

Guatemala Log (I)

Travel Log

By Cristina Grigore

September 14, 2010

March 5, 2010

6 AM on the plane: If I could reach out my arm, it would be one with the plane's wing. I embrace the sun with my eyelashes and I curl up next to the window so as to warm my face. My throat still hurts. I hope the weather in Guatemala will speed up my recovery. For fear of missing my plane I didn't get any shuteye all night. But I did get to talk to the folks back home. Talking to my loved ones in Romania and flying to somewhere new gives me a sense of fulfillment and happiness. I drink my tomato juice instead of having breakfast. I usually only crave tomato juice when I'm on a plane and lately I've been drinking it every two or three weeks. Next to me sits Eliza, who's from Guatemala. She's headed to El Salvador but up to Miami we have the same flight.



Bienvenido a Miami: It's only 9 AM when we land in Miami. The palm trees, the ocean, the people speaking Spanish are a good transition towards Guatemala. I have breakfast with Eliza. The waiters call us "preciosa" and "bonita". The omelette is excellent. Eliza is telling me about Guatemala. She likes to talk about her country but she's glad she's living in the US. She has three children, her husband is American and they run a business together in Nashville. I listen to her talking on the phone, half in English, half in Spanish (what is known as "Spanglish"). She's telling her family about meeting me, she corrects herself by calling me Cristiana and not Cristina and carries on with her conversation. She makes sure I have enough phone numbers to call while I'm in her country, including that of her niece, Silvia. She invites me to visit her when I get back to Nashville. She gives me a wide, "Americanized" smile when we part, the smile of a woman who leads a better life in the US than she could ever have in Guatemala.

Vanderbilt colleagues: At the airport I meet three more colleagues from the Vanderbilt Law School. We're 25 students heading to Guatemala on different flights. We're all part of *Project Pyramid*, an interdisciplinary course offered by the Vanderbilt Business School. This course is aimed at finding solutions for reducing poverty and supporting the betterment of those who are at the "base of the pyramid". I'm part of the microfinance group and our goal is to find ways in which an American foundation can build more houses for a poor community close to Guatemala City.

The Caribbean Sea: The flight from Miami to Guatemala City takes us over The Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. It's my first trip to a tropical country. The colors of the water, the sand and the islands I glimpse from the plane are breathtaking. I never thought I'd get to see so many shades of blue and green so beautifully blended together. I think of colorful fish, dolphins, palm trees and a looooot of sun. I daydream about the time I'll know how to swim, when I'll be diving and exploring the underwater world.



Airplane friends: I usually meet all sorts of interesting people when I'm on a plane. This time I was glad that the seat next to me was free and I could relax, look out the window and read. But who can resist when they're offered chips on a flight that serves no food? That is how I got to talk with Wendy, my neighbor on the other side of the empty seat. Wendy is a dance teacher in the US and since last year she's been going to Guatemala as a volunteer with *Habitat for Humanity*, to build houses for a poor community. I told her I was going there with a similar purpose. She spoke about the experience she had the previous year and she got teary-eyed when she remembered the family for which she had worked and how happy the children had been to have a house. I was surprised to find out that the volunteers from *Habitat for Humanity* not only covered all the costs, but even paid a fee to be part of the program. Wendy is close to retiring but she wants to keep working for a few more years so she can afford to help the poor families in Guatemala.

Love at first sight: We land in Guatemala a couple of hours later. I meet Matt, the only PhD student in the team. We follow the instructions given to us by the organizers of *Project Pyramid*. We exchange our dollars for quetzals. My spring jacket gets unbearably heavy and hot, and so do my boots. The air is hot and it smells different. The other colleagues are waiting for us at the airport exit. We get on the minibus and we're all marveling: "Look at that flower!", "Look at that tree!". The minibus is crowded and noisy. I look out the window and I can't believe the traffic: I'm reminded of scenes from Indian movies, with bustling streets and children on top of cars, fruits, colors, drivers who, for lack of road signs, explain and gesture while sticking their heads out the window. It all becomes clear: we're far from the United States and Guatemala is awesome.



5 Hotel:* We get off quickly, grab the luggage perched on top of the minibus and climb up the stairs of the hotel. Tonight we're staying in Guatemala City, area 10, right downtown. In the hotel lobby we meet other colleagues and professors. I'm rooming with Alison, the only other colleague from the Microfinance group. We go up to our room and we marvel at how spacious it is. There's a sitting room, two double beds, a glass wall, a huge mirror and a small wardrobe (who needs so many clothes in a country with such a hot climate?). It's almost 5 PM and the sun still shines hot. I plop on the bed, wrap myself in a velvet blanket and enjoy the sun which casts a different light and warmth than what I'm used to.

Marvin: We eat at a Guatemalan restaurant. There's more than 30 people: all the students, Victor Bart – the coordinator of Project Pyramid, Ted Fisher and Avery from the Anthropology department, a Guatemalan family and a couple of locals, friends of Ted's. The meal is delicious: avocado, shrimp, sauces, good bread, etc. After we eat, Ted introduces Marvin to us: he's an Archeology student, who has studied for a year in the States, and comes from a modest family with Mayan roots. Marvin, who is a bit embarrassed, tells us how much it has helped him to study for a year in the States, and how, back in his country, he feels caught between several cultures: on the one hand he is different from the other members of the ethnic group he is a part of and on the other hand he is not fully accepted by the "dominant population" of Guatemala. Although it is a small country, Guatemala has several ethnic groups and different dialects are being spoken besides Spanish, the official language. Racism, discrimination and interethnic conflicts are very common in Guatemala. I confess that I can somewhat relate to this and that I also belong to a minority group, which is being discriminated against, known as "Roma" or "Gypsy".

Shoes: I only brought along a pair of mountain boots and after a day on the road, with the hot evening air, the boots are the last thing I'd want to wear. I start getting angry and wonder why I hadn't thought of bringing some lighter shoes along. I think of different possibilities and I imagine how my more comfortable shoes and sandals are sitting uselessly in the closet. I stomp heavily, but I don't dare take off my shoes and walk barefoot on the streets of Guatemala City.

Fiesta: I'm tired and I want to go to bed early, there's a long week ahead of me. But I can't resist the temptation of going out again; after all, it is my first night in Guatemala. In the meantime, Jim, our coordinating teacher, arrives from San Francisco. He joins us on the noisy streets of the city. The

loud music and cheerful atmosphere remind me of Vama Veche. We end up in a colorful bar, in the middle of a party. In the next ten minutes, Alison and I are on the dance floor. The Latino rhythm, the coconut and pineapple drinks put us in good spirits. We're joined by other colleagues. I'm one with the music. The fatigue and worries melt away on the dance floor. I close my eyes and stretch out my arms. My experience in Guatemala is just beginning.

(To be continued...)

Translated by: **Diana Maftai** and **Mădălina Borcău**

MTTLC, Bucharest University

LiterNet.ro

Guatemala Log (II)

Travel Log

By **Cristiana Grigore**

September 28, 2010

March 6, 2010

Breakfast with UNDP: It's only 8:30 AM. We're having breakfast with two representatives from the UNDP (United Nation Development Program). While enjoying the omelette, coffee, cereal, pineapple and watermelon, we're paying close attention to the PowerPoint presentation, with too many charts for such an early hour. Linda, the program coordinator, describes the situation in Guatemala, in what concerns finance, education, human resources development, etc. Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Central America. The majority of the Guatemalan people works illegally or "under the table" and is poorly paid, and the education system is deficient, especially in the rural areas. Guatemala is dependent on foreign aid such as USAID. Many Guatemalans work in the US and send money regularly to their families back home. Linda asks us if we know which city is considered the second largest in Guatemala.

A colleague says Los Angeles. It's a favorite joke among those who work on migration. I start to wonder how such a beautiful country can have so many problems. It's difficult for me to imagine children suffering from malnutrition or who have to walk for an hour in the scorching sun to get to the nearest school. The UNDP data help me form an opinion on the situation in Guatemala, but I feel like some information has been left out of the equation. When there is so much money coming in illegally, when more than 50% of the workforce is working without a contract or any kind of insurance, it's hard to tell exactly what the real economic situation in Guatemala is.

Medical center: We stop at a medical center in Zone 1. It's a building that has been bought by the Shalom Foundation and is now being renovated; in a couple of months it will become a surgical center for children; the students from Vanderbilt will come here as interns. Maria Jose, the representative of Shalom in Guatemala, shows us each floor, the operating room, the waiting room, the place where the kitchen will be, the patients' rooms, the doctors' office, etc. The rooms seem small and dark; the ceilings are too low, our heads can almost reach them; the hallways are cramped and the staircases long and narrow. It's the smallest hospital I've ever visited. I go out on the terrace to warm up in the sun. Paul, another colleague from Microfinance, joins me. He is fascinated by how big the hospital is, by how many facilities it has. He takes pictures to show his father, who is a doctor and often works in less privileged countries. He is convinced his father will see the hospital as a "paradise". What?? I feel like he's playing a joke. But he's actually serious. He tells me about hospitals in poorer and less developed countries and the precarious conditions in which his father works. Suddenly I feel lucky to have the hospitals we do in Romania; it is incredible how things can be so relative and how what we refer to when we make a comparison can make all the difference.



Antigua: It's almost 3 o'clock when we arrive in Antigua. The streets are paved and narrow, the houses low and crammed together. The locals are selling fruit in the streets. I carry my luggage on a small sidewalk. Good thing that the hotel isn't too far away. The rooms are different from those in Guatemala City. You can barely fit two beds in. The bathroom is small. You can feel the humidity in the air. I'm rooming with Alison again and although we both can tell the difference in comfort, we'll try not to be too fussy, but content with what we have. Our room is on the ground floor and the window is right next to my bed. From where we are, we can see and hear almost everything that goes on inside the hotel, but more importantly, we can be seen and heard. Although I'd like to rest, the lack of privacy makes me go out for a walk with my other colleagues. Antigua is a tourist city. It's very easy to get lost in it and just as easy to find your way back to the hotel.



Unintentional tourist: I wander on the streets of Antigua. The light is warm, the people friendly, and the colors diverse. There are also plenty of shops. I end up going in and out of them, looking for postcards and souvenirs, although I hadn't planned on playing the tourist today. I drag my tired feet, which are objecting to how tight my boots are. I fall behind and get separated from my other colleagues. I meet up with one of them again: Eli, from the

Divinity School. We walk idly through the city. We stop and watch a harlequin that is handing out balloons to the children and performing tricks. We continue to take pictures, watch the smoking volcanoes and explore the shops.



New shoes: I find a stall with all sorts of shoes and sandals. My eyes light up but I try not to show my enthusiasm too much. Eliza taught me to be careful with the merchants and to haggle over the prices, because they try to fool even her. I ask how much the shoes cost and I'm told they're 95 quetzales. I have a vague idea of how much that is in dollars and I promptly tell the woman that it's far too much, that it's impossible for a pair of sandals to cost so much. She drops the price to 85. I look at her worriedly and tell her that I can't pay so much money for a pair of sandals. She drops it to 75. I play my last card and tell her, in a very serious manner, that the sandals will break after wearing them a couple of times, so I can't give her more than 50. As expected, she tells me it's too little. I concede and offer her 60. I don't waver in my decision and...victory...she sells me the sandals for 60 quetzales (the equivalent of \$6). Invigorated by the negotiations and proud of my new acquisition, I resume my walk on the colorful and busy streets, in the warm light of the setting sun.



Hookah: Tourist cities have places that have nothing to do with local tradition but which are welcome anytime and anywhere. Such a place is a Turkish restaurant on the main street. I'm with Eli, Alison and Paul (a second Paul). We decide to stay there and smoke hookah. Next to us is a group of youngsters from El Salvador. I can't help myself and start dancing to the Arabian music. I am reminded of the time I represented Indonesia at Global Village, an event organized by AIESEC in Bucharest, when the visitors would stop to take pictures with "the girl from Indonesia." I had a similar experience in Timisoara, at IRAF (International Romani Art Festival), when I took part in a fashion show... each time enjoying the many flashes and the attention of the passers-by. I stop after a few minutes and sit on the mountain of pillows, like I read in fairytales that princesses do. ☺ We enjoy the cherry-flavored hookah and, through the smoke and the smell of incense sticks, we tell each other bits of our exciting lives as wandering students.

Liz: I get back to the hotel around 8, ready to work and go to sleep early; my colleagues return with me, ready to change and go out again. One of the hosts, who is sitting on the sofa next to the entrance (a sort of reception area in a "real" hotel) tells me that someone was asking for me and left a message. "For me? Are you sure it was for me?" The host had already looked into it, had found out how I looked, in what room I was staying and what my name was...so no doubt about it. I'm handed a notebook where a name and a phone number are written down. I remember now that I had

exchanged emails with someone working in Guatemala named Liz. I gave her the address in Antigua but I wasn't sure she would visit me. My colleagues start teasing me: "Oh, yeah, Cristiana, who meets people on planes and gets visited at the hotel by an unknown person." I feel very grateful to Liz for making the effort to visit me at the hotel; I'm curious to know her, so I give her a call.

Volunteer in Guatemala: Liz is happy I called; and I'm happy to talk to her, although we don't know much one about the other. We're leaving Antigua early the next day, so the only option would be to see her tonight. As I'm impressed by her nice gesture, I suggest we meet. This spoils my plans to stay at the hotel, to Alison, Paul and Eli's delight, who are also excited about the mysterious rendezvous downtown with the "unknown girl." The meeting turns out to be warm and friendly. Liz has just finished college, is living in NY and has decided to become a volunteer in Guatemala for at least six months. She works at a children's center, in Zone 18, one of the most notorious areas in Guatemala City. She tells us about the activities they have there (the center works with almost 600 children) and about the children's poor living conditions, looking through trash for food and things to recycle. Once again, although I understand it from a rational point of view, I find it hard to imagine that something like that actually exists. I introduce Liz to my other colleagues. They "click" almost instantly: they're all Americans, all approximately the same age. They get ready to order beer and I get ready to go back to the hotel; much later than I had planned, but much earlier than the others.

(To be continued...)

Translated by: **Diana Maftei** and **Mihaela Dănăciă**
MTTLC, Bucharest University

Guatemala Log (III)

Travel Log

By Cristiana Grigore

October 12, 2010

March 7, 2010

The Mayan culture: We are leaving Antigua and we're heading to Tecpan; Ted, our anthropology professor, is telling us that we are going to visit a Mayan community. For me, as well as for many of my colleagues, the Maya peoples are just something out of history and National Geographic documentaries. To start with, we visit a family who prepares lunch for the whole group. The women cooking outside, the well dressed children, the puppies and the nice weather remind me of my grandparents' village, of celebrations, when large feast tables are set up in the "yard". We enjoy the garden, take pictures with the children, listen to stories and buy souvenirs.



Picnic: We head towards the Mayan pyramids, stopping at a nearby park to eat. Like any traveler, I enjoy this small breather. I stretch out on the grass and savor the absolutely delicious food. The borsch is just like the one my mother makes. There's fresh cheese and tortilla too. We aren't the only ones

out for a picnic, there are also families with children, their cars resembling our Dacias, which 15-20 years ago could be seen everywhere. Most of the women are dressed in traditional clothes, but the men have given them up in favor of jeans. They're all calm, cheerful and curious to see who the foreigners visiting their community are. It's as if I've teleported myself into a scene out of *Braveheart* (before the war). I'm fascinated by the simple life within the community, the greenery, the purity of the place and the people's gentleness. I'm taken back in time.



International student: I'm the last one still sitting on the grass. I gather my things and slowly get up. Jim sees me and waits for me. We walk leisurely. He asks me if I've noticed that people are watching me with curiosity; I tell him it's not the first time and that people don't know what to make of me and are wondering where I'm from. Jim tells me that they're probably confused because I look like them but I'm with a group of Americans. Yesterday, while we were all waiting in front of the bus, I looked at every one of my colleagues and asked myself if there was any other international student. Because I couldn't pinpoint anyone, I asked Paul; he told me that other than me there was just Israel from Mexico. I'm surprised to notice that out of 30 people only two are not from the US. "But does it matter?" Paul asks me, seeing my surprise. And really...*does* it matter?



Marvin: We're getting close to the ruins. Maaaarvin!!! I'm happy to see him again. This time he's not the shy young man at our table, he's the group's guide, the one who is familiar with these places, the one telling us the legends of his forefathers. I whisper to Jim that I'm most excited not about seeing these pyramids or the tour he's taking the group on (I'm not interested in these sort of events) but about the fact that I'm seeing Marvin in a leadership position, facing his fear of speaking in front of the group and overcoming his insecurity about not speaking English perfectly. Deep down I'm celebrating; I take pictures with my colleagues, climb the pyramids and congratulate Marvin for being our guide. I look at him and my eyes sparkle as if after an unexpected victory.

At a crossroads: Avery lets us know that it's time to get back to the bus. We, the ones from Microfinance, are going back to Guatemala City, while the other three groups are continuing their journey into the land of the quetzal. Right before leaving, one of the locals works up the courage and asks Alison to take a picture with him. With his family giggling in the front, us giggling in the back, with the Dacia-like car on the horizon, Alison smiles and poses like a real diva; and then, amidst the clapping and cheering we speed off towards Guatemala.



The gym. We've barely crossed the threshold of the hotel room (the same hotel from the first day) and Alison and I are happy to be once again in a bright and spacious room. Jim tells us that the hotel in Antigua was OK but that he had missed the comfort of this hotel. The other colleagues didn't even get to vocalize how glad they were to be back "in the lap of luxury", because they're already at the gym. Alison and I catch up with them. We sit next to each other at the exercise machines. I go slowly at first and then faster. My thoughts drift to Romania, passing through the US. I think about the people back home. I go faster and faster. I pick up the pace until my thoughts scatter on the treadmill.

Ready to work: Having run, bathed and combed our hair, we head to an Italian restaurant. Jim sets the tone with an "all right guys", it's time to get back to work. Tomorrow we'll visit the community we'll work with for the whole week and it's time to map out the course of action. While enjoying the pasta, shrimp, mozzarella, white wine, red wine and fruit cocktails, we discuss what we have to do in the following days. Jim talks about what strategy to adopt. Steve thinks up some questions for the community. Alison takes notes on the paper tablecloth and I build a swimming pool out of a bottle cap and a house out of the warm, soft wax of a candle.

(To be continued...)

Translated by: **Diana Maftei** and **Mădălina Borcău**

MTTLC, Bucharest University

Guatemala Log (IV)

Travel Log

By **Cristiana Grigore**

October 26, 2010

March 8, 2010

Mission (im)possible?: Alison, executive director at the Shalom Foundation is also on the minibus heading towards Las Conchas. We're meeting her for the first time. Steve breaks the ice and tells her that we're part of Project Pyramid and that the project was inspired by Muhammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank, the father of microcredit and winner of the Nobel Prize. Yunus studied at Vanderbilt with a Fulbright scholarship. Following in his footsteps, Project Pyramid sets out to find practical solutions for the economic and social development of poor communities. "Project Pyramid started with a visit to India, followed in 2009 by one to Bangladesh. Because of cultural barriers, of different time zones and great distance, we decided to continue in Guatemala; it's closer and the project can have sustainability", Kent continued to explain. Alison shows him on the laptop the research we did before the trip. Our aim is to help the foundation build more houses, that's why we're investigating the possibility of a new model: a mix between the strategy the foundation has had so far, of building free houses, and the families' partial contribution, through microcredit. Is what we're proposing even possible? I look at Jim and Alison; I turn and look at Kent and Steve. I wonder when we ended up having the serious talk on the minibus.

Las Conchas: The minibus stops in a cloud of dust. We've arrived in Las Conchas. We put on lotion so we won't get burnt, put on sunglasses, grab our notebooks and get off. Rudy is waiting for us. He's one of the beneficiaries of a house built by the Shalom Foundation. Rudy worked in constructions back in the States, so he's used to Americans and more or less speaks the language. He will be our guide in Las Conchas. We start the field research by getting to know his family. He's happy to answer our questions. He works "by the day", he's paid poorly, sometimes late or not at all. He's good at

building wooden houses but he'd do anything to earn an honest buck, especially because every month he has to pay mortgage for the land where the house is built. He's happy to have a place to live and to not be sleeping among bugs and rats. God was kind and helped him. The children in the area have "sniffed" us out. They can tell we're foreigners and are swarming around us. We give them gingerbread and we go on walking in the neighborhood.



Give me some glasses: This time we enter an improvised house, with a tin roof and ramshackle walls, covered with cloth. We meet Wendy. She is a nice and friendly woman. She doesn't look more than 30 years old. Her daughter Hillary shyly accepts a piece of gingerbread. Wendy has another boy, Eric, who is now in school. Her husband leaves for work at 5 A.M and comes back between 7 and 9 P.M, Monday to Saturday. Many of the men in the community have a similar schedule. They don't complain; they're happy to have work and be able to pay for the land they bought. Las Conchas is a new community and many of the locals haven't been there long. Wendy moved in a year ago. She likes it here because compared to the city it is a safer place and her children are safe when they go to school or out to play. When Alison asks what her biggest worry or her strongest need is, she looks at us and tears come to her eyes. She lacks a sturdy house where the wind won't be able to break in. The cloth is not enough, she is worried for her children's health, especially because they are more sensitive; she is used to sleeping on the ground. We hadn't seen this coming; her honesty and suffering leave us speechless; we thank her and go out. We put our sunglasses back on; this time to hide our tears.



“You are smarter than me”: We scatter. I’m with Alison and Rudy and we’re waiting to visit a house; the others are talking with the locals, studying the area, taking pictures of the children. I sit on a pile of bricks, used for building houses. I feel OK sitting there, I remember my parents and the moment when, with similar bricks, they built a new house in the countryside. At the other end of the world I find the same bricks that, as a young girl, I would see being made out of cement, lime, and sand, and then left to dry in the sun. I ask Rudy what he wants for his little girl; he prizes education above all. He tells me he’s always tried to surround himself with people that are smarter than him, from who he can learn. It’s exactly what my father used to say, to always surround myself with people smarter than me and that it is better to be the worst of the best rather than the smarter among those who have nothing to teach you. I can’t but wonder; can this belief be part of the success of those simple or poor but who want more for themselves and for their children?



Give me that hat too: Why is this place so familiar? My grandparents' village has houses with at least three rooms, roads and paved streets, water in the wells and firewood for the stove. And yet, something's the same. I remember my grandfather who always used to say that he had bought a slice of the village and built houses for all his children. I never understood why it was such a big deal for him. Could it be because the generation before him had gone through similar experiences? I don't know. It's getting unbearably hot. The sun is burning strong. I need a cap too.

From Berkley to Vanderbilt: We're on our way back to Guatemala City. Jim, our coordinator, is in front of me. Jim Schorr is a professor at the Business School and teaches Social Entrepreneurship and Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability. I ask him how come he's interested precisely in the role that the business world has in determining social changes. He tells me that because his father was an executive and his mother a peace activist, he was always "in between". During the MBA he became interested in the social responsibility of a business. He believes that the purpose of a company should be greater than bringing in profit. His career has focused on creating new business opportunities and ideas that would benefit the poor. Thanks to his activities in San Francisco, the people from Berkley asked him to teach social entrepreneurship. He accepted without even asking if he

would get paid. Because he wanted to be closer to his family that lives in Memphis, this year he moved to Vanderbilt. When I was wondering whether to join his course, he was recommended to me as being “one of the best minds in the world regarding Social Enterprise.” Now I understand why.

Cultural differences: We arrive at the hotel and before anything else we take some time to talk about how the first day went. A lot has happened and we have a lot of information to process. My colleagues are floored by the hospitality and the openness the people in the community have shown. They are surprised by the ease and confidence with which these people have talked about what income they have, what loans, what needs and wishes. Kent tells us that when he had worked for a poor community in the States, he was only welcomed in two houses. I find nothing unusual about that; in Romania that happens all the time; people are welcoming and willing to talk about their situation. I tell them that keeping their family income and such information a secret is rather something Americans do. They can't believe such openness exists and I can't believe they are so surprised.



The gym (2): At the gym I meet up with Peter and Paul. I stretch my arms, roll my neck and warm up my ankles. Peter does an exercise I've never seen before: he sits his abdomen and legs on a huge ball and moves using his hands. I try it too but I easily lose my balance. Damn, when I was watching Peter it seemed so easy! I try again and show signs of giving up, but Paul doesn't let me – he says life doesn't accept those who give up so easily. Oh, how I dislike this type of motivational method, even though it is a strategy that spurs me on. I tighten my abdomen, hold my breath and try again. It doesn't work. Paul acts as if he doesn't even see me sprawled on the floor and he leads me to believe that of course I have to try again. OK, OK, I have

nothing to lose! It would be hard for me to look more ridiculous than with my feet on the walls, my hands on the ball, desperately trying not to lose my balance. The third time is better, the fourth time I even manage to move a bit, by the fifth time I'm already tired and my abdominal muscles don't understand what is going on. I stop, hug the ball and watch Paul working on his arms. To me he is a winner.



International student (2): So much has happened today! We eat at a Mexican restaurant and get back early to the hotel. I am tired. My head is swimming with thoughts. More than ever I feel like an international student and that's not always a good thing. It's a sort of mix between "I'm not good enough", "I don't fit in well enough with the team" and "I'm not on the same wavelength as everybody else". I feel like Kent is the one I can communicate least with. In these situations there's only one solution: reality check. I go straight to him and tell him how I imagine he sees me. Kent is a student at Law School. Up until today I saw him as being an arrogant guy but seeing how he acted with the children and how involved with the project he was, I realized that my initial judgment was untrue. He went through a similar sort of process, adjusting his view of me. We all get together

in his and Steve's room. I tell them about my life in Romania, about what I'm doing in the Education Department. Then we talk about this and that. We look at photos and huddle together on the couch; less of an "American" personal space and more closeness and openness.

(To be continued...)

Translated by: **Diana Maftei** and **Andrei Alecsa**

MTTLC, Bucharest University

LiterNet.ro

Guatemala Log (V)

Travel Log

By Cristina Grigore

November 9, 2010

Tuesday, March 9, 2010

Business student: We meet for breakfast. I have already gotten used to the freshly made omelette, to the variety of fruits, to the bright and spacious terrace. This morning I have the chance to talk to Peter some more. He is one of the four colleagues from Owen Graduate School of Management. Peter worked for a while in the pharmaceutical industry. As he was “the “only one in the group” without an MBA, he decided to further his education at Vanderbilt. For him this represents an investment: he is working hard now but he will reap the benefits in the future. Last summer, before starting school, he took a tour of Africa and it was then when he was first confronted with life in extremely poor communities. Since then he has become interested in economic and social development. Although he wishes to help with the development of poor communities, he is well aware that this is a very difficult and complex process. Peter’s views are a wake-up call. They bring me down to earth .



Two with the wind: We are on our way again to Las Conchas. The mood is getting increasingly laid back. We are getting to know each other better and becoming a tighter group. We somehow end up telling stories about our trips and adventures during college. Jim tells us about the time when he toured America on motorcycle. Together with a friend they called themselves “Two with the wind” and crossed America from coast to coast. It was then that he fell in love with San Francisco, the city in which he later ended up working. Jim’s stories fill me with the feeling of “we’re cool and young and adventurous”. Out my window I can see palm trees and exotic plants, the dry land and the unpaved roads. I am instantly reminded of movie stars visiting Third World countries. I recently watched a documentary about Angelina Jolie and Jeffrey Sachs’ intervention in Africa. With Jim as a teacher and with such smart colleagues, I somehow feel stronger, as if I am doing something important. Who would have thought, a couple of months ago, that I would get to work with a multidisciplinary team on such a complex project, in such a beautiful country.



The school in Las Conchas: The minibus stops in front of the school in Las Conchas. The children are rowdy and they are dressed in colorful clothes. I get off last. I take a look at my colleagues who, in the blinding light and dust, are already surrounded by children. They all gather around to meet us and take pictures with us. We make our way through the crowd and arrive at the principal's small, bare office, where we all huddle together. The principal welcomes us warmly and answers all our questions attentively and in detail. He moved to Las Conchas ten years ago and got this school running. He wasn't even paid for two of those years but that didn't matter to him. Now there are 450 children enrolled and the school has become overcrowded. Expanding the building is now what the school needs most. Even though there are almost sixty pupils in a classroom, none of the children that wish to attend school is turned down. If they can make the effort to walk to school, in the scorching heat, for as much as one hour, then they can surely be taken in, even if it is getting harder and harder. The principal interrupts his talk to ring the school bell. Some impish children arrive and want to know what

the adults are talking about. The principal doesn't chase them away. He watches them tenderly and goes on. He is a member of the town council and that's how he knows that the Guatemalan government is developing a housing project. On hearing this, our eyes light up. We ask even more questions. We begin to get an idea of what takes place within the community and what our options are from here on.



Maslow's pyramid: At first, when we spoke to Steve, the founder of Shalom, he told us that his initial goal was to help more children go to school. But because these children had no stable home, and were moving from one place to another and abandoning school, the foundation began to build houses. It was like shooting at a pigeon and killing a crow! We're curious to know if there's any difference between the results of the pupils who have a stable home and those of the pupils who live in temporary homes. The answer is yes, because the self-worth and confidence of the children who have homes motivates them to study more and come to school regularly. I'm again reminded of my grandfather and I begin to understand what he was telling me. Naturally, his greatest achievement was buying some land, owning a home and offering his children safety and stability. His greatest dream was, of course, to "fit in". I wonder how many generations before him had to constantly move around, to live without a home and the security it provides.



Military base: The minibus is the place where we rest and reflect where we have lunch, discuss the meetings we've had and get ready for those that are still to come. The minibus is the place which keeps the team together, where we joke and fool around, where we give each other fake names and tease our colleagues. The minibus is the place where Jim teaches us things, tells us about his work with the poor communities in San Francisco. It is our military base – the glasses and caps become our safety equipment and the notebooks and pens our attack weapons.



MBA at 22: We get back to the hotel and as usual, we go to the gym. Alison shows me some new exercises and I try them too. I can see how focused and determined she is. At just 22, she is probably the youngest student at Owen. But her age is inversely proportional to her achievements. The most amazing things about her are the discipline and focus she possesses: from how the clothes are organized in her room, to her ability to work fast in the minibus, while everyone else is talking. We go back to our room and we have some time to chat until the next meeting. I confess my admiration for her academic achievements and for her ambition. She tells me that she also admires me for the projects I'm working on.

The first strike: This afternoon, we have our first meeting with the company selling land to the people of Las Conchas. We meet up thirty minutes ahead of time to prepare our questions. The reception area is turned into a classroom and we take our business suits out of our suitcases. Back at our military base, we keep playing detectives, on the lookout for “bad guys”. Arriving at our destination, we keep an eye out for our “mark”. In other words, we’re early so we scope out the area. After a couple of minutes, we take a look at the building. At the entrance we see a series of lists. They have the names of the people who have fallen behind with their payments for the land. I wonder how you could avoid such a situation when you’re poor. We once again huddle together in a small office. An amiable young man talks to us for an hour: it’s been 10 years since he started selling land to the poor people of Las Conchas and they’re almost finished with this project. Meanwhile the price of the land has come to be 20!!!! times higher. The company representative tells us that they’ve done all they could for the community, given the available resources, and they’re not planning on investing any more money. They’re not “bad guys”, they just have a strictly “business” approach, but they’re not “good guys” either – it seems like it didn’t even cross their minds to try to have an approach that would stimulate the development of the community.

Map or territory? During dinner we talk about today’s events: our visit to the school had a great impact on us and the meeting with the company which sells land set us straight regarding their plans. The school needs help but we came here to build houses. Jim can’t forget the children and the talk with the school principal. He tells us that we have the chance to do more than an applied MBA course, that we could even help the children at that school. Everybody is quiet. Some of us argue that this goes beyond our initial goal. The others are willing to adapt it according to the on-site findings. The views are split: do we keep to the initial focus, do we completely change direction or do we include the new option too?

Notting Hill, Gallo & Victor Bart: We arrive at the bar where we went on our first evening. But now it’s almost empty. Everybody but me orders Gallo. My coconut juice and margarita are the only strays among the beer bottles. My colleagues like Gallo beer particularly because it comes in heavy, glass bottles, the kind that doesn’t exist in the US any more. It’s an utter revolt when we hear that one of our colleagues watched Notting Hill at his bachelor party. They’re absolutely stunned to find out that I declared my apple pie when I entered Guatemala. Barrels of laughter when my colleagues caught on to the fact that I was confusing one of our teacher’s (Victor’s) last name with his first name. Now really, who would have thought that his first name

was Bart and his last name Victor? I tell them, overdramatically, that I sacrificed my reputation as “expert on names” just so they could have a good time. They laugh even harder and I join in.

(To be continued...)

Translated by: **Diana Maftei** and **Andrei Alecsa**

MTTLC, Bucharest University

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Guatemala Log (VI)

Travel Log

By Cristiana Grigore

November 23, 2010

Wednesday, March 10, 2010

On the wrong side of the bed: I fell asleep late last night. I tried to do some more work but without much success. Even if it's a vacation I have to get ready for an exam. Because last week the others in my department had a conference in Chicago, they extended the deadline for one of the exams. But that doesn't sit well with me. The fact that I'm taking classes in two different departments is extremely interesting and useful but not in the least bit easy. I have to get used to different colleagues, to different types of demands, but especially to the schedule that doesn't always fit my needs.



Las Conchas: On Monday and Tuesday I gathered information on site: I saw what the living conditions were, I spoke to the locals, I visited the school. Las Conchas is a relatively new community. Most of the people moved there less than a year ago. Because the people haven't yet gotten to know one another, there is a low level of social cohesion. It is a peaceful place compared to other areas in the city and people feel safe there. They need houses and workplaces; the children are excited and willing to learn but the school has become crowded. So...



What's next: Economic and social development is indeed a complex topic and not easy to approach. It's hard to say what the priority is: providing education to those in the community or helping them to build houses, taking care of the infrastructure or creating workplaces? We came here with the intention of supporting the Shalom Foundation to build more houses through partnerships with institutions that deal with microcredit. But we found out that the school needs our support. By helping the school we would be directly helping the children learn in better conditions. But that means more time and effort on our part. And if we do choose to get involved where can we draw the line and say we've done enough?

Una idea loca: We're having the first meeting with one of the largest companies dealing with microcredit in Guatemala. Usually Steve is the one to breach the topic, talking about Project Pyramid and our objectives. When those in the business world hear that we are students, they have a softer approach and a bigger interest in explaining and "teaching us" how things work. The CEO congratulates us for the contribution we're bringing to his country and then talks about microcredit in Guatemala, drawing elaborate diagrams on the board. Jim takes advantage of the moment to ask if the idea we came up with, microcredit plus donations, makes sense and can be put into practice. The CEO thinks about it; we're all ears. He gives a positive answer. Even if he's never heard of such a thing he believed that what we're suggesting is possible. Jim doesn't shy away from expressing his happiness and lets out a resounding "Yes!!!" We're also excited and shout "Chilerooo!!!"



Habitat for Humanity: Last semester at the course on Economic Development and International Organizations I learned about Habitat for Humanity. And now I'm in their office talking about building houses in Guatemala. It's great when education can be applied to the real world. Bethany is from the US and has been with Habitat for two years. She answers our questions amiably. She's one of the "full time" employees but most youngsters come as volunteers for just a week. The fact that we're the same age and speak the "same language" helps relax the mood. We talk about their model for building houses, about the cultural differences between Guatemala and the US and about the possibility of collaboration.

Learning by seeing: At the end of our talk Jim looks at Bethany with gratitude and thanks her for the time she's taken. I've watched him closely and he acts the same at every meeting. It's as if time stands still when he shows his gratitude to the other person. I like that for him shaking hands at the end of the talk is not a superficial moment but one when he thinks whether he's managed to say everything he meant to, whether the other person has formed a positive opinion of him or about what he has to do next. I'm fascinated and inspired by this "ritual"; I'm happy to see how the communication process is taken to such a high level.



When theory meets practice: The questions that I have for the exam are strikingly tied to the situation of the school in Las Conchas. One of them is about the difference in academic achievement between the poor children and those who are well off. The fact that I have to answer questions that have

real life applicability makes me respect even more the education I am afforded and understand even better why the Peabody College is considered the best school of education in the US.

Home alone: After much stalling I choose not to go out with the team and continue to work for my exam. After a few days spent almost entirely in the company of others I'm enjoying my first minutes of "being by myself". I close the door, turn on the music, start dancing (especially now that I can move my neck) and singing along to "You rock my world". But this miracle doesn't last more than 15 minutes (and three repeats of the song) and I get to work. After an hour...my colleagues are probably drinking beer. That's fine, what I have to write is interesting. After two hours...my colleagues are probably laughing. It's OK; I have an exam to take. After three hours my colleagues have probably forgotten about me. No, they haven't forgotten about me, I chose to stay in and take care of my schoolwork. Sighing, shut inside my hotel room I'm half thinking about what my colleagues are doing and half about educational aid in developing countries, parental financial contribution and closing the achievement gap in education...

(To be continued...)

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Translated by: **Diana Maftei** and **Mădălina-Ioana Borcău**

MTTLC, Bucharest University

Guatemala Log (VII)

Travel Log

By **Cristiana Grigore**

December 7, 2010

Thursday, March 11, 2010

Smart cookie: I'm at the table with Jim and Alison, having breakfast. Jim asks me if I'm tired or worried. Is it that obvious? I tell him I have a lot of work to do and that I don't know how to prioritize my activities. He tells me not to worry so much because after all, I'm a "smart cookie" and I'll manage. I smile self-consciously. The encouragement is welcome. Somehow I'm more confident that in the end I'll pull it off.

Doing business: We're having a meeting with Genesis, one of the largest institutions dealing with microcredit in Central America. We once again move our classroom to an office. The coffee smells great. Amidst charts and statistics I understand what programs they have and what their work strategy is. As opposed to the people we talked to yesterday, Genesis has a special program for building houses. Not only are they willing to offer microcredit for houses, partnering with Shalom, but also to offer the school a loan. The negotiations run smoothly, probably because their offer goes great with what Las Conchas needs. I'm wondering...how much of doing business is just synchronizing supply and demand?

Chilero: We leave our meeting with Genesis satisfied and pleased with how we closed the deal. It's incredible how well we got along and how well we worked together. And it's not just my opinion; there's a synergy within the group that we can all feel. This is one of the strongest teams I've worked with: colleagues interested in varied domains and with international experiences, one more interesting than the other. We take group photos, celebrate our success and enjoy our victory with coconut, coffee and banana flavored ice cream.



Informal education: We're having lunch in the park. I keep thinking about what it means to do business. If business is what we've been doing for the past few days, discussing and negotiating with different stakeholders, then I didn't know that I knew business. I confess to Jim that I didn't expect it to be that simple and that practically what we've been doing was helping both sides, the suppliers and the future clients, meet each other. I was imagining business to mean persuasion and manipulation strategies, and sometimes even creating false needs for the client. Jim tells me this is related to marketing and gives me as an example McDonalds, which promotes "healthy" products. This time the classroom has moved among swings and slides. We talk while we eat, watch nature and the children playing. I feel like I am in my element, learning in such an informal setting.



And darkness set in: We have one more meeting, but because we've achieved our objective, Jim tells us there's no need for the whole team; he will go alone. Steve offers to go with him. The others go shopping and I stay at the hotel. I go to my room, change and head for the gym. I'm not sure if I've turned off the lights; I go back and check: should I turn off the light in a hotel room?! I remember the many talks I've had back home with my mother about turning off the lights when I go out of a room, so "we don't pay the electricity bill for nothing", she used to say. But this doesn't apply now. I sit and wonder...does it really matter if we turn off the lights in a hotel room as long as we're not the ones paying the electricity bill?



Photo session: Jim and Paul must leave early for a meeting and the rest of us are going to paint the town red. Dressed to the nines, we swarm the hotel bar and instead of drinking, we start taking pictures. We jump from one stool to another and take hold of the couches. Some of the patrons turn back the way they came. Nobody and nothing is standing in our way. Until the phone rings: it's Jim asking where we are and when we'll arrive for dinner. Is it 7:30 already?? Oops...

Vanderbilt Alumni: We're having dinner with an American businessman working in Guatemala. I'm thrilled by the fact that we've met someone who has studied at Vanderbilt and is willing to share some of his experience. It means more than a meeting with a banking expert, it means belonging to a

network of people with the same education, people who have already established themselves as professionals and who are willing to support us at the start of our careers.



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Festive night: Alison and I are wearing evening gowns. We took the time to do our hair and match the jewelry. After a week of wearing T-shirts, pants and caps, this is a welcome change. Our colleagues pay us compliments and are glad that we're their colleagues. Simply. Seriously. Sincerely. That's something I like about American culture; people don't shy away from praising you and showing their gratitude. It's a festive atmosphere.



Getting ready for school: It's our last night together. Tomorrow Jim is going back to Vanderbilt. It's true that school starts on Monday but tomorrow is only Friday. We're sorry he has to go and we try to convince him not to leave. No matter how much he'd love to stay the weekend, he has to get ready for his next course: Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability. The course has ten practical projects for the students and he wants to make sure that everything is ready before school starts. Am I hearing things wrong or is a teacher cutting his vacation short to do his "homework"?

(To be continued...)

Translated by: **Diana Maftei** and **Mădălina-Ioana Borcău**

MTTLC, Bucharest University