safety, as well as a convenience, issue for Hanley, and should help her become even more productive. Since this will take at least half a year, if anybody else has other ideas, let us know.

Rhonda and Mary Jo came up with a great idea, after seeing a truck full of mattresses. Why not get more mattresses for the homes of the people of the dump? We have already priced the cost of mattresses and bunk beds, which will help with all sorts of social problems in the homes. Many homes have dirt floors with one mattress and many people sleeping and living in squalid conditions. I saw one bunk bed in one home, and it was in good condition and of great help for the family. We hope to see a test case of these bunk beds and mattresses late this month as well.

The farmland, recently donated to SP by a generous Boothbay Harbor resident and honorary Rotarian, will in the coming months be cleared a bit and have a shelter built where the children of the dump and from the foster home can camp out and later till the land.

Mary Jo fell in love with Marvin, a lovable kid, and she has just sponsored him. Many of the kids adore him. His brother, Darwin, was in the first grade class attended by me and even more by Marnie, this week.

Frank and Marty are directors of a private foundation, and they have just committed to trying to get the board to approve a large sum of money to do the entire remaining portion of the wall project, including the remaining funding for the garden, field area, and preschool building with four or five Montessori classrooms. They should be able to confirm this by early August and, if so, it is possible that the building could be completed by January.

Safe Passage still has daunting challenges, notably coming up with \$50,000 each January for the children's full SP and public school expenses. And SP needs to raise \$700,000 for either buying the excellent Casa Hogar facility or an alternative site, since they only have 3 years remaining on their lease. We reviewed other needs of SP as well.

The girls had some great ideas, including better equipment, perhaps a large cuisinart, for the kitchen. Feona and Betsy are developing an idea for a silent dessert auction at Ocean Point this summer and speaking about Safe Passage with photos.

Some of the kids went with Frank to the supermarket for chocolates and snacks for tonight. All are back in the hotel.

Tomorrow is the final full day here, when we go to the zoo in the morning and return in the afternoon for shopping.

Chip

SATURDAY / SUNDAY

Ola,

We leave from here in Antigua in less than an hour, and so I must be quick. Sorry no report yesterday, but I was unable to get to an internet cafe in time last night. All the internet cafes are closed Sunday morning, but I found this one-seater in a nice little cafe that can be used only if you buy 25Q of something. Could have just bought five postcards, but decided instead to buy a book, Mayan Folktales, for much more. Denise, you'll be so pleased.

All are well, even better health and spirits, but I think ready to return.

We had another amazing day on Saturday, meeting the kids at the dump, getting one last whiff of the stench, and then off to the zoo, the first trip for the 3 and 4 year olds, 18 of them. Each of us

had one or two in tow, and some plotted ways to bring them back with us! They absorbed everything, the elephants, giraffes, and especially the howler monkeys. But also observing other kids using wastecans and using the banyos, bathrooms. Particularly our 8 girls were magicians with those kids. We had many tearful goodbyes again at the zoo parking lot before departing to Antigua for a real lunch in a good restaurant and then some power shopping in the artisans shops in Antigua near our hotel and also some jewelry purchases from one of our van drivers who has this as a family business. Then off to a farewell dinner with Hanley and her super staff at a bar/restaurant. We had a candlelight sharing of the most memorable moment for each of us. Sharing with particular kids, viewing the vultures and garbage dump from the cemetery, and reunions with sponsor children were just some of the ones mentioned. More tears.

Girls are finishing packing.

Gotta go.

We'll call from Atlanta, at least some of the girls will. Custom Coach will go to the Jetport first and then only later to the Comfort Inn.

See you soon! Chip