

EL SOMBRERO AZUL



Above: A hands-on activity demonstrating how solidarity works during a CRIPDES Sur workshop in June.

Better Than A Wall

Need a break from the usual grim news about what's happening along our southern border? Family separation, child incarceration, the wall, the anti-immigrant rulings, etc.? Here's an antidote to all that.

On these pages you'll learn about the creative, constructive, determined grassroots work that goes on daily in rural communities like El Charcón. These programs, created and administered by CRIPDES, offer women and youths an alternative to emigration. Scholarships for young people, skills training for women, the creation of regional networks, the strengthening of community organization, the promotion of civic engagement – all are part of a larger popular movement aimed at meeting the challenges of life in El Salvador.

CRIPDES (the Association for the Development of Rural El Salvador) works with over 300 rural communities across the country, 70 of which are located in the province of Southern La Libertad. El Charcón is one of these communities. The funds we raise support CRIPDES Sur, the southern branch of the national network.

In supporting our Sister City Project, you become part of a determined popular movement that offers Salvadorans a positive alternative to emigration. In return for?

A welcome respite from the negative news that tends to dominate the headlines, and assurance that you are making a significant difference in the lives of many people.

Autonomy and Empowerment of Women in Rural La Libertad

Adapted from a 5/20/19 post by Zulma Tobar

CRIPDES Sur has been promoting the empowerment and autonomy of rural women through the creation of Savings and Loans (S&L) groups. Begun in 2014 with the financial support of OXFAM, the project has advanced to a new stage with the formation of the Women's Network of La Libertad. This network, which includes S&L's from nine municipalities, represents nearly 1,000 women, demonstrating the organizational power of women as they press for more rights and opportunities.



A Case Study

Carmen Criollo is the president of an S&L group. When CRIPDES began this project five years ago, someone came to her and asked her to look for 15 to 20 women who would be interested in being part of an S&L group. Carmen herself was hesitant, concerned about trusting other women to save her money. Taking up the challenge, she found that other women had similar hesitations - they hadn't enough money to save even a penny, or they didn't have time to meet every week... Finally, Carmen found a group of 15 women willing to give it a try. Little by little they began to like this way of working within a group. The CRIPDES promoter visited them often to provide follow up on their accounts, keeping the savings booklets in order. (Remember that most women from rural communities have never

(continued)

(Autonomy and Empowerment of Women, continued)

had the opportunity to go to school).

Today there are 40 women in Carmen's S&L group. She sees how this has affected their daily lives. They feel comfortable working with other women from the community and are no longer shy about sharing their opinions. For the women these meetings are not only for recording deposits and loans but also for sharing their problems and their joys.

Today Carmen participates in the Women's Network of La Libertad, representing 165 women from her municipality of Comasagua. The regional network will continue to empower women, and to strengthen their economic autonomy.



Above: A Meeting of the Women's Regional Network.

Previous Page: Carmen Criollo

More About CRIPDES

Community organizing in rural communities is the essence of what CRIPDES does.

This past June CRIPDES Sur ran a workshop for its scholarship recipients, Junta Directiva members, and Youth Group representatives. Themes covered: the history of community organizing by CRIPDES, the role played by national and international solidarity in support of that effort, and the nature of solidarity itself.

Understanding the past (how come we've achieved so much so fast?) is key to success in the future.

Meet Zulma Hernandez



Zulma Hernandez

A key member of the CRIPDES Sur team, Zulma Hernández is what the popular movement calls a promoter. Indefatigable Zulma balances many responsibilities. She mentors the region's high school and college-level scholarship

students, following their academic progress and involvement in their local communities while encouraging participation in CRIPDES regional campaigns.

Equally important, Zulma coordinates the Women's Network in the region that includes El Charcón. She mentors every Women's Saving and Loan committee, covering an area that includes five municipalities. Meeting with them both individually and collectively, she helps them with basic organization, and with creating events to raise money for their groups. Beyond that, Zulma facilitates vocational workshops as well as sessions dealing with advocacy and women's rights.

As if this weren't enough, Zulma also visits communities to work with their governing boards (their Juntas Directivas). Through her mentoring, these rural communities acquire the necessary documents that recognize them as legal entities entitled to benefit from projects offered through CRIPDES by different governmental and non-profit organizations (like us). These projects promote women's issues, organic farming, and community development projects.

Finally, Zulma coordinates political formation, a process that promotes active involvement at the community level. Zulma's salary is covered jointly by the US-El Salvador Sister City committees of Binghamton and Crystal Lake, IL.



Above: Meeting with a group of women in El Charcón's casa comunal



Above: Becoming computer literate.

Computer Literacy in El Charcon

Last year, the school in El Charcón received 30 laptops from the Ministry of Education. Problem: the school budget did not cover instruction on how to use these laptops.

The lack of computer instruction in El Charcón has, until now, put its students at a disadvantage. For those continuing on to high school, the fact that 10th grade was their first exposure to computers meant that they were academically disadvantaged compared to students from other schools who were already computer literate. Also, many students, having finished 9th grade, are forced to drop out of school to look for work to support their families. In most cases they are expected to know the computer basics (e.g. Word and Excel).

To help remedy this situation we agreed this year to contribute an additional \$800, allowing the community to hire a computer instructor. Currently a total of 137 students in grades 1-9 are finally learning to use the school laptops.

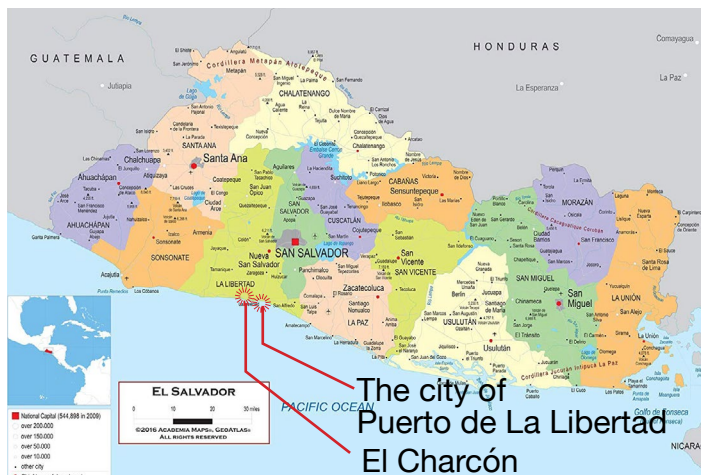
A Success Story

Meet Elvira Meléndez, the young woman who has been offering computer literacy classes at the school in El Charcón. Elvira herself attended that school, then continued on to high school as one of our scholarship students.

With the steadfast encouragement of her family, she eventually earned a BA in Computer Management from the Teachers College of El Salvador. Today she is sharing her computer skills with a new generation of young Salvadorans intent on competing in this fast-changing world of ours. We are proud of what Elvira has achieved and take pleasure in her success.



Above: Elvira Meléndez receiving her diploma



Our Mission Statement

The Binghamton - El Charcón Sister City Project (working closely with CRIPDES, a Salvadoran grassroots organization) offers educational, financial and advocacy support to Greater Binghamton's sister city, El Charcón, as well as neighboring rural communities in El Salvador. We belong to a national network of U.S. - El Salvador Sister Cities, as well as the broader movement for social and economic justice. Our common focus is the support of people working together to improve their lives.

Left: Labels indicating the location of El Charcon and the nearby city of La Libertad.



Above: Marco Aguirre (Madison WI) translating for Felicia Mijongo at the National Gathering

A US-El Salvador Sister Cities Update: Report on the 2019 National Gathering

By Suzanne Geoghehan

Some 30 people from around the country met in Chicago in October for the 2019 National Gathering of US-El Salvador Sister Cities. Hosted by the local Chicago-Cinquera committee, this event offered an overview of the current state of our national network. In addition to our traditional sister city partnerships with individual Salvadoran communities, there are now three theme-based working groups. These committees focus on the urgent issues of our times (immigration and climate change) as well as popular education. Operating via conference calls, they create opportunities for new people (particularly young people) to become actively involved with our Sister Cities network.

A key participant in this year's event was 29-year old Felicia Mijango, a leading member of CRIPDES at both the local and national level. Among other things, Felicia presented an update on the challenges posed by the conservative Bukele administration which is in the process of rolling back many of the advances made by the previous administration. These changes are not good news for our Salvadoran partners.

The most exciting aspect of this meeting was the strong presence of lively, engaged young people from different parts of the country - Albany, NY; Bozeman, MT; Chicago, IL; Danbury, CT; Madison, WI; Philadelphia, PA. The face of our national network is changing as we create new opportunities for people to develop their interests and share their talents.

Our Scholarship Students

It's been a long-standing tradition for us here in Greater Binghamton to fund three scholarships per year for high school students from El Charcón. This year we agreed to do something different. Our current scholarship recipients are Jaquelin Abigail García, in her 3rd year of high school, and Juan Torres, in his 3rd year studying Business Administration at the University of El Salvador.

Participation in community affairs is part of the contract that each student signs with CRIPDES in accepting scholarship support. Jacqueline, a member of the El Charcón Water Committee, also supports the local Youth Group. Juan is president of the community's governing board (the Junta Directiva).

The four-room school in El Charcón covers pre-school through 9th grade. The higher the grade, the smaller the class size.* In many cases, whether you stay in school or drop out comes down to a matter of money. We know that many more young people would choose to stay in school if their families could afford it.

A question for ourselves, for CRIPDES, and for the El Charcón Junta Directiva: If we were to contribute more toward scholarships, would they choose to send more students to high school or would they want to use those additional funds to help more of their young people continue through to 9th grade in the local school? Just one of many questions for upcoming conversations with our Salvadoran friends.

*This year's class sizes: 25 students in 1st grade vs. 19 in 7th grade, 12 in 8th grade, and 8 in 9th grade



Jaquelin Lara



Juan Torres

Donations

For several years now, elementary school students in the rural sector have benefited from a Ministry of Education program that covered the cost of school uniforms and supplies, plus a free school lunch. If the Bukele administration ends this support, many more children may have to drop out of school far too early. In addition to supporting all our current commitments, your donations and Equal Exchange orders will help us determine to what extent we'll be able to respond in case we're asked to help offset this threatened set-back.

Here is my tax-deductible contribution of \$ _____

When you buy Equal Exchange products (which make great gifts!) you support sustainable agriculture in developing countries while raising money for our many projects. Please use the enclosed envelope to return this form with your donation and your Equal Exchange order. ¡Gracias!

I would like to order the following Equal Exchange items:

Coffee (12 oz. bags; drip)

| | |
|--|----------|
| _____ Bag(s) of Café Salvador @ \$8.50 | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bag(s) of Hazelnut @ \$8.50 | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bag(s) of Breakfast Blend @ \$8.50 | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bag(s) of Decaf @ \$10 | \$ _____ |

Tea (25 tea bags/box) @ \$4.50

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| _____ Box(es) of Green | \$ _____ |
| _____ Box(es) of English Breakfast | \$ _____ |
| _____ Box(es) of Chai | \$ _____ |
| _____ Box(es) of Chamomile | \$ _____ |
| _____ Box(es) of Roiboos | \$ _____ |

Cocoa (12 oz. cans) @ \$7.50

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----------|
| _____ Can(s) of hot cocoa drink mix | \$ _____ |
| _____ Can(s) of baking cocoa | \$ _____ |

Organic Chocolate Bars (2.8 oz. bars) @ \$3.50

| | |
|---|----------|
| _____ Bar(s) of Dark Chocolate Almond (55%) | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bar(s) of Dark Caramel Crunch (55%) | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bar(s) of Dark Chocolate Orange Infused (65%) | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bar(s) of Dark Chocolate Mint (67%) | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bar(s) of Very Dark Chocolate (71%) | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bar(s) of Milk Chocolate (43%) | \$ _____ |
| _____ Bar(s) of Milk Chocolate Caramel (43%) | \$ _____ |

Live outside of Greater Binghamton? Please add \$8 for shipping. \$ _____

Total amount enclosed: \$ _____

Please make your check payable to **BECS CP** and mail it to **59 Matthews St., Binghamton NY 13905**.

Please give us your e-mail address. _____

We'll send you a 'green' Thank You note!



Our 2019 Benefit Sale

Warm thanks, once again, to the many people who donated wonderful items and precious time to this important fundraiser. In addition to garnering over \$1,000, this event provides valuable publicity for our Sister City project. We accept donations throughout the year. Please keep us in mind if you know of anyone moving, down-sizing, uncluttering. Contact Beth (785-0869) or Suzanne (798-0787). Thanks!

What does the label code mean?

It's the year in which you made your most recent contribution to BECSCP. If you don't see a number below your address, please consider making a contribution this year. Thanks!

Sombrero Azul is the annual newsletter of the Binghamton-El Charcón Sister City Project. Follow us on Facebook at fb.me/BECSCP. We are a 501(c)3 tax deductible organization affiliated with the National Center for US-El Salvador Sister Cities. elsalvadorsolidarity.org

Sombrero Azul refers to the opening line of a Salvadoran protest song: "*El pueblo salvadoreño tiene el cielo por sombrero, tan alta es su dignidad*" - "The Salvadoran people stand so tall (with such dignity) that they have the sky for a hat".