

## *South Berwick Rotary Club SP Presentation*

*April 13, 2006*

Imagine the largest dump in Central America, and perhaps in all of the Americas, the Guatemala City Garbage Dump, where over 3,000 people, mostly Ladino and some native Mayan Guatemalans, live and pick for a living, often for generations, not knowing any other place and never seeing green grass. Several football stadiums could easily fit into this enormous landfill. When viewed from above, amongst the vultures in a cemetery overlooking the dump, the 2,000 dump pickers look like ants, scrambling amidst the dangerous dump trucks pouring out their garbage. The pickers compete for the recyclable items and even for some food scraps, sometimes getting injured or killed in the refuse of the dump. The week before we arrived this year, a contractor who had worked for Safe Passage drove his pickup truck into the dump, dropped through an enormous mass of collapsing garbage, and neither truck nor body was ever found.

Imagine a young woman, Hanley Denning, in her late 20s, a Yarmouth, Maine native; Bowdoin College graduate; and Guatemala volunteer; visiting the dump for the first time, with a nun friend of hers, near the end of Hanley Denning's 2-year stay in Guatemala, in 1999. None of the dump kids attended public school, which required uniforms, shoes, tuition, backpacks, school supplies and acceptance by the ladino teachers, who told Hanley that those children of the dump were hopeless cases. Imagine Hanley, with pressure from home to return and with no encouragement from Guatemalans to stay, selling her computer, obtaining a \$5,000 educational grant, and setting up shop in a tiny church at the dumpsite to support 15 kids of the dump in an effort to make a difference and get them into public school. She was the victim of early robberies at the Safe Passage church, and even the church door was stolen to melt down for recyclables. But Hanley Denning continued undaunted and served over 80 children the first year.

Imagine another Guatemalan volunteer in the highlands, Rachel Meyn, in her early 20s, leaving her parents, siblings, and friends in Sonoma, California for the past few years, meeting Hanley Denning over 5 years ago, and pitching in with her social work expertise to make a difference in every aspect of these lives of the children of the dump. I can tell you that Rachel Meyn has made a huge difference in my own life, in that of many other long and short-term volunteers, as well as hundreds of Guatemalan children and their parents. Everyone knows, loves, and respects Rachel.

And imagine a member of your club, Sharon Beckwith, a veteran of the tsunami relief effort in India last year, giving up a week of her life in early February of this year to check out and volunteer at this amazing Maine-based nonprofit group named Safe Passage led by founder Hanley Denning and supported by Rachel Meyn.

Sharon arrived at the Guatemala City airport to be met (during the Super Bowl game) by me and other Safe Passage volunteers and a Safe Passage van with a Rotary decal, as a result of last year's

\$19,000 matching grant from several midcoast Maine Rotary clubs. And imagine Sharon encountering 12 like-minded and talented Maine volunteers from Boothbay, Bethel, Unity, and Yarmouth, making a difference for over 540 children of the dump regularly attending public schools and Safe Passage's before and after-school enrichment program, just over 6 years after Hanley Denning dropped everything to make a difference. Homework assistance, vocational programs and a participatory learning environment where games, role plays and hands-on educational tools are used, provide students with an alternative to rote learning and memorization which is prevalent in Guatemalan public schools, thus ensuring that some of the neediest children in the city benefit from expanded educational opportunities. And now Sharon is already returning for a week during school vacation this month to help Safe Passage and prepare for her return this summer for a longer stint.

Imagine a one-of-a-kind organization, Safe Passage, centered on

paid Guatemalan teachers and staff and supplemented by international volunteers, short term and long term. Not an international group who relies on paid international staff to “teach” the natives how to do something. Imagine new school buildings for the program, some Montessori-styled classrooms, and a full meal a day and snacks furnished, along with school materials, to these children hungry for food and thirsting for schooling. Safe Passage is not a “hand-out” project, but instead endeavors to empower each child and his/her family to assume responsibility and to play an active role in the child’s education. Every child can earn assistance with clothing, shoes, and other needed items by regularly attending school. School attendance is verified by frequent school visits and through regular attendance taking. Social workers visit the schools and families on a regular schedule to assess family home life and help with problems.

Once a month, parents attend a half-day session with their children at the Center, during which they celebrate their children’s

successes, meet one-on-one with their child's teachers, social worker, and receive a basic monthly food ration per attending child.

This year Safe Passage fundraised for a hospitality-training program, established two libraries, started a computer center with a USAID grant, secured an urban garden play space, and acquired some rural farmland. And all that in addition to the Early Intervention Center.

Now, imagine how you can make a difference. Sharon Beckwith is on fire with ideas and actions, and her fire is spreading to others in your area and around Maine. Sharon is raising money for the annual program, now over 1 million dollars, supporting over 540 children of the dump. She is raising money for the dump families. She is designing soccer clinics, soccer uniforms, and other programs to supplement the learning and life skills of these children.

Imagine my sponsor child, 5-year-old Marco Tullio, a shy and endearing boy who attends Safe Passage. He is cute and curious, clean and clever, and courteous and courageous. Imagine my surprise, when I visited his home and his mom for the first time this past February. Like many of the several homes at the dump that I had visited on three other social visits, this home had a dirt floor being the dump with its methane fumes and walls of makeshift materials, about 10 feet by 12 feet, with two openings, no stove or sink, and one mattress. When I asked Marco Tullio's mom how many people slept there, she replied, "Seven." I was sparked by the leadership of Casco Bay Sunrise Rotarians Rhonda Emerson and Mary Jo Cross, who the prior year had conceived of the concept of funding bunk beds for the children of the dump, Immediately after leaving Marco Tullio's home, I gave \$300 to the Safe Passage treasurer, \$200 to be used for two bunk beds (the family and social worker instead chose one bunk bed and one cabinet); and \$100 for dental fillings for Marco Tullio. Yes, we

can make a difference!

Imagine Safe Passage already a model nongovernmental organization; many experienced volunteers repeat the refrain: “Safe Passage is the best NGO we have ever seen.” Bowdoin College has already bestowed upon Hanley Denning the coveted Common Good Award; Guatemala this past year, the first year Safe Passage could qualify (as an NGO in existence for five years) won the Jean Batista Award for its exemplary work in Guatemala.

My dream of making a difference with my family (my wife, Denise, and my two teenage daughters, Emily and Betsy), came true when we led a group of volunteers from the NYA community in June of 2004. I and my daughter Betsy led another group of 5 Rotarians and 8 teenage girls this past June of 2005. I then attended with the other Safe Passage directors, for a quarterly board of directors meeting in early February, for a few days before Sharon’s group arrived during the second half of my stay. I will be

returning for short visits, with other potential benefactors, later this year and next year.

Why do I work, on average, more than 1-2 hours each day, seven days a week, for Safe Passage? Because I know that I can make a huge difference in peoples' lives. Yes, charity starts at home and we must all commit to our communities, but we can build on this and leverage through the Rotary Foundation and through the value of the dollar for third-world Guatemala's poorest inhabitants.

Because we get to know particular children whom we can truly help and literally save their lives. Because the horrific conditions of the dump life hit us in the gut. Because these children and their mothers are so grateful. Because Safe Passage needs more annual support to get them through each month and keep the food and water flowing, the teachers teaching, the children learning, and the families supported. Because our money, school supplies, and volunteering transforms our own lives as we transform theirs.

Because this is really a community service project in nearby

Guatemala. Because we can travel to and from Guatemala, stay a week and volunteer, and all at a cost of around \$1,000. Because others from Maine can keep us well informed. Because, as Mother Teresa is reputed to have declared, “We must pick our own Calcutta.”

A third grade education means that one is no longer illiterate and can get a working-class job in Guatemala. A twelfth grade education permits graduates to go directly into teaching and other professions. Higher education propels them into top-notch professions and leadership positions. Our dream is to see these kids graduate from the program, become employed in meaningful work, attend university, and become future leaders of Guatemala.

And already, even though it's a scant six years old, the program is making a difference. Last fall, the first class to start school with Hanley as first-graders was ready to graduate from sixth grade. The boys took the test for Quinal, an exclusive, private, all-boys

junior high school with an incredible reputation. Think of it as Choate in Guatemala. Anyway, of the 30 kids who took the test, six gained admittance. They are now competing with the best and the brightest of their age group throughout Guatemala City.

Frankly, we had hoped that maybe one youngster would be accepted. Now we have to raise the tuition, not only for these six, but for next year's potential admittees, and the ones for the year after that. And also, when the Board heard about it, we congratulated Hanley on the accomplishment but asked her to find an equivalent school for girls as well.

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, showed us that the best way to get things done is in small groups of committed people. Margaret Mead's words have had the most profound effect for me: *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

We hope that many of you choose to change the world, in Maine

and in Guatemala, through Safe Passage. Choose your own  
Calcutta in Safe Passage. And, safe passage to you, Sharon, later  
this week and this summer!