

# ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido! The People United Will Never Be Defeated!

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People are always surprised when I return from Guatemala without a tan. I always found it necessary to wear a sweater in Quetzaltenango, despite its proximity to the equator. Set high in the mountains of Guatemala, Quetzaltenango, or Xela as the locals refer to it, always has a slight chill in the air, especially in the rainy season, from May through August, when I visit.

Despite the less than desirable weather, I have been in love with Xela since the first time I visited. The summer after my sophomore year, I stayed in Xela for six weeks learning Spanish and exploring the city and culture. I immediately took to the warm, friendly people I met there and to the city itself. It's small enough to feel like a community, but large enough to have some diversity. It is a foreign-friendly city, but is not overwhelmed by tourists; the people who travel to Xela mostly work in its non-profit sector. My first summer in Xela, I was fascinated by labor struggles that I witnessed, and saddened by the inequality the country still faces. At the end of the summer, I knew I would have to return.

My interest in labor and inequality made working for a union the next summer a logical choice. I decided to intern for the Union de Trabajadores de Quetzaltenango (UTQ), a coalition of labor unions. I came in expecting to struggle with ideas of privilege, community organizing, and how to maintain hope in an economic context that

favors free trade and ignores the rights of workers. I expected the UTQ to be a vibrant force leading the labor struggle in Xela. While the UTQ did not meet my expectations, I did face many of the issues that I had expected to grapple with. I befriended people from different areas of Guatemalan society, from the indigenous and marginalized to those working to address Guatemala's issues to the upper-middle class. I was saddened

by the inequality in the country--despite being the largest economy in Central America, 56 per cent of the population remains below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> I saw how community can contribute to social change, in such settings as everyday work at the UTQ and at a Mayan celebration. On the other hand, I saw how community among the more affluent can reinforce the status quo; this point was driven home

at a birthday party for a friend's daughter that I attended. Every day I was confronted by the growing violence in the country. Latin American violence is often exaggerated by the press in the United States, but it does make community more difficult to achieve. I was saddened by the UTQ's inability to maintain the community it had created, and by its slow decline. My entire summer was colored by the backdrop of intense, and occasionally violent, electoral campaigning.

## Lo que ha Pasado

Guatemala is a deeply divided nation. Not only is there a huge gap between the rich and the poor, but race also drives people apart. Despite being 40 percent of the population<sup>2</sup>, indigenous peoples, Mayans, are marginalized and ignored by many *Ladinos*, or people with Spanish ancestry. After a CIA-backed coup of the democratic government in 1954, the country found itself embroiled in a civil war. For 36 years, guerrilla forces fought for indigenous, labor, and civil rights against a repressive government that began a campaign against all Mayans in order to wipe out the guerrilla forces and procure the little land the Mayans owned. There is much debate as to whether the Mayans were innocent bystanders or whether they took part in the guerrilla movement, but no one denies the persecution and massacres they faced at the hands of the army. This violence includes the "razed earth" campaign in which entire villages were burned to the ground during the civil war. After decades of violence, the Peace Accords were finally signed in 1996; however, the Mayans remain on the fringes of society, and violence continues to be a major issue in Guatemala and has affected this year's elections.

During most of the 36-year civil war between the military and guerrilla movements, civil society was not allowed to exist in Guatemala. Unions and other organizations were brutally repressed when they tried to form. In the early 1980s, the military relinquished nominal government control

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to civilians, and civil society, though heavily monitored, was again allowed to exist. The UTQ was established during this time in order to strengthen the labor movement that was finally able to exist after years of repression and violence.

The UTQ began organizing factory workers, like Oswaldo Saquich, my boss, who used to work in a beer factory. As the organization grew, and Guatemala's plight became known in the international community, unions from Europe and the United States began making large contributions to aid the UTQ's struggle. With this funding, the UTQ hired 25 full-time employees to run various programs, such as health care, childcare, and legal aid, and it hired instructors to run an organizing school. The organization had enough funding to build the "Casa del Pueblo" to be the center of the UTQ community and operations.

The UTQ became a place for various unions to collaborate and offer each other support. During its heyday the UTQ served as a community gathering place where meetings were held, protests were planned, classes on leadership were taught, and legal services were provided. Due to outside funding, UTQ was able to continue its work and begin offering many services that not only improved people's work situation, but their quality of life. The childcare and medical services the UTQ made available show that it had a holistic vision for how to improve the lives of its members. The UTQ fought not only for workers' rights, but also for the rights of indigenous peoples, who were and are principal constituents of the organization. Because of its size and power, the UTQ was able to build relationships with the *alcaldes*, the mayors of Xela. This gave the organization some political influence over local politics. After the Peace Accords were signed the UTQ remained active in monitoring progress made (or lack thereof) on the agreements the government, military, indigenous groups, and others determined.

While the Peace Accords ended the 36 years of physical violence, structural violence against indigenous and other marginalized members of society has not ceased. Guatemala remains a stratified country with huge disparities between rich and poor, urban and rural, ladino and indigenous. Despite the problems that continue to plague the county, international aid has moved to other countries that are receiving more attention in the international media. This has left civil society in Guatemala, including the UTQ, at a loss.

### **Trabajadores en Xela**

Despite its status as the second largest city in Guatemala, Xela does not feel like a large city to me, since I grew up ten minutes outside of New York City. There are very few buildings that boast more than two stories, and from the roof of my hostel (another two-story building) it was possible to see most of *Zona Una* (Zone One). Zone One, the oldest part of the city, is the Xela that most foreigners know. Lining the narrow colonial streets are hostels, hotels, restaurants, and Spanish

schools, all catering to the significant, but not overwhelming, expatriate and tourist populations. Interspersed between the businesses catering to tourists are *tiendas* (small stores), *comedors* (small restaurants), residential buildings, and *mercados* (street markets), which generally cater to the local population and more adventurous foreigners. None of the buildings have windows facing the streets; it always felt like I was walking down a brightly colored corridor. In the center of Zone One, *Parque Central* offers a respite from the dangerous task of walking through the streets, dodging cars, *colectivos* (minivans for city transportation), and chicken buses (converted school buses for journeys outside the city), all of which have little concern for the lives of pedestrians. Surrounding Parque Central are the only cultural buildings in the city, the large museum that serves as a cultural, historical, and science museum in one, the cathedral, and other old buildings dating back to the time the department of Quetzaltenango attempted to become its own country.

Intense pride in Xela remains a common characteristic of many locals. According to the owners of my hostel, *every* Guatemalan wants to live in Xela. It's hard to refute this bold statement considering the large influx into the city of migrants from rural areas. Many of these migrants come searching for better opportunities that no longer exist and wind up working in the informal sector. I was able to interact with many of them through my internship at the UTQ.

The UTQ is located in *Zona Dos*, a 30-minute walk from Xela's bustling city center. In fact, on my way to my first day interning, I almost turned back several times. Zone Two felt so different that I thought I had gotten lost and accidentally left the city. While Zone One's architecture of brightly colored cement walls remained the same, most of what was familiar in Zone One changed. Gone were the narrow cobblestone streets, cafes, restaurants, hotels, and gringos talking and laughing loudly. Sit-down restaurants gave way to simpler comedors where there is no menu; you eat the one meal they're serving. When I saw cornfields and a cow grazing along the road, I decided it was time to turn back.

At the moment I had given up, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, turned, and was rewarded with the sight of a tan building proudly proclaiming in large brown letters, "CASA DEL PUEBLO, UTQ." Set slightly off the road, at the bottom of a steep hill, UTQ's building is easy to miss. Perhaps if it had been built in a more central location in a more prominent position, it would not be on the brink of collapse as it is today.

A building is an incredible resource for an organization. It can provide a space for members to gather and meet other members. These social ties build community and strengthen commitments to each other and the organization. A building can be used to build ties with other organizations and to create revenue to keep the organization sustainable. It can be a place that stores institutional memory,

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reminding members of the accomplishments and challenges of the past so they can learn from their mistakes and build a more successful future. It is clear that the Casa Del Pueblo did serve these functions for a long time; however, now it is debatable whether the building is helping the UTQ remain afloat or is holding it back.

On my first day interning, the UTQ only had two full-time staff, and their only remaining program was the organizing school. The UTQ has given up on factory workers and now focuses on the informal sector, mostly street vendors. On this particular day, I only waited a short time for someone to respond to the doorbell; however, depending on my luck at other times I waited anywhere from 30 seconds to 10 minutes before I was rewarded with the sound of scuffling feet running up the ramp to open the door. The sight of Camillo's awkward smile as he opened the door quickly became familiar and his greeting, even after three months, never changed "Pase adelante. . . . .Rrrrrraquel" with a long pause that I always suspected meant he was struggling to remember my name. Occasionally he'd chat with me, but more often than not, he quickly scurried away, back to his own mysterious work.

The architecture of the building is typical to Guatemala and most Latin American and Spanish buildings. Immediately upon entering the building, I was confronted with a courtyard garden that, depending on the week, was out of control or indifferently tended. Around the courtyard are doors opening to single offices, a suite of rooms, and the large conference room. When a large conference takes place, the courtyard is filled with chatting participants — men and women; some dressed in traditional *traje*, others in Western attire. On a typical day, various people hang out in the courtyard, talking and waiting to speak to Oswaldo, my boss and head of the UTQ.

The building itself is a raft, keeping the UTQ afloat. As long as the building exists, the UTQ can remain a community center and provide some resources. Unions can use the spaces provided for their events, and the UTQ can hold its own events designed to support the unions. The conference room holds an *actividad* (which I have taken to mean anything including a conference, workshop, meeting, or celebration) at least three times a week. From the kitchen has come countless lunches for participants in these *actividades*. Ties are built with other like-minded organizations through renting extra office space at low rates. CONALFA, a literacy organization, and the local left-wing political party, the URNG, both take advantage of this service.

While the building keeps the UTQ hanging on by a thread, it also speaks of better days and the slow decline of the organization. Despite the great care given to the building (the first thing we did every day was clean), the vacancy and lack of funding is always apparent. Paint is chipping off the walls. Broken windows abound. I was always struck by the disrepair of now vacant rooms; posters, calendars, diplomas, and awards from years gone by peeling off the walls, and everything is covered in a film of dust.

I can only imagine how the building appeared in its heyday ten years ago — offices bursting at the seams with lawyers, doctors, organizers, rank-and-file members. Children of the workers running around and playing on the now broken swing set. Participants of an *actividad* filling the dorms at night laughing and dreaming of creating change. I can picture last-minute preparation for a rally or large event — people everywhere making signs, running across the courtyard to inform Oswaldo of an unforeseen complication. What it must have been like back when the UTQ had funding and legal, medical, dental, and childcare programs. Where did the staff of 25 work?

I'm quickly shaken back to the reality of a ghost building. A staff of three emphasizes the vacancy almost more than if no one had been there. Even with two extra organizations sharing the building, offices are never filled to capacity. The dorm beds remained vacant all summer. I remember that the UTQ is no longer what it was, but wish I could have seen it in its glory.

Perhaps the building is also a crutch. Constant reminders of days gone by could be inhibiting the way forward. Maybe the solution is not for the UTQ to look and feel and act as it did in the past. It is a different political and economic landscape now, both locally in Guatemala and globally in international trade. Organizations need to respond to the needs of today rather than the shadow of yesterday. While the building remains a community center, community can be built in other ways. I have learned through my organizing efforts and through organizing classes how important relationship building (and thus community building) is to an organization. A physical space is not necessary to accomplish this task. Only time and dedication and willingness to train and talk to people are needed to build relationships, and as a result, organizations. What would happen if the UTQ sold its building and used that money in a new organizing effort? Would the organization totally collapse? Or would it finally be released from the shackles of the past?

### Las Problemas

Oswaldo's narrative of the demise of the UTQ focuses blame on the international community's desertion of Guatemala. Because of the lack of interest in Guatemala and its labor struggles, the UTQ began to lose funding, and one by one, its staff diminished, programs were slowly cut, and the UTQ began to lose power.

While I do believe that losing funding accelerated the UTQ's decline, I think that only touches on part of the story and does not excuse the

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UTQ from blame. The Peace Accords were signed more than ten years ago, and the UTQ still has not developed an economically sustainable plan to stay afloat. In truth, the UTQ should not have relied solely on international funding in the first place. Many issues both practical and theoretical come up when one relies on outside funding to sustain an organization. If members do not sacrifice for the organization, they don't have as developed a sense of ownership over and commitment to the organization<sup>3</sup>. When an organization receives funding from an outside source, it becomes indebted to that organization and some of their autonomy is sacrificed. The largest problem, which the UTQ is experiencing, is that once the outside funding is lost, the organization doesn't know how to proceed<sup>4</sup>.

I believe that another major factor in the UTQ's decline is the shift in international trade and increased globalization. As a result of free-trade agreements including CAFTA and the termination of quota-led trade agreements like the Multi-Fiber Trade Agreement, it became increasingly difficult to organize factory workers. Previously, countries could only export a certain amount of a product to the "Global North" (i.e. the United States and Europe). This limited international competition between factories. Even if a factory in China sold an identical product less expensively than a Guatemalan factory, a US company could not purchase more than China's quota for that product. While this system was not perfect and there were major violations of workers' rights during this period, it allowed workers to demand higher wages and maintain their jobs. As the quota system has since dissolved, factories are forced to compete with other factories all over the world. Now, if a Chinese factory sells an identical product cheaper than a Guatemalan factory, the US company can and will buy from the Chinese factory. The easiest way to cut costs is to cut wages. When workers organize for higher wages, if they win, the factory cannot continue to compete, and the factory closes, putting the workers in a worse situation. This has made it impossible to organize factory workers or maintain the unions that were a part of the UTQ. According to Oswaldo, there are only two factories in the entire country that are still unionized.

When I arrived at the UTQ, it was struggling to survive. The organization had cut medical, childcare, and legal services. It had lost many of its affiliated unions as the international and national economic climate shifted. What remained were a building, the organizing school, and a handful of street vendor and taxi driver unions and indigenous rights groups. Oswaldo's days were filled with meetings and conferences, some of which he led and others in which he participated.

Despite Oswaldo's seemingly busy schedule, these events never seemed to build towards anything. I frequently had the image of someone running on a treadmill, working hard and never moving forward.

## Actividades, Reuniones, Demostraciones

The spring before I left for Guatemala, I took a class on community organizing. I learned both the theoretical and practical skills of mobilizing people to create change. One of my goals while working at the UTQ was to practice the skills and theory I had learned in class. I thought I would have the opportunity to see a different style of organizing and be able to gain a better understanding of how to organize. This class taught me that organizers must build community, and empower members to become leaders and take responsibility. What I find to be one of the more challenging roles of an organizer is letting go and take risks, and give others responsibilities that you know you can do better yourself.

The role of an organizer seems overwhelming, but when done right, I can imagine the rewards. As described by my professor, Marshall Ganz:

*Organizers identify, recruit and develop leadership; build community around leadership; and build power out of community. Organizers bring people together, challenging them to act on behalf of their shared values and interests. They develop the relationships, motivate the participation, strategize the pathways, and take the action that enable people to gain new appreciation of their values, the resources to which they have access, their interests, and a new capacity to use their resources on behalf of their interests. Organizers work through "dialogues" in relationships, motivation, strategy and action carried out as campaigns.*

*Organizers challenge people to take the responsibility to act. For an individual, empowerment begins with accepting responsibility. For an organization, empowerment begins with commitment, the responsibility its members take for it. Responsibility begins with choosing to act. Organizers challenge people to commit, to act, and to act effectively.*

*Organizers build community by developing leadership. They develop leaders by enhancing their skills, values and commitments. They build strong communities through which people gain new understanding of their interests as well as the power to act on them.*<sup>5</sup>

I was disappointed, but not surprised, to learn that this is not the way the UTQ works. Oswaldo had a superstar idea of leadership. He did most of the work and did not allocate much responsibility to others. Not only is this kind of leadership exhausting and inefficient, it also does not allow members to take risks and develop their own leadership. It does not give them a stake in the organization and does not empower them to create change.

Oswaldo would lead weekly meetings of representatives from each street vendors' union. However, attendance was sporadic at best; most of the unions did not send a representative every week. He also would

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head some meetings of individual unions trying to give them advice on how to address their problems. Many of the meetings that I witnessed Oswaldo lead began with him remonstrating everyone at the meeting for poor attendance and their lack of commitment. His frustration at the UTQ's decline was always apparent at these meetings. While I sympathize with his desire to yell and scream until things went his way, I know that that is not the way to organize. An organizer must make an organization relevant to his or her members and build relationships to pull in people who have similar needs. Oswaldo's ranting frayed the edges of the community he was trying to foster.

The workshops that the UTQ led and attended were informative but tended to be poorly organized and had no call to action at the end. I have learned that to increase attendance at an event organizers have to put in a lot of legwork. They need to get members to commit to attending well before the meeting and then continuously remind them of their commitment. This job is impossible for one person to do alone. Oswaldo does not have the time to contact every member of the UTQ; however, he did not utilize other leaders within the UTQ to do this either. The members who do come to these workshops are generally talked at and are given no opportunity to discuss methods to create change. I attended a workshop on the current political state of Guatemala. For six hours the other attendees and I were lectured about the major issues Guatemala faces, including violence, unemployment, and internal migration. We were also told about the different political parties running for president in September and why they should vote for the URNG-MAIZ, one of the most left-leaning groups. I could see the other attendees become disengaged, and at no point were they asked to contribute. While it is important to educate people about the political climate in Guatemala, especially with an election coming up, this did not seem to be the way to empower people.

### **Los Vendedores de la Calle**

My summer was divided into two distinct parts at the UTQ. For the first few weeks, I spent a lot of time with Camillo. We overcame my rusty Spanish and his shyness and maintained a steady dialogue about Guatemala, the upcoming elections, the United States, and our lives. Similar to many people living in Xela, Camillo was from an indigenous community outside of the city. He spoke Quiche, one of the Mayan dialects, and was fiercely committed to addressing the inequality between Mayans and Ladinos. He worked at the UTQ in exchange for free room and went to the public university at nights in order to obtain a degree in sustainable economics, which he hopes will help him be more effective. We would walk for hours around the city interviewing street vendors. We made signs for the URNG-MAIZ, the left-wing political party, and traveled to surrounding towns to talk to members of indigenous rights groups. In the second half of the summer I mostly followed Oswaldo to his many meetings and helped with preparations for meetings and conferences that the UTQ held.

The most exciting job I participated in was interviewing street vendors. Camillo and I would walk to different markets around Xela and interview the secretary-general of each union. The questions covered demographics of the union (gender make-up, place of birth, and literacy rates), successes of the union, challenges for the union, and future goals. Talking to the street vendors shed light on many realities within Guatemala. Statistics on literacy, health care, poverty, and rural-to-urban migration that had just been numbers became real in my interactions with the vendors, both in interviews and conferences. These two weeks were the perfect way to get to know the city and the predicament of the street vendors. Camillo explained to me what was going on in the campaigns for the upcoming elections in September for everyone from *alcades* to *diputados*, senators, all the way through the president. I learned that 14 different political groups were running for office, and Camillo told me each one's political ideology and which group/candidates he supported and which he prayed would never be elected.

Street vendors form unions based on location rather than type of product they sell. The area that a union covers is normally a couple of blocks covering anywhere from 20 vendors to 200. In a market that tends to span many blocks, there are often four or five different unions. The unions have formed because selling merchandise on the street is technically illegal. This leaves the street vendors open to exploitation by shop owners and police. The unions have formed in order to advocate for legal permission to sell on the street and to generally improve their conditions.

Most of the unions were made up of indigenous people who had migrated from rural areas. Over the past decade, migration from rural areas has increased significantly due to the changing economy of Guatemala. Land ownership in the rural areas is concentrated in the hands of a small wealthy population. The poor people in these areas have little to no land and are reliant on large farms for any sort of income. People come to the city expecting jobs, but the cities no longer have the jobs to sustain this influx. As technical citizens of a different municipality, migrants don't have the right to vote in city elections. As a result, government officials are less likely to address the migrants' issues.

Migrants are further marginalized by their lack of education. Rural areas are given fewer social services, including education and health resources. As a result, many of the street vendors are illiterate, further exacerbating their problems.

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Despite these challenges, the street vendors have made some impressive gains. Many of the unions now have a legal right to sell on the street, and are less harassed by police officers. They want to create a new indoor market where they will be protected from the elements and be in a cleaner environment.

However, the indoor market solution would not address systemic problems. As soon as street vendors vacate their places on the street and move indoors, other migrants will take their place. The real problems to address are issues of land ownership and unemployment. While Oswaldo sees this contradiction, many of the unions were more concerned with helping their own members rather than trying to create social change. The issues of land rights and unemployment are not within the UTQ's power to tackle alone. The UTQ does work with indigenous communities on land rights issues and has helped cooperatives of farmers set up fair trade coffee farms. However, the organization is based in a city, far from the rural areas, and its ability to assist these communities is limited.

The union members are interested in helping the members of their own community, but not the larger community of marginalized Guatemalans. Until a broader vision of community is used, this dilemma will not change.

### **Una Actividad de los Mayas**

The Pan-Mayan movement attempts to create a broader vision of community within the different Mayan populations. The Mayans' situation has improved since the Civil War. They are no longer physically persecuted; however, they are still subject to poverty and a life of struggle. In order to improve their situation, Mayans have begun to organize and advocate for themselves. This is a complicated and difficult process as the Mayans are isolated from each other and Ladinos by language and geography. In Guatemala, there are 22 distinct Mayan dialects; many do not speak Spanish. Most Mayans live in rural areas where it is difficult to travel between communities and are not given a voice in the cities. Even their dress is different. Most Mayan women wear *traje*, which is a traditional dress, and each pattern is specific to a different community, so it is possible to identify where a person comes from by sight alone. Mayan activists have begun to battle these divisions through the Pan-Mayan movement, trying to embrace their similarities and work together to improve their situations. This movement is controversial; some Mayans are worried about a loss of individuality and tradition as they try to merge into one group, while others believe that creating a larger community is the only way to foster change and are willing to forfeit some tradition. Tradition and what is "authentically" Mayan have since become politicized. Some argue that embracing tradition and identity can be empowering for Mayans, while others feel that remaining in a static culture is impossible and constraining and doesn't allow the community to improve.

This process is not only coming from within the Mayan movement, but also from without. In her article, Carlota McAllister (1996) examines a Mayan Queen contest and explores how the ceremony contributes to ladino (or Spanish descent) influences that have tokenized Mayan identity and used it to maintain cultural hegemony. McAllister attended a ceremony where Mayan women competed for the title of "Mayan Queen" based on how authentically Mayan they were. The ceremony she saw was an effort by the government to showcase Mayan culture as one of the natural wonders of Guatemala. McAllister discusses the theme of authenticity and its effects:

*Authenticity has often served as a source of empowerment and its availability mutually to tactics of resistance and strategies of power shows it should not be laughed off. Without detracting from critical struggles that base themselves in authenticity; however, the structures which generate the authentic should be recognized. They lay its burden only on certain shoulders and transform the inauthentic into the corrupt.<sup>6</sup>*

Throughout my time at the UTQ I spent a lot of time with Rosario, the secretary. Like Camillo, she was also Mayan and spoke Quiche. While Camillo moved away from his family and into the city, Rosario continued to live with her family outside of Xela and continues to wear *traje*. She's two years older than me, and we became fast friends. We told each other about our families and lives. She tried to teach me Quiche and I tried to teach her how to swim, both with varying degrees of success. A friendly and kind person, she invited me to "*una actividad*" during my first week interning to celebrate the Mayan culture. I tried to understand her explanation of the activity, but was only able to catch key words like "*reina*," and "*cultura*." I wondered whether Rosario might be talking about a similar celebration to the one McAllister wrote about. Not wanting to miss a chance to get my own perspective, or miss a chance at making a friend with Rosario, I eagerly accepted the invitation.

I had only a vague idea of what to expect as we got off the bus and walked up the dirt path to a small house. From piecing together information I had learned from McAllister's piece and questioning Rosario further, I assumed that the activity we were going to was an election for the Mayan Queen of a community. Rosario said that these ceremonies were part of an effort to preserve the Mayan culture and that she was the Queen for the UTQ. I realized she wasn't competing, though she still played some sort of role in the celebration that I had not yet discovered.

It turns out that the ceremony I witnessed and the ceremony McAllister discussed were different in more ways than that one was the election of the Mayan Queen and the other was the celebration of the winner. This ceremony was organized by the community and was clearly a way of celebrating Mayan culture and building community. The community did not seem to have a static definition of authenticity; throughout the night I noticed inconsistencies that clearly demonstrated that they were willing to adopt technology that suited them. We ate dinner with the

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other contestants and their families in the house of the community's winner from last year. As I looked around the room, I ate my tamales and rice off of Styrofoam plates and listened to the music of live musicians while a stereo and TV sat dormant to my left. Men and children walked around in Western-style clothing, while the women wore *traje*, traditional Mayan clothing.

Eventually, we all began to march out of the house and down the dirt path. The procession was cut short as the rain began, and we all loaded into pick-up trucks that took us into town. We came to a large meeting hall, in which the floor was lined with Eucalyptus leaves, and I could smell more burning. I sat for an hour or so while preparations continued. Rosario had abandoned me for her friends, and I was able to sit and observe until I was called upon to take picture upon picture of Rosario and her friends, who would switch clothes and model again for the camera. Eventually, the ceremony (and my confusion) began. Several long speeches were made followed by performances by traditional dancers.

Finally, the announcer began to call up the girls, and one by one they danced their way to the stage and each gave a speech discussing the importance of preserving culture. They then sat on stage and watched further cultural performances. However, they looked as restless as I felt. I was surprised and amused to see them begin to take out their cell phones on stage to take more pictures and make and receive phone calls.

While these intrusions would not have been permitted in the national event that McAllister witnessed, they did not seem to be treated as intrusions in this community-based event. Rosario and other members of this Mayan community believe that the way to preserve Mayan rights was to preserve the culture. These celebrations help the community come together and celebrate their culture. This strengthens the social ties they have to each other, and as a result, the Pan-Mayan movement.

### **Feliz Cumpleanos**

Sitting in a *colectivo* with a friend, I felt an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*. Why do I recognize this road? I know I haven't been in this area before. It wasn't until we arrived on top of a hill that I understood. Out in the distance, I could see the words *Granja Penal* in large white letters on the grass, and even farther I could just make out a familiar dilapidated building. From the beautiful large house with sweeping lawn, where I was attending the birthday party of a 13-year-old named Alejandra, I could see the orphanage where I occasionally volunteered the summer before. The contrast between the upper-middle-class birthday party and my experiences at the orphanage was striking. From these two experiences, I could see how children are socialized depending on their class and how that reinforce social inequalities. I also learned how community can sometimes be used to maintain the status quo, rather than effecting change.

When my friend and I arrived, many of the adults were sitting outside talking and watching Marlene, Alejandra's mother, organize activities for the children. We were all (including my friend and I) divided into teams for a series of races and games. The partygoers, ranging in age from 4 to 15, listened carefully to Marlene explain the rules and waiting their turn to receive the supplies for each race. We had an egg toss, three-legged race, and other games. The children all followed the rules to the letter. No one complained when they lost or bragged when they won. After lunch, the adult-supervised games were over, so the kids organized games themselves. Again they played fairly. After working and interacting with children in the States, I was shocked at how well these children played together. I learned that the private school these children attended, beyond providing an elite education, emphasizes cooperation and camaraderie between the students. When Alejandra, or one of her peers was struggling in school, their parents would help them with their homework. If this failed, they would hire private tutors, including my friends at the hostel, to help their children in the areas that they struggled.

I met this wonderful and warm group of people through the owners of my hostel. For most of this past summer, I stayed in Hostal Don Diego. I lived with a group of other foreign volunteers and travelers. The more permanent residents, who like me were staying for at least a couple months, had time to become close to each other as well as with the owners of our hostel, Ivan and Andrea. As we became closer to Ivan and Andrea, we were brought into their circle of friends. Ivan and Andrea grew up with many of their friends. This group of friends is incredibly supportive of each other and is warm and welcoming to others. They invited us to different get-togethers, like birthday parties and other celebrations. As I spent more time with them, I could see how close they all are, and ready to help each other out with a personal or business problem. For example, Ivan connected many of his friends to English tutors who were staying at the hostel, and his friends often recommended customers for Ivan.

Though I had a great time playing with the kids and talking to Ivan and Andrea and their friends, I couldn't help but occasionally glance over at the orphanage at the bottom of the hill. Last summer, another friend, Stefanie, volunteered at the orphanage; I would occasionally tag along with her. The orphanage, which sleeps around 50 children, is about as large as the one-family house of the Alejandra's family. It was on about the same amount of land as well. The term "orphanage" is deceptive, since many children at the orphanage had parents; however, the parents could no longer afford to support them. These children were the poorest of the poor and had little positive influences in their lives to encourage them to succeed.

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There was little to no adult supervision at the orphanage, and our responsibilities were to play with the kids and make them feel loved and entertained. This job proved to be trying as organized games fell apart quickly, often before they began. If we could explain a game and its rules well enough to begin to play, it would generally dissolve into cheating and fighting. I gave up on organized games and would try to play with some kids one on one while the rest of the children ran around with little to no structure. The

children went to school in the mornings, if they were able to wake themselves up in time for the bus, and were encouraged to do their homework, but weren't given individual attention and help.

These two experiences were more illuminating than anything I could read about. The affluent community supports its members, the sense of community and camaraderie fosters business relationships, and the community can keep itself in power this way. By sending their children to an affluent school that teaches this kind of cooperation, the parents reinforce these values in the young. When their kids are struggling in schools, more affluent families can afford to hire private tutors. This is not to say that the values this school teaches are bad, or that the children at the orphanage are always wild and mean to each other. The wealthy children have had the opportunity to attend a school that has the resources to teach these values in an effective way. They have parents who are present and have the time and money to reinforce these values, and support their children in other ways. Poorer children who attend public schools do not have access to schools of that caliber. The children at the orphanage also do not have parents to reinforce these values or a network of family friends who can employ them when they are old enough to work.

I am lucky that I had the opportunity to interact with members from different social strata of Guatemalan society. I could see how the ties built between the more affluent families reinforced the status quo. These were not bad people but merely want to help themselves, and those they love, to succeed. I saw how hard poorer members of society worked to no avail, and do not see an easy future for the children at the orphanage. I know Ivan and Andrea and their friends would never want a child to live the way the children in the orphanage do. They are loving people who care about others. However, because they are comfortable and they have a support network, they will not work for the social change necessary to help the impoverished. Community can be used to maintain the status quo rather than working towards social change, and inequality reinforces structures and communities that make it more difficult for social change to occur.

## Violencia y Política

Recent Guatemalan Headlines:

"Guatemala's EPIDEMIC of KILLING"

"Guatemala campaign DEATHS mount"

"EU ALARM at Guatemala VIOLENCE"

"BULLETS overshadow Guatemala ballot"

Throughout the summer, I followed the presidential campaigns. All of the 14 candidates promised to change Guatemala. The most left of these groups, the URNG-MAIZ promised to tax the rich (who notoriously avoid paying taxes) and create more social services for the poor. The more right-wing groups, of which there were many, promised to crack down on crime. In early September, the first round of elections eliminated 12 of the 14 presidential candidates. On November 4, there was a run-off election between Alvaro Colom and Otto Perez Molina. Colom ran on a center-left platform promising social and economic reform. Crime has been a central issue in this election, within the political parties alone; there were 50 political deaths. Both candidates promised to fight crime, but along with Molina's other ultra-right policies, his slogan "*Mano Dura*" (strong fist) promises a no-tolerance, all-out war on crime. His campaign appealed to many who are afraid of the growing gang and drug problems; however, human rights groups and others were worried about the implications of Molina's possible presidency, fearing he would instate martial law and suspend constitutional rights.

The UTQ attempted to address the issue of violence and the political context in typical fashion — by holding an *actividad*. A woman from Guatemala City came to the UTQ and did a presentation on crime and the different political parties' strategies on addressing crime. As usual, there was no real call to action beyond trying to convince the participants to vote. While the UTQ wished the URNG-MAIZ's candidate would win, presenters pragmatically asked people to vote for Colom, whom they believed was the best option of those who had the money to win. While I thought the meeting was ineffective, the information on crime and impunity was useful and stunning to me.

In 2006, there were 5,885 homicides in a country of 12 million people<sup>7</sup>. Violence and impunity seem to have taken over the country. Both in and out of Guatemala, I read reports of the increasing violence against women, the ever-rising homicide rate, the news that this was the bloodiest election season in 20 years, and the lack of police effort to do anything about these problems. I was told by locals to never walk alone at night. I was practically ordered to stay away from Guatemala City, where all my local friends had a horror story about themselves or someone close to them.



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In 2006, 97% of all homicides were not investigated<sup>8</sup>. And why would the police punish perpetrators? Many of the police *are* the perpetrators of these violent crimes. The *Policia Nacional Civil* (PNC), the national police, is made up of hundreds of ex-military soldiers; ex-officers fill 30 of the most powerful positions within the PNC<sup>9</sup>. These policemen were not punished for their war crimes and don't seem interested in punishing others. Many people I spoke to were more afraid of the police than they were of criminals among the broader citizenry.

In 2006, there were 17 homicides a day. Where does this violence come from? What has made Guatemala so violent? Crime is not just a result of impunity. One must look at the international and national contexts in order to fully understand why Guatemala is so violent.

Part of the reason seems to stem from the 36-year civil war. Thirty-six *years*. That's longer than I've been alive. Despite the Peace Accords that were signed, no effort seems to have been made to heal the country. Mayans still live in poverty, they are still subject to discrimination, and the disparity between the rich and the poor, and urban areas and rural areas, is overwhelming. Most Mayans are illiterate; I saw this firsthand at conferences when I had to write many participants' names for them.

Because of the poverty and inequality pervading the country, many people have migrated to the States to try to create a better life for themselves. In the States, they live in cities and their children are marginalized and exposed to gang culture. Often the children who get involved in gangs are caught and sent back to Guatemala, where they bring with them a culture of violence. This is not to blame the States for the gangs pervading Guatemala, especially in the capital city; it is just one aspect of crime. Guatemala is also a stop for drug traffickers traveling from Colombia to the States. As many Guatemalans are poor, they become involved in the drug trade in order to survive.

### **Mi Propia Experiencia**

I experienced some of the reported violence firsthand. Towards the beginning of my trip, a few friends and I were walking back to our hostel around 10:30 pm. We did not think to be cautious as 10:30 is still relatively early and there were five of us. As a result, the five men who mugged us took us by surprise. I did not even realize what was happening until one was digging through my pockets looking for valuables. We were lucky. Aside from a few scrapes and bruises, none of us were injured. They took some cash, our cell phones, and my passport, all things that could be replaced. The worst parts were the inconvenience of getting a new passport and the fear they instilled in me.

However, I did not stay afraid for long. Despite these statistics and my own brush with violence, fear and violence were not a part of my

everyday reality. Xela was not a particularly dangerous city to me. My attitude was that I could get mugged anytime, in any city, anywhere in the world. In fact, even after the mugging, Xela felt safer than other cities I've visited. Perhaps it's the sense of community throughout Xela. All the locals seem to know each other. After only a few weeks, it became impossible for me to walk more than three blocks without running into someone I knew. Or perhaps it's the openness and generous spirit of everyone I met. Within minutes of meeting new people, I would feel welcome in their lives, and was often invited to their homes. Perhaps it's naïve, but I can't imagine anyone I met committing a violent crime.

The community in Xela made me feel safe, but continued violence erodes community. When people don't feel safe leaving their houses at night, they lose social activities that build connections among each other. When people don't trust their neighbors, community is further eroded.

### **Realidad?**

It's hard to explain to people that while the statistics on violence are real and something the country must deal with, that is not the everyday reality. This task is made more difficult by what they know of my experience and by news coverage of Guatemala. In the weeks and months leading up to the elections, I read both *La Prensa Libre*, a popular Guatemalan newspaper, and international newspapers. When I read *La Prensa Libre*, I read articles discussing each candidate, the debates they were having, and the issues they would have to address. Upon my return to the States, as I eagerly searched the media for news of Guatemala, all I could find were articles peppered with shocking headlines discussing Guatemala's fast spiral into violence and impunity.

It's hard to express the despair I feel while watching a place I love dissolve into violence. But I also feel incredibly frustrated at the disparity between the Guatemala I saw and the Guatemala in the news. Guatemala is not just a state on the brink of failure. It's a country where people took me into their homes and patiently listened to my halting Spanish and answered my barrage of questions.

I didn't see the pervasive violence, but I saw poverty and discrimination every day. I witnessed the marginalization of the Mayan communities. If these problems, along with a corrupt police force, cannot be solved, the violence will not cease. In order to foster change, communities must be strengthened and given a larger voice. On November 4, Colom, the UTQ's practical choice, was elected. He promises to use a multi-pronged strategy to combat crime. Eradicating poverty and inequality, and thus addressing structural violence, is a key tactic in his strategy. With a new president and new vision, perhaps Guatemala will be able to move beyond its bloody past and into a more optimistic future.

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## Notes

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