

**“If adventures do not befall a Young Lady in her own village,
She must seek them abroad.” Unknown**

Santiago-Atitlan
September 5th-October 2nd

About Santiago-Atitlan

Country: Guatemala

State/Department: Solola

Pueblo/City: Santiago-Atitlan

Geographic Location: Western area of Guatemala, West of Guatemala City, Located on Lago Atitlan on the Southeastern side.

Population: 30,000-40,000 inhabitants

There are numerous sounds, images, and smells that describe Santiago daily life.

At 4:30 am, the neighbors' chickens and roosters start to crow to alert the community of the start of a new day. An hour later, private mills start crackling to process the corn for tortillas. Then there is the smacking of fresh cornmeal on an Atiteca woman's palm. With each smack and a splash of water, a tortilla is born representing the staple of life and daily survival.

By 7:00 am, the footsteps of children, men, and women on the streets are heard from inside as everyone begins their day. Smoke rises above the town from wood burning fires, reminiscent of cooking tortillas. Honking horns and the smell of gasoline from local buses and trucks zoom past around the cracked stone paths.

At 10:00 am, children run around Parque Central during their recess, banging instruments, and playing basketball while most of the Santiago women gather in the park to sell their goods in the market. It is a sea of red and purple huipiles covered in flowers and birds conveying both culture and chaos. The harsh yet cherished sounds of Tz'utujil inundate the city forgetting that you are in Guatemala.

As 1:00 pm approaches, the smell of black beans, toasted tortillas, and eggs signals lunch time. After lunch, villagers return to afternoon work. Atiteca women sit on mats smacking the wooden sticks of the back-strap looms in their houses, men chop lumber in traje and cowboy hats, and tuk-tuks drive aimlessly around town luring tourists or friends.

By 4:00 pm, the afternoon rains have come and gone and night creeps over Santiago. With nightfall, come the sounds of the street; the barking of 100s of stray dogs, and the echoes of women singing, praying, and crying at many Evangelical churches or private homes..

Then there is a tranquil silence as Santiago sleeps a waiting dawn to approach and the sun to rise over Atitlan.

Santiago-Atitlan or most commonly referred to as Santiago claims to have the largest preserved and concentrated indigenous population/community in Latin America. Its indigenous community

is composed of the Tz'utujil Maya. Santiago is located on the South eastern part of Lago Atitlan, one of Guatemala's most beautiful and cherished natural wonders. Lago Atitlan is surrounded by lake villages as well as three volcanoes which add to its beauty and prestige. For this reason, Lago Atitlan and its village attract tourists from around the world throughout the year. Santiago is easily accessible by "lancha" or boat from neighboring lake communities or by truck or bus on paved, winding roads around the lake.

There are 35,000-40,000 residents of Santiago making it the largest lake village on Lago Atitlan. The estimated total population continues to fluctuate between 30-40,000 people because of the increase in births. In addition, "houses" are literally stacked on top of one another on small tiny paths that you do not know even exist until you stumble upon them.

Although considered a "pueblo" or town, Santiago conveys both an urban and rural feeling to visitors. There are six "cantones" or areas in Santiago. Santiago is by no means a city, but it has a busy Parque Central, which is home to the vibrant market, the bus station, and the largest public school. Santiago also has numerous businesses and specialty shops, one gas station, four internet cafes, 100s of small family-owned "tiendas" that are hidden on the winding pathways, multiple schools, large plots of land for agriculture, it is one of Guatemala's largest exporting town of avocados and coffee, a functioning and self-sufficient "hospitalito," a vibrant and abundant textile market, and it has a strong public transportation system with "chicken buses" and "tuk-tuks," Santiago's taxi service.

Despite being one of the most affected areas of the war, the villagers of Santiago possess great cultural pride, a rich oral language, vibrant traditions, a strong standard for social morals, and an abundance of warmth for one another and visitors. In addition to Santiago's fabulous culture and strong sense of indigenous identity, it also happens to be located in "true paradise" on Lago Atitlan with its magical views and sense of tranquility.

The Atiteco People

Natives of Santiago, or Atitecos, are deeply rooted to their Mayan heritage and culture. Not only do a majority of both men and women dress in "traje" or traditional Mayan clothing everyday and speak their native Mayan language, but they also are extremely hard working community who devote themselves to the well-being of their families. Despite living on beautiful Lago Atitlan, a majority of people suffer daily from poverty, malnutrition, a lack of education and resources, and they literally live day-to-day. Most male fishermen or wood collectors only make twenty Quetzales a day, less than \$3.00/day. Women work in the market selling tortillas, fruits and vegetables, eggs, chickens, and their hand-made textiles. Children are also subject to working at an early age. Many boys go to the fields with their fathers and practice his trade, while young girls learn to make tortillas and crafts.

Life in Santiago is not easy despite its strong community, new modern innovations, and location. Only a few residents live well whereas most live in dilapidated homes or what would be described as hovels or small dwellings.

Tz'utujil

Nearly all Santiago residents speak Tz'utujil, pronounced "zoo-to-heel." Tz'utujil is a Mayan language spoken by roughly 100,000 people who live in the states or departments of Solola and Suchitepquez. However, there are many different dialects or types of Tz'utujil spoken. Each version is specific to a town or region, and some Tz'utujil speakers claim they do not understand other dialects other than their own. Each variation has different phonology, lexical variations, inflection, and syntax.

In Santiago, they speak Kaqchike Tz'utujil. Santiago's Tz'utujil is the most distinct and is the most preserved. However, it has adapted to modern phonological changes and many local Atitecos blend various forms of Tz'utujil or Spanish. Those who do not speak Tz'utujil are non-native Santiago residents or non-Atitecos that moved to the area, some newer and younger generations, and the handful of tourists and foreigners who have decided to claim Santiago as home.

Tz'utujil is the strongest component of Santiago's culture and prominent Mayan identity. It is said that 80-90% of the Atiteca women only speak Tz'utujil and do not know Spanish. If they do know Spanish it is almost certain that they are unable to read or write in Spanish. Of the Atiteco men, most men speak Spanish as well as Tz'utujil. The prominence of bilingualism among men is attributed to the vicious war that consumed Guatemala for the late half of this past century. As a member of the army, men had to speak Spanish. Additionally, for the most part, children who attend and can afford school speak both Spanish and Tz'utujil. Spanish is the dominant language in the classrooms, but Tz'utujil is also present. Conversely, although Tz'utujil is clearly the dominant language and cultural force in Santiago, only a handful of Atiteco men and women can read or write in Tz'utujil or explain its grammatical structure.

Tz'utujil has 32 letters, 22 of which are consonants and 10 vowels. Some useful Tz'utujil are the following (spelled phonetically):

How are you?	Utz (ootz) Karah?
Good	Utz (ootz)
Thank You	Mentiosh-Chavah
Bye	Adios
See you tomorrow	Chu-Chek
No	Ma-hone

Tz'utujil is by far the most notable aspect of Santiago Atitlan. If you take pick-up truck 20 minutes outside of Santiago or take a "lancha" or small motor boat across the lake to Panajachel, the beautiful sounds of Tz'utujil are lost and you remind yourself that Santiago is not a separate country, but a part of Guatemala.

The Armed Conflict and its impact in Santiago

"Qaksaaj quachojq'aa' "

"We use our strength."

Guatemala's Civil War terrorized its people for thirty-six years between 1960 and 1996. The war pitted the armed forces against guerilla troops, which including a majority of indigenous Mayan soldiers.

Specifically, numerous political and economic factors created tension around the country between political leaders and local indigenous communities. In 1982, General Jose Efraim Rios Montt, an Evangelical Christian, came to power in a coup. His "scorched earth" policy aimed to suppress and exterminate rebel areas and villages and send a threat to others who were interested in guerilla tactics. It is said over 400 villages were destroyed and over 15,000 deaths (mostly Mayan men) were a result.

In that same year, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) was created by uniting four different guerilla organizations. The following year, Rios Montt was deposed by a coup led by General Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores. However, trouble and bloodshed continued. The US suspended aid and military support.

In 1985, power was returned to civilians with the election of Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo of the Christian Democratic Party. (The military ensured that they would not be later accountable for abuses in the future.)

There was little progress and change. As a result, Jorge Serrano Elias became the new president from 1990-93. He made an effort to reopen dialogue with the URNG in order to terminate the war. With little success, he carried out an "autocoup" in attempt to take control by ruling by decree and suspending the constitution. He was later exiled.

Ramiro de Leon Carpio, the Solicitor for Human Rights and critic of the military, carried out the rest of Serrano's term. Furthermore, the US suspended aid again in 1995.

Finally, in 1996, Alvaro Enrique Irigoyen of the middle right PAN (Partido de Avanzada Nacional) was elected. He continued an open dialogue with the URNG. In December of 1996, the Peace Accords were signed ending the Civil War.

An estimated 200,000 Guatemalans were killed, a million were left homeless, and there are estimates that thousands are missing.

Even though the Peace Accords were signed almost 10 years ago, like most of Guatemala, Santiago is still deeply rooted to the war and the violence that took place here. Locals speak of the war and the violence but only in passing or in relationship to another topic because of their private and reserved nature.

The war is a sensitive subject because Santiago was one of the largest guerilla towns who fought against the government. Most men here were guerillas in the war. In addition, there was also a government military base that was set up in Santiago in order to control the guerillas.

Many feared the military and did not leave their homes at the peak of the war. The base was set up on the backside of town in Panabaj, down the road from the local hospital, many residents,

and the road to most agricultural farming. Santiago's people suffered greatly from the military's presence.

One example is the affect the military presence had on Santiago's access to healthcare and medical attention. The local hospital was built in the late 1960's by the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, under Father Stanley Rother. The community adored Father Rother or called Padre "Aplas" by his followers. For twenty-five years, the "hospitalito" and its 15 beds provided critical healthcare to more than 45,000 people living in Santiago and the surrounding lake villages. The hospitalito was the only facility that provided emergency and in-patient care.

As the war worsened, hospital staff and doctors were unable to go to work at night because they were fearful of their lives while passing the military base. Patients were also unable to seek services. Moreover, in 1982, Father Stanley Rother, was murdered by ultrarightists "death squads" on church grounds.

On December 2, 1990, thirteen Santiago villagers were murdered and executed at the entrance of the army base. Many others were injured. The "Massacre of Santiago Atitlan" received international attention and it resulted in the expulsion of the military from the village. Currently, there is a Parque de la Paz (Peace Park) that pays tribute to the tragedy and it is where the villagers are buried. The fifteenth anniversary of the massacre will be memorialized and honored this year.

As a result of the massacre, the Hospitalito was abandoned and closed. The massacre and the closure of the hospital were both devastating for Santiago. (The hospital did not reopen until this past spring of 2005 thanks to the motivation of community leaders and international assistance.)

In addition to the massacre and its affect, there were other war issues. The people had no trust in the government and a majority of the town's men served in the guerilla forces or the army. There was a divide between the people and a strengthening anti-government/anti-military movement here.

In addition, as most of the men were away fighting, the women were left helpless and stranded trying to provide for their families. Economic troubles were not the only problem that faced Santiago's women. Many women were raped by the military men who infiltrated Santiago. As a result, the women were left scarred and there were many babies that were born out of a rape. This cold and sad fact is rarely discussed or acknowledged in the community.

Within the community, there is one group deserves acknowledgement for its wartime efforts. The firefighters, or *bomberos*, of Santiago and throughout most of Guatemalan played a strong role in restoring peace, maintaining order, and critical to the stability of the communities. The volunteer firefighters were responsible for the cleanup of the bloodshed of the war. Literally, they retrieved the dead bodies throughout the streets. According to Ambassador Marilyn McAfee of the World Affairs Council in Jacksonville, Florida earlier this summer, "The most effective group before democracy was established was the firefighters. They were responsible for taking care of any crime and evidence."

Nine years later, Santiago has made progress despite its all too recent dark history. A few notable changes have occurred in Santiago. First, it was only within the last three years that the military police returned to Santiago. Most residents were skeptical and untrustworthy of the police. Even today the police do not have a strong hold over justice here in the city. Although they are present, they appear inactive and no one notices their presence, but you do notice men armed with guns patrolling the streets.

Secondly, after a visit to the Judicial Organization in Santiago, I learned of their Mediation program, a resolution program that is an alternative to conflicts. There are 27 mediation sites around Guatemala. This program is unique to Santiago because it is the third most visited and successful mediation site in Guatemala after Guatemala City and Quezaltenanago. Furthermore, as a lake village many would find it surprising that Santiago was selected as a mediation site instead of Solola, the department's main city. Santiago is home to the mediation site because of its bloody history and violence during the civil war. Mediation is a voluntary and free program used to solve civil, labor, family, penal, and merchant conflicts. All types of conflicts are brought to mediation including land issues, separations, disagreement over inheritance, broken contracts, etc.

Santiago villagers come to mediation on their free will to work out problem among themselves and with the presence of a mediator, not lawyers. The mediator will also translate between Tz'utujil and Spanish in order to meet the needs of the villagers. (Language barriers, poor translation, or forced to use one's secondary language are major problems that face most of the judicial branch and court systems in Guatemala.) The mediation program has had great success and it also demonstrates a change in the mentality here in Santiago. People are looking towards peaceful resolution rather than armed conflict.

Traditionalism versus modern religion

Before the arrival of the Spanish and Catholicism to Latin America, many indigenous groups took great pride in their traditional religion, spiritualism, and rituals. Although many indigenous groups "accepted" Catholicism, many groups continued to hold on to aspects of traditionalism and various rituals which have been blended into religious ceremonies and events, etc.

Upon arrival to Santiago, one will quickly notice two things. First, small boys will ask you if you would like a guide to visit Maximon and second, the large quantity of Evangelical churches around town. With recent decades, Catholicism has lost some of its power and stronghold in Santiago and an influx of missionaries and Evangelical churches have come to Santiago.

Furthermore, there is an apparent tension between traditionalism and newer conservative values. For example, Santiago is proclaimed to be home the true Maximon, but at the same time Santiago also has vigilante groups who serve as the moral police force in town. Cofradias are still well organized, and it is still considered an honor to be a part of one. Social drinking and parties are rare, but it a common occurrence to hear the singing, chanting, and crying from the local churches or small prayer gatherings.

Observation: Interaction among Santiago teenagers

(Note: This cannot be taken as fact. It is based off of stories and comments made by people I have met and personal observation).

As a conservative and religious community, I did not expect to find male or female teenagers roaming in and out of bars, publicly drinking, or showing public displays of affection among each other. Albeit true, I was surprised to learn of an entirely different kind of social interaction between teenage boys.

You will not see young Santiago women roaming the streets or fraternizing with local boys, you never see a young couple flirting or kissing one another, you rarely see women out at all with groups of friends or by themselves at night, and with only one bar in town, there is not a vibrant social scene in Santiago.

However, if you observe teenage boys during the day or night, one would notice the closeness in proximity that teenage boys stand within one another. More surprising, you would notice two teenage boys almost flirting with each other. It is not uncommon to see two young men standing with their arms wrapped around each other walking or standing, hitting one another, sharing the same bicycle, or driver's seat of a *tuk-tuk*.

It turns out that this is not just something that I had noticed. It is clearly evident to most people, although it is never discussed among locals. However, foreign residents are the first to comment.

According to ex-patriots who have lived in Santiago for most of their lives, there is a presence of "pseudo-homosexual tendencies" in Santiago. However to Santiago natives and locals, homosexuality is a sin and not present. Rather, since the days of traditionalism, young men and women were not allowed to have pre-marital sex because it was considered sinful and immoral. Additionally, young women were especially conservative and cautious about their sexual experiences prior to marriage. The sexual and moral standards for women were much higher.

However, from what I have been told, it was not considered pre-marital sexual relations if young men experimented with one another. Over time, this has transformed into a social norm. Although, it has not been confirmed as to whether or not young men did participate/are still participating in sexual acts with one another, it is evident that the culture accepts and reinforces a strong sense of brotherhood and affection among young Santiago men. It should be noted that this relationship is not visible among any older or mature local men, only teenage young men.

Importance and History of Weaving and Textiles

In addition to the prominence of Tz'utujil, the traditional Santiago "traje" or dress and other textiles are quickly noted by visitors. More impressive is the fact that not only do Atitecos take pride in wearing "traje," but many Atiteca women put in many hours a day on a back-strap loom creating these magnificent textiles to wear and to sell.

The “traje” or traditional Mayan dress in Santiago is unique to Santiago in the same way that Tz’utujil is region-specific. These differences further bolster the local culture and its autonomy which is reflected in both their language and dress. There is a direct relationship between indigenous identity and social position. Many Atiteca women critique and criticize the “traje” of another woman by evaluating the level of difficulty in its embroidery, complexity of design, attention to detail, and use of color in all four pieces of the typical “traje.”

A woman wears the following pieces:

huipile” or po’t in Tz’utujil: a heavily embroidered and detailed top. In Santiago, it includes purple and red colors and embroidered birds.

corte or uukj in Tz’utujil: a long, heavy wrap around skirt

tzut: a shaw-like piece draped over one shoulder

pas: a detailed and embroidered belt that holds the skirt and top together. It is wrapped tightly above your waist.

Weaving and the backstrap loom represent not only a primary source of economic means for Santiago women, but it represents the importance of Santiago’s culture and history. Throughout Guatemala, communities are losing their traditions to globalization and commercialization. The truth is that it is cheaper to buy commercial clothing at the local markets. In addition to cost, it can take months for a weaver to make one huipile. This time could be spent working in other areas. Finally, creativity and quality craftsmanship are weakened with a changing market, cooperative deadlines, or pressing financial circumstances. In recent years, weaving design has changed with the incorporation of new colors, new threads and materials, and new techniques.

Organization Impressions/Basic Assessment:

ADISA:

A local organization that works with special needs children and their families. Furthermore, it provides numerous programs including: special education, physiotherapy, access to medicine and medical attention, enrichment and empowering workshops for the kids, early stimulation programs, and other advocacy programs to bring special needs issues and reforms to the public’s attention. It is directed by two local Santiago parents, Francisco and Argentina Sojuel. Strong volunteer opportunities are available.

Strengths: passionate community leaders, strong mission statement, volunteers and other medical professions visit regularly, serves its target population well and offers them an outlet for personal attention and social diversions.

Weaknesses: Lack of resources or long-term funding, it would be more effective for them to partner with a larger national or international organization. Lack of a personal website- looking for someone to create one. The directors take on a majority of the responsibility along with 2 other paid employees and 1 Peace Corps Volunteer. In the long run, I hope they are able to offer more sustainable projects to its target population, like jobs, adult education, access to extended education, and overall more capacity building.

Co'jolya Association:

Non-profit organization which focuses on the economic empowerment of local weavers in Santiago and other neighboring towns. It offers 50 Santiago weavers sustainable weaving projects which are sold overseas in the United States. They are provided with the designs and any specific training, administrative support and resources, as well as the materials needed. Furthermore, the Association hosts a museum on weaving, classes, and their website provides detailed history of the importance of the preservation of back-strap weaving. Lastly, the Association has formed a partnership with Fundacion Ayudamos and is working on looking at more social projects. Directed by Candis Krummel, a United States native but has lived in Santiago for over 30 years. Limited volunteer opportunities are currently available, but there maybe more in the future with social projects. (www.cojolya.org)

Strengths: The Association provides economic opportunities for select Santiago women, many of which continue to return to the Association. They have hired a local community leader to help assist with the administrative duties and social projects. They currently are out of debt. Most importantly, blending their economic focus with social projects and working with locals and other small international organizations.

Weaknesses: There is a conflict between economic and social interests. In my opinion, the weavers have not improved the quality of their lives as a Co'jolya weaver (and the high costs of the exported projects), but they are guaranteed stable and steady work. Vision of development is outdated, but willingly changing to more progressive and sustainable development ideas.

Fundacion Ayudamos:

Ayudamos is a small and new Canadian NGO based in Calgary. They have come to Santiago in order to partner with Co'jolya. Their purpose is to help alleviate poverty for women and children in Santiago, primarily the weavers and their families. Specifically, they are currently working on a housing construction/refurbishment project, capacity building with new stoves, and a possible water-filtration project. The project is sponsored by the Canadian government and other private funding methods. The director, Sandra van den Brink, is the only employee and is based in Calgary. Currently, there is a Canadian government intern, Lesley Magee, in Santiago carrying-out the project. Volunteer opportunities are available, but currently coming from Canada. Contact Co'jolya first about social project volunteer opportunities or Sandra directly. (www.ayudamos.ca)

Strengths: The passion and dedication is present to make a difference in Santiago, primarily with the weavers. The partnership with Co'jolya provides a solid, target audience that a small, new NGO can address. In addition, working with a local community leader makes implementation of ideas and projects easier. Housing project is in progress and the needs based assessment was conducted with great detail and objectively. Home recipients (men) are active in the construction process.

Weaknesses: The organization is not focusing on long-term sustainable projects or capacity building of the weavers. It is geared more towards a "charity-model" to provide funding for smaller projects and programs. There needs be a stronger focus or main objective. There is a lack of communication within employees and there is almost zero dialogue between the field intern

and the board of directors. Furthermore, the field intern is only under contract by the government until January. Then, who will come? Will projects end until August? There needs to be a stronger management and a permanent in-country liaison if hoping to carry out long term sustainable/capacity building projects.

Puente de Amistad

Puente de Amistad or “Friendship Bridge” is a U.S. based NGO with five different offices in Guatemala focusing on micro-finance. (They also have a program in Vietnam). The first office was opened in Santiago in 1998. The field director is Sofie Wolters, a native from the Netherlands, has lived in Panajachel since 1989. The organization offers loans to women in solidarity or collateral groups. The organization offers financial support, but it is not a “charity organization.” Every loan must be paid back (at 20% interest rates) and the women work with their solidarity/collateral group. Microfinance focuses on a new development theory that helps women get out of poverty. (Women are the primary beneficiaries because they are usually the most susceptible to poverty, etc.) In addition to loans, they offer social programming/training in human rights issues, business training, self-esteem, and they also offer scholarships for the women’s children. Volunteer opportunities available in Santiago or Panajachel. However, application process is rigorous via the U.S. headquarters. You may want to first contact Sofie Wolters. (www.friendshipbridge.org)

Strengths: Their success rates around the lake area and numbers alone show a level of effectiveness. Additionally, women keep coming. They offer multi-language services; the loan officers also conduct the social programming; they are reaching out to their children as well. They also have offered the long-term commitment to Guatemala. Community supports and appreciates their work.

Weaknesses: Other microfinance organizations are rapidly spreading in Guatemala as competition, their impact studies may be skewed or other statistical data is not available- they need the resources to provide all the information. They currently are not sustainable (hopefully by 2009 budget.) Their funding or budget are directly affected by the events or economy in the United States. Some criticize microfinance organizations as exploitative. Adult education classes have failed and at times the social programming classes are hard for the women to accept or hear because for older generations it is too late for them to make different decisions about health, education, etc.

Hospitalito

15 bed hospital of cultural, medical, and historical importance to Santiago-Atitlan. Reopened in May of 2005 after its war-time closure in 1990. Community leaders, foreign doctors, and local/international organizations worked to re-open the facility. It is a full-functioning hospital now providing cesarean sections and new construction is progress for other facilities including a pharmacy, volunteer quarters, staff lounge, and dental facility. Volunteer opportunities of all kinds are available including nursing, doctors, med students, and other volunteers hoping to conduct a social-medical, anthropology, or other study. (www.puebloapueblo.org)

Strengths: Currently, it has five full-time doctors who have signed a minimum 1-2 year contract. There are always new nurses and students visiting the facility for shorter/longer periods of time.

The fact that community leaders and other organizations were able to re-open the facility this year. The construction of other facilities and building partnerships. The board conducts weekly meetings. Lastly, it is providing adequate and essential healthcare to the Santiago community.

Weaknesses: Funding and ensuring that there are always full-time staff who will be available. That nearly all of the volunteer staff is from the United States. It is critical to have more volunteers or doctors from Guatemala.

Community Leaders: Tribute to Francisco and Argentina Sojuel Figueroa

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

Every person has the capacity to lead and affect those around you, but not everyone has the dedication, compassion, and the heart to do so on a twenty-four hour schedule. Not everyone is willing to sacrifice their seemingly normal lives to help others in different capacities. Not everyone has the strength to go against cultural and community norms to make a difference. And not everyone can use their own challenges and difficulties as a catalyst for change.

Community leaders and civil servants do not only live in metropolitan cities, work in government politics, or run large-scale international organizations. They are among us in all walks of life, working in different fields, and helping in a myriad of ways.

I had the opportunity to meet two dynamic community leaders in Santiago Atitlan. In addition to meeting them, I was fortunate enough to live with them for one month. Francisco and Argentina Sojuel are considered pillars of society in Atitlan. Everyone knows them. You cannot walk down the street with either Francisco or Argentina without 100 greetings and side conversations. It appears that they know all 40,000 residents.

Francisco is an Atiteco native of Santiago and almost his entire family lives on the same block. Depending on who you talk to, Francisco is commonly referred to as “Chico” or “Machic” in Tz’utujil or Francisco by all of his non-native friends, foreign friends, or other residents.. And Argentina calls him “Frances.” He was one of the first students to complete a full, formal education at the public school in Santiago along with a handful of other students. Francisco is involved in everything in the community. He continues to serve as a volunteer firefighter (and he was an active volunteer during the war). He is on the water rescue committee and helps monitor/participate in the lake’s cleaning or other lake-related events. He spent several years working at the community health department serving as a health promoter. He was the main community leader who spearheaded the initiative to re-open and re-establish the local “hospitalito.” And he currently serves as the primary administrator and director of social projects at Co’jolya Association.

On the other hand, Argentina is a not from Santiago. She is from an area near the boarder of El Salvador. Argentina has always been passionate about teaching, and over twenty-five years ago she took the risk to head to Atitlan. Her family and friends thought she was crazy. Why would she want to move so far from home and go somewhere new? She accepted a teaching position on

the outside of town (near Panabaj). She walked everyday to work until she bought a bicycle and later a motorcycle. She would wake up all of her students when she drove by as their “personal alarm clock.” She continued to teach through the early days of the violence and would pass the military men. Argentina later became a teacher and then the director of the main primary and secondary school in the center of Santiago. Most people would agree that teachers have more compassion than anyone because of their desire to impact the lives of children and instill in them the value of education and personal achievement.

After they were both married, they were blessed with three beautiful children, Andrea, Ricardo, and Nila Eliza. Nila Eliza was born in 1990 with multiple disabilities. Despite her needs, her parents adored and embraced their daughter as a gift of God. And although their lives were forever changed, they continued to work in the community and raise their family.

Then on June, 10, 1997, Francisco and Argentina held a small meeting with other parents with special needs children. They knew that other parents were going through the same challenges and experiences that they were facing. From that meeting, innovative ideas and programs were born. That same year, neurology services and physiotherapy were offered to the children on a needs-based schedule.

In 1998, Francisco, Argentina, and other involved parents formed the Association of Parents and Friends of Persons with Disabilities, or more commonly referred to as ADISA. Later in 1998, ADISA started to attend to three children on Saturdays. In addition, ADISA gathered resources and information to present a proposal of a Special Education program to the Ministry of Education of Guatemala, MINEDUC. Also in the same year, ADISA worked with the community to prepare them and encourage them to work with disabled people. In order to facilitate these meetings, they worked with a diplomat of Special Education of ASCATED, a non-governmental organization that specializes in capacity building and training to the community and disabled persons.

On the 18th of February, the Special Education Center of Santiago was formally inaugurated, recognized, and honored in the community. The children gathered and attended the Escuela Mateo Herrera No. 1 with the following teachers: Maria Argentina Figueroa de Sojuel; Program Coordinator, Maria Ramirez Sosof, y Professor Josefa Icaj. Argentina continues to dedicate all of her time, resources, and energy to her special education classroom and ADISA.

Sadly, in this same year on June 1st, Nila Eliza died at nine years of age, the daughter of ADISA founders and the Center for Special Education. Many people thought that after this shocking tragedy that the continuation of the center and ADISA would come to a halt. However, one month after her death, everything continued to move forward and progress. Argentina and Francisco knew that they could not stop spreading Nila Eliza’s message and that the future of ADISA depended on their strength and dedication.

In the years to follow and with the help of a community and foreign volunteers, ADISA has increased its attendance of local children in Santiago and neighboring communities and the services offered. ADISA reaches more than twenty children and their families. Most of which also attend Argentina’s class in the mornings. As for services, ADISA now offers special

education, early stimulation programs, physiotherapy, medical assistance, personal training, and other specialty programs. Furthermore, ADISA also offers a place for the children to come together in a positive and comfortable environment and meet with other children.

In addition to “special-needs” related services, Francisco holds a weekly carpentry workshop on Thursdays. The kids come together to work on a craft project where they practice cutting wood and artistic creativity. When I visited, they were making wooden cows and fish that will be used as towel or key hooks. It is truly incredible that Francisco has time to participate every week.

Another event is the weekly cooking workshop conducted by Amanda, a local Peace Corps Volunteer and practically a third daughter to Francisco and Argentina. Every week, the kids come together to make a pastry or cake of some sort to sell the following morning outside of Argentina’s class.

Lastly, as a result of last week’s landslides, Argentina and Francisco have continued to demonstrate their selflessness and hearts of gold. Francisco spent 133 hours working with rescue missions with other firefighters. Likewise, Argentina was caring for the effected ADISA families and running a soup kitchen for the storm victims out of her classroom. I can only imagine that their relief work will continue for the weeks to come.

Both Argentina and Francisco have dedicated their lives to Santiago and ADISA. In addition to all of their social activities, they have a loving and close-knit family and they also house foreign volunteers and travelers throughout the year. I only hope that I meet such incredible leaders such as them throughout my fellowship. In order to have a successful organization, you must have leaders to pursue the mission of the organization, but also to effectively manage and direct it as well.

Hurricane Stan and Santiago

Hurricane Stan directly impacted Santiago-Atitlan on Wednesday early morning, October 5th. On Tuesday, October 4th, the President of Guatemala issued an alert and state of emergency for the entire country because of the vast quantities of rain which had started to flood many areas.

Santiago was completely unprepared. Some fortunate families who live in Panabaj were awoken in the middle of the night/early morning of the 5th to the sounds of moving earth. They had little time to react. They had little time to wake sleeping children. They had little time to run and escape. The worst was inevitable. A massive landslide from Santiago’s volcano took over. This is the same volcano that locals praise for adding to Santiago’s beauty and the serenity of Lago Atitlan.

This natural disaster is the closest I have ever been to death and it has affected me greatly. I decided last minute to leave Santiago on Sunday, October 2nd to work in the capital. I had planned on staying in Santiago one more week before spending my last week traveling around the country. I left Santiago and it was a sunny Sunday morning, although it had rained everyday for the previous three weeks. The rains were supposed to stop on “Tuesday, October 4th”

according to local papers and weather reports. All of the papers indicated that Guatemala would suffer 48 hours of heavy rains and then the rainy period would cease.

However, Hurricane Stan had other plans for Guatemala, Mexico, and El Salvador. The hurricane took all three countries by surprise. The heavy rains saturated Santiago's soil and without notice the ground moved. It buried Atiteco men, women, and children alive. It destroyed homes. It stripped families of everything they had. It separated families. It brought total chaos to an undeserving community.

One week later, the disaster is still affecting the Santiago community. The search for bodies ended on Monday, October 10th. There is little hope for survival for anyone still buried and it is too difficult to continue looking for bodies. The affected and destroyed areas have been unofficially proclaimed as a massive gravesite and Santiago's extended cemetery. Specifically, 77 deaths are a result of landslides (many of which are children) and over 500 people are still missing and will be considered dead in the near future. In addition to losing everything they had, many community members are running out of food and water, communication is still down, and it is nearly impossible to reach Santiago because of damaged infrastructure and roads.

In addition, I received word from Francisco that 6 ADISA families have lost everything. They do not have the financial means to recovery from such a catastrophe. Another entire ADISA family is still missing. Francisco and Argentina are doing everything they can to comfort these families during this hard time and to respond to the needs of their children who have disabilities.

As well, 5 Co'jolya weavers and their families have also lost their homes. Ayudamos Foundation is currently working to fund housing projects for these five homes.

The community reacted as quickly as possible in order to help the hurricane victims. The volunteer firefighters (like Francisco) helped rescue victims, search for bodies, and work to clean up the aftermath of the disaster. In addition, Argentina's classroom serves as a soup kitchen. Amanda and Martin (who live on the Panabaj border) work around the clock to help. They opened up their home as a children's orphanage and welcomed Mingo, an ADISA employee, and his 10 children into their home after they lost everything. They are all true heroes. They demonstrate the courage and strength it takes to be a leader. They are "saving the world" and do so without praise. Their selflessness and enormous hearts are qualities we should all strive to embody.

This has been the hardest thing I have had to deal with since I left the United States. And in retrospect, this has been one of the most tragic events that I have had to encounter in my life. Right before I left the States, I was distraught by the affects of Hurricane Katrina and its destruction in New Orleans. I was glued to the television and I wanted to go help. In many ways, I had the same feelings as I did during September 11th. However, I do not know anyone in New Orleans. I have never been there. I only know of one family indirectly impacted by the hurricane.

With Hurricane Stan, I missed the destruction by only three days. I have never been so close to tragedy or destruction in my life. I could have spent the last 133 hours working with rescue and relief efforts. I would feel the direct impacts of disaster, limited resources and food,

contaminated water, and with no way to communicate with family and friends. Even though I was not directly impacted, I have found this week extremely challenging. It is all I think about. I try to imagine life in Santiago. I try to think about its future. I try to imagine how Francisco, Argentina, Lesley, and Amanda are handling the situation. It saddens me that they have been confronted with this tragedy. They do not deserve the pain and suffering. They already do so much for the community.

In addition, Santiago has already endured so much in recent years since the war's end in 1996. They have spent the last nine years rebuilding the community, strengthening and empowering themselves, and establishing peace. Now, they will need to spend another undetermined block of time recuperating from this tragedy. (Ironically, this tragedy occurred in the same places that endured many of the hardships during the war.) Furthermore, when military aid arrived to Santiago earlier in the week, it was refused by the locals. The scars and memories of the war still greatly affect the village and they still lack confidence in the military.

I have faith in Santiago and its people. If they can recover and rebuild themselves after 30 years of civil war, they can do the same now. They will not be conquered by a natural disaster. They will come together as a unified community to overcome this tragedy and hardship. With the financial and resource aid of foreign countries, the Guatemalan government, local community leaders, and civil societies, normal life will be restored in Santiago. It will take the positive determination of everyone and our collective thoughts, prayers, and resources to restore Santiago to its natural beauty and peaceful village state.

If you would like to financially contribute to ADISA in order to help support the six families who lost everything, please contact me. Although, I realize many of you have already contributed to relief efforts in the United States.

The Future of Santiago

Santiago has a bright future ahead of itself despite the devastation, destruction, and death that Hurricane Stan brought to the small lake village only days after I left. The hurricane triggered a massive landslide in one area of the village where many people lost their homes and lives and many more people are missing. Despite this tragedy, there is hope for Santiago's future. I am confident in that the people of Santiago will come together to restore their daily lives and help those who are in need. With any challenge, it will take time. Yet, I know that although some residents have lost everything, Santiago will continue to take great pride in their culture and community. Their traditions and cultural spirit will not be lost.

As for the future of organizations in Santiago, the need is there for non profits and NGOs to come to Santiago. However, they should only come if they are prepared to come for the long run. Organizations that only visit Santiago and offer "charity-based" help are not needed. Rather, sustainable groups that work with the local community are welcomed and will be embraced by the local community. Despite a language barrier, the Santiago community welcomes foreign help, volunteers, and organizations. Santiago also has the community leaders to work with and the knowledge to implement innovative and sustainable ideas. They only need the administrative and financial resources to implement these ideas.

Guatemala City October 4-October 16

My visit to Guatemala City was unplanned and spur of the moment. I was offered the opportunity to work with USAID or the United States Agency for International Development and one of its funded projects with AED or Academy for Educational Development.

In the end, I missed Stan's encounter with Santiago by only three days because of my move to the city.

I spent two weeks in an office, in front of a computer with easy access internet from 9:30-5:30 everyday. What a change from my time in Santiago! I actually was on a schedule. However, I have to say I was not busy the entire time. I spent a lot of time using the internet, something I have truly missed.

I had the opportunity to learn about a new initiative to increase and improve investments in the social sector, primarily education as well as improve the efficiency and transparency of the Ministry of Education in Guatemala. It was interesting to see how a large scaled development project is implemented. It takes a lot of time, research, and paperwork. Although both USAID and AED are United States organizations, the field team in the office under contract by AED is comprised of Guatemalans. At first, I was surprised for some reason, but then after consideration it is the most practical idea. Locals speak the language fluently, have knowledge of development work and the project, and they may also be better received by the Guatemalan government, other local organizations, and smaller communities. The project is scheduled to take two years of research, etc. However, I do not think they will implement any educational policy. They only hope to increase awareness and increase investments.

It is evident that there are strong ties and connections between the social, the political, and the economical when you are working on a large scale project with a large budget. That being said, some people criticize USAID sponsored projects because they are only funded on short periods of time. At the same time, projects such as these have access to a larger budget and major key players that is not accessible to other smaller local or international organizations.

As a volunteer, I read a lot about the purpose and mission of the AED project, the background of the social sector here in Guatemala, and helped with the translating or editing of key AED documents, reports, or other marketing proposals. It was as if I was working in a Public Affairs office all over again. You realize how important every word is and how bureaucratic or lengthy projects or documents can be.

Overall, I have enjoyed my stay in Guatemala City even though I was reluctant to go. Most foreigners speak negatively about the city and its high crime. However, I found it safe between my home and the job. I found the people in the office, on the bus, and my taxi drivers all quite friendly. It was a totally different experience than Santiago. Things were more expensive. I had to take a bus to work. Sometimes, there was not room on the bus to get home, so I'd have to

take a cab. Unless, I decided to hang out the side of the bus. Only a few women wear traje and the city and almost everyone has a car! Luckily, I have not encountered any problems and my host family turned out to be a delight despite the screaming, weird collections, and loud animals.

Personal Reactions:

When I departed the Jacksonville airport at 7:50 am on September 2nd, I felt different than when I had left home for other reasons. I felt both disillusioned and indifferent. For some reason, it had not hit me that I am away for the year embarking on this new adventure. I am still not sure if it has hit me during my visit to Guatemala. I take every week one at a time, one out of fifty-two. I did not allow myself to get upset or say “good-bye.” I knew that during my five hour layover in Miami, I would call home along with everyone else that I know to kill time.

Thus far, things have been fabulous and I can't begin to describe how fortunate I have been in my six weeks away. I have been able to avoid homesickness, stomach illnesses, and any major logistical planning issues with the fellowship. If things go this smoothly over the next year, I am going to be home in no time.

How did I end up in Santiago? It all started with one email from Candis Krummel, the director of Co'jolya Association. I had spent all of August trying to find an organization to work with. I was almost certain that I was working with another weaving group, but I had never received confirmation from the organization in New York. I was panicking mid August because I had nowhere to go and no one to observe. A contact I have in Peru, Tam Tam Femme, emailed me with a list of organizations that she found. One of the organizations was Co'jolya. I visited their website and it said they were looking for volunteers with experience or graduate work. I was unsure if I had the qualifications. It was late one evening and I was sitting on my couch in Florida when I received an overly-enthusiastic email from Candis inviting me to work with Co'jolya during my visit. Moreover, she could arrange a homestay for me. (It turned out that Francisco is the administrator for Co'jolya and is the social projects director).

My visit to Guatemala has been incredible. I have had the opportunity to learn about so many issues ranging from weaving to water purification to the impact of landslides and the need for improved investment in Guatemala's social sector. I have been exposed to organizations working with women weavers, handicapped children, microfinance, large scale education reform, and a local hospital. At times, I think I could have visited more organizations and held more introductory meetings, but at the same time I really enjoyed my time spent developing personal relationships with people at both ADISA and Co'jolya/Ayudamos.

In addition to working with these organizations, I had the opportunity to spend quality time with new friends and even unplanned and unpredictable adventures to Panajachel, San Pedro, Sipacate, and Tikal. I am anxious about leaving because it means another big change and another beginning. I have a feeling I will go through the same mixed feelings and anxiety with every move because it means awaiting the unexpected and experiencing a new culture.

Although many people recommended that I skip Guatemala because I have already been there, I am so glad that started my trip in Guatemala. Although I was familiar with Antigua, Panajachel, and the airport, everything else was a completely new experience. I am glad that I decided not to return to Xela and explore a different area of Guatemala. Moreover, as an ASB site leader, I did not have all of the opportunities to experience first-hand Guatemala. I was busy with logistical planning, budgeting, and coordinating a trip for twelve. In the past five weeks, I have adjusted to new languages, new foods, new friends, a new flexible schedule, new means of transportation, and other adventures.

In terms of personal growth, I have yet to determine any drastic changes. I know independence is a the obvious answer, but I do not think I have reached a level of complete “self-sufficiency” and “international independence.” This is not to say that I think I am not self-sufficient because clearly you need to have a level of self-reliance and sufficiency to participate in this fellowship. However, I have not had to experience “loneliness.” I was fortunate to have “built-in friends” like Lesley, Lisa, and Amanda in Santiago. I always had someone to talk to. Someone to listen to me ramble on for countless hours. Someone to explore Santiago and other places with me. The longest amount of time that I went without a so-called friend or companion was in the Miami airport to fly to Guatemala or the Guatemalan airport to fly to Flores.

As a result, I have yet to experience the true meaning of this fellowship. I have only gotten my feet wet. I have yet to give it my all, to fully challenge myself, and to totally push my physical and mental limits. I consider myself lucky for my visit to Guatemala. How did I end up in Santiago? How did I end up meeting some of the most unique people in my life? How was I able to develop seemingly strong relationships with people in only a few weeks? Are these relationships real or are they merely an illusion? How did I become so close to two new friends, Lesley and Lisa, in only four weeks when at Vanderbilt or New Trier it took four years to develop strong bonds? I was lucky to find two people who I share so many common interests when in college and high school it was hard to identify people with the same passions, visions, or dreams. At the same time, the people I left behind in the U.S. are truly remarkable friends who I adore because of their diverse interests and dreams. Even though Vanderbilt and New Trier both appear homogeneous on the outside, you can find so many different people if you are willing to dig below the surface.

In addition to meeting new people, I have challenged myself to try new things and to do things differently than when I was abroad in Spain or Costa Rica. For example, in Costa Rica, I was a picky eater and I did not “seize the day” or the opportunity to do new things. In Santiago, I spoke Spanish as frequently as possibly even if my grammar was not stellar, I tried all the foods (probably more than I needed to), and I never passed up an opportunity to attend a meeting, take a walk, run an errand, or participate in some activity.

I have also been quite surprised how I do not miss the United States as much as one would think. I went from someone who talks to my parents or my close friends anywhere from three to ten times a day. I was always on the phone or the computer talking to someone. I did not know how I was going to cope without having them in my daily (or hourly) life. Surprisingly, I have not been in withdrawal as I had previously imagined. Granted, I miss talking to friends and family, but at the same time, I have been fine with only a weekly phone call home.

If I miss anything about the United States it is probably access to information. I miss twenty-four hour news access and reports and the internet. I guess that proves that today's generation and youth have become addicted to technology and information. I do not miss other superficial things like television shows, food, driving, or my house. And just like other recent graduates, I of course miss college life and the days of endless entertainment.

When I think about the United States it is because I am trying to imagine where I will be in year. I cannot believe how often I think about next fall. I am not focusing on the in between time. It is evident that I have not lost my compulsive attitude to try to configure the future and make a list of future dreams. There are days when I am thinking about DC and how I can further pursue development work and the other issues I have explored in the past six weeks. On the other hand, there are days where I can see myself living abroad permanently or at least spending a chunk of time overseas to work. I know this sort of lifestyle change would sadden my friends and family, but it certainly would not surprise anyone. It's a lifestyle that I inherited from my mom's side of the family and that has been encouraged and support by those around me.

My only regret in the past six weeks was not devoting more time to personal reflection and writing. I wish I spent more time collecting my thoughts and preserving them. I have never been able to keep a journal in my entire life. I find them quite awkward. However, as I write this personal reflection, one hundred ideas and thoughts flood my mind and I don't know how to transcribe them. It would be easier to blend the historical and academic side of this fellowship along with the personal growth side together in a better journal format which is appealing to readers and that will be of interest to me in the future. (I would be quite surprised if someone has read all of this information). I promise to have a stronger format for my next stop. I attribute my lack of organized writing on the fact that things went so well in Santiago and that I had friends to share my thoughts with.

After my second visit to Guatemala, I know that it has a special place in my heart. I adore its culture, indigenous heritage, people, and diversity. It has unique qualities that other places do not have. I only hope that this is my second visit of many more to come, and I hope other people have the opportunity to experience its vibrant culture! Although a developing country with its own challenges, Guatemala has much to offer and with time, patience, and the proper aid, Guatemala will grow, prosper, and live up to its full potential economically, socially, and politically. I have realized that it will be much harder to leave and re-adjust to another community, but I am also excited about visiting El Salvador, a country which many tourists do not visit.