

Hi Cal, Joel and Patty, Steve, Stacia, Brett and Sara, Andy, Pastor Dave, Melanie and Sharon,

A weird turn of events will mean that I will have the chance to be in Grand Rapids on November 18th and 19th (a Sunday and Monday) between visits to Ontario and Chicago. As it turns out, SEMILLA Seminary and CASAS plans an annual tour to share with Universities and churches about our Study abroad program and our one-on-one Spanish school (for learners and professionals of all stripes) in Guatemala, and this year we are geographically-focused mid-westerly! I will be accompanied by Marta Calderon, one of the Spanish teachers at CASAS.

So, my question is...whether there would be any interest in having Marta and I share a bit about CASAS in any Madison-related settings on Sunday? It could be a youth group age, college-age folks, social justice team, missions committee, curious or interested folks in general. We'd be up for any scenario - in a service, after a service, at a table, during a group meeting or Sunday school class, or anything you can think up! We can share about Guatemala or themes in the context of Guatemala (i.e. migration, human rights, indigenous rights/racism, women's rights, community development) and of course the opportunities CASAS offers to delve into these issues into more depth and for one-on-one Spanish study.

Then on Monday we are hoping to share at Calvin and RBC, with a yes so far from Dan Miller's Latin American History class at Calvin. But we will likely have some time to work with, if there are any interested HS teachers out there, or Baxter, CRWRC, or CRWM possible connections we could make while we are in town!

Hope you are all well. And maybe I will have the chance to see you in the not so distant future after all!

Peace to you,

Shannon

P.S. Also reattaching my Aug newsletter because I am not sure Cal and Bill received it yet.

August 2007
1st Quarterly Newsletter & Prayer letter

My Dear Family and Friends,

Can you believe that I have watched my three month anniversary in Guatemala come and go without writing you formally since I have been here? I cannot begin to describe how quickly the time has passed.

These three months have been full ones, and a bit of a blur – it's hard to know how to properly begin sharing about life and work here with you, but I will try!

First, to recap on why I am here...

I have come via a placement and invitation from the Mennonite Central Committee, an international justice, peace, emergency relief and community development organization. MCC partners with local community organizations and churches around the world. Semilla, the seminary in which I am working, has contracted with MCC to have me serve for the next 3 years as the Director of CASAS, a study abroad program and Spanish language school in Guatemala.

CASAS serves several roles here in Guatemala:

- 1) We are ***alternative university education with a semester, cross-cultural program*** for students who come independently from a variety of universities throughout the US and Canada. Students learn through a combination of field trips, speakers, readings, family stays, student-lead reflections, trips, and service-learning about Guatemalan history, culture, Spanish language, and study the social realities here related to peace, justice, ethnic oppression, Christian expressions in Guatemala, community development, Mayan Spirituality, Human rights, women's issues in a "machista" culture, and anthropology (there are 23 lingual and cultural groups in Guatemala!), among other themes. We run up to three of these full semester terms per year, and a condensed May term.
- 2) We create ***intensive, theme-oriented study for University delegations*** who come to study a specific issue or theme, by coordinating speakers, field trips and family stays around a specific topic of interest. These groups may be studying psychology and mental health related to trauma post-war and post-natural disaster (like Fuller Seminary, who came for two weeks in August), or have specific interests in Community Development, (Im)migration, Cross-cultural Studies, etc.
- 3) We are a ***Spanish school, for learners of all ages and professions*** who come to learn Spanish for a variety of reasons. We have had doctors and nurses, social workers, and pastors from North America, volunteers living in Guatemala who want some simultaneous language training, families who are moving to Guatemala, and people of all ages simply wanting to dive into Spanish and experience Guatemala.
- 4) And we serve as a ***source of income for the Seminary***, so that local pastors and lay leaders can receive Bible training in their local home countries and communities throughout Central America (Semilla professors go to each country to do onsite trainings and courses).

What have these past few months looked like?

In terms of my new work...

This spring, I began by receiving a general-MCC orientation which included visiting some of the other MCCers around Guatemala in their various placements with local organizations. Some are working in rural areas in sustainable organic agriculture, vocational education (tailoring, commercial baking, traditional weaving, carpentry, metalworking), in emergency relief post-hurricane Stan 2005, in food security and rural income generation (with fish ponds - to raise fish as a protein source, flower and mushroom farms – to sell as an income source), and in a land redistribution project. Others, are based in cities, working with churches to launch a new music education program and with HIV/AIDS prevention.

After a truncated mini-orientation to MCC, I launched into language training/family stay/job orientation at CASAS. Normally the language training and family stay would be full time for 3 months before any job training or orientation would start. But we were pressed for time, with the current CASAS director leaving in June, so it was a pressure-filled few weeks of trying to learn as much Spanish as possible while learning about CASAS and all that would be expected of me job-wise.

In June, the former Director left to return to Canada, and those next several weeks were difficult. No more leaning on the "I'm in the orientation phase" when Spanish failed me, when I didn't know what to do. I was from that point forward, officially, though reluctantly, the person you'd go to if you were looking for the "directora" of CASAS, though I felt like I was looking for her too.

I have been doing all kinds of things that "content-with-the behind-the-scenes" me would normally avoid, namely...public speaking (and in Spanish!), running staff meetings (yes, again Spanish...), leading groups of 20-somethings around the country (I have always been most afraid of peers!), and in general having to make "un montón de" decisions (the Guatemalan way of dramatically expressing a huge pile of – literally a "mountain of"), when I'd rather just give input and leave the decision-making to those natural leaders and type A personalities! To students, I have been nurse, tour guide, mother, teacher, and social worker. To my coworkers I have been jefecita (term of endearment for boss), compañera, but also I hope, friend. At this point, most of the roles are an awkward fit, and the changes between roles are less than fluid. It has gotten easier though, and I have been told it will continue to – I am holding onto that promise!

There have been very hard days – I have prayed prayers of desperation when I gazed dumbstruck at the calendar and to do lists and wonder how on earth a new director and a green assistant could ever pull everything together in time for three overlapping student groups this summer. (We have had 12-week

CASAS summer semester students, a group of Canadian youth 16-19 years who came for a few weeks to gain an intro to Guatemala and to learn what MCC is doing around the country, and a group of PhD Psychology students who came for an intensive 2-weeks to study trauma and mental health related to a post-civil war/ genocide context and post-natural disaster (2005 Hurricane Stan)).

Yet, now, having just finished my final airport run of several this week, delivering the last of our summertime students to their home-bound flights, I can breathe a sigh of relief. And I pray that the lives of these students will begin to reflect changes begun in souls and perspectives as part of their time with CASAS.

What have these past few months looked like?

In "everyday life"...

I live in Guatemala City, the capital of Guatemala, and home to 3 million. While it does have the things that most people think of when they think of big cities - lots of people, pollution, gangs - it has other things that not every big city can claim – vistas of surrounding mountains and volcanoes, eternal springtime weather (Guatemala is often referred to as the "land of eternal spring"), and a dynamic mix of indigenous Mayan and ladino (Spanish-Mayan mixed blood) dominant culture that plays itself out visually in my daily commute.

My time in Guatemala started with two months with a host family – to help with language and cultural adjustment. I now live in a second-story, MCC-rented apartment– a place that has been home to four MCCers before me and scores of MCC guests and workers traveling into the city throughout the years. (Keeping up the trend, I hosted over a dozen different guests in my first month!)

I live above a panaderia (bakery), which like all Guatemalan bakeries, specialize in sweet breads, and in the evenings and early morning hours warm waves of "pan dulce" waft up to my apartment. My daily travel route to Semilla is a microcosm of the paradoxes of life here as I pass by SUVs headed to the nearby mall complex, shy, smiling women patting masa into corn tortillas at the nearby comedor (family owned eatery), crowded buses belching black puffs of diesel exhaust, vendors on bicycles calling out "arreglo zapatos!" (I fix shoes!), Mayan women in their colorful traditional huipiles and cortes balancing huge baskets of papayas, bananas, flowers, eggs on their heads to spread out on rainbow-colored blankets and sell at a nearby corner, and a perfect view of the Agua volcano just before I board my standing-room-only public bus to Semilla.

In the past week or so, I have finally felt like, yes, this place of stark beauty and stark pain, is home now. I have shared meals and laughs with great bosses and great coworkers – both from MCC and Semilla Seminary, who are a blessing to me and are my family away from family. I have tackled my fear of driving in zigzagging, at-your-own risk, crazy traffic of Guatemala City with the Semilla oversized 15 passenger Dodge van. I am getting to know my neighborhood, the tiendas (little corner stores), produce stands, bus routes, and the owner of my favorite pupuseria restaurant (think quesedilla, but with soft corn tortillas instead). I no longer mistake the early morning firecrackers (set off for birthdays and other celebratory occasions) for gunshots. Padre Tomás, the Catholic priest of Chichicastenango greeted me like an old friend the last time I brought students to chat with him during our visit to his Catholic church in the bustling Mayan market town in the Western highlands. I've bought new Guatemalan-style furniture (a new hammock swings in my living room). And, I go through withdrawal after more than a few days without Guatemalan black beans and fresh guacamole. ☺

Prayer requests...

Many of my early prayer requests have been answered without even formally writing you about them. So I thank you for being faithful in prayer, even when I wasn't faithful in updates those first months.

My prayer requests now for the coming months are:

- 1) To build good relationships within the CASAS department staff and Semilla staff, learning and embracing my role(s), especially that of the uncomfortable fit of leadership
- 2) Continued progress in Spanish – with a hope to be ready to translate by January
- 3) Learning to drive stick-shift!
- 4) For the upcoming Fall semester – For our students: health, emotional processing of the many painful and powerful experiences they will have while they are here. For me: providential guidance in my class facilitation of our Intro to Central America course, activity and trip coordination, perhaps

- trying out translation, and staying alert to not forget about our staff in the bustle of activity with students. For our CASAS staff: That they will feel valued, motivated, and fulfilled in their work.
- 5) To find a new communications and publicity assistant for the CASAS program this fall who is also bilingual and can drive!
 - 6) For our upcoming CASAS Promotional tour to 5-6 Canadian and US Universities in November
 - 7) For rest and balance

I thank each of you again for your love, prayers, advice, and financial support that are sustaining me here in Guatemala! May God bless you. And know that letters and emails from you are always welcome! ☺

Con Paz,
Shannon

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