

HOW MANY CHILDREN DOES IT TAKE TO RAISE A VILLAGE? CELEBRATING YOUTH AS A RESOURCE IN GUATEMALAN COMMUNITIES

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During a recent visit to Guatemala I spent two weeks with a youth program I helped to launch. Within the first week one of our youth mentors was robbed at gunpoint on a public bus in midday, and the rental vehicle of a visiting supporter from the U.S. was broken into in Guatemala's most touristy city. He had left the car for only twenty minutes.

In a *New York Times* article on violence in Guatemala (2006), Ginger Thompson reports a 21% increase in killings of men and a 57% increase in killings of women from 2002 to 2004, giving Guatemala one of the highest homicide rates in Latin America. As youth gang-related crime continues to grow throughout Guatemala, politicians frequently respond with tough language about increasing security.

Disgruntled by the seeming exacerbation of crime in a country I love dearly, I found myself reminded of why I was there in the first place when I picked up a newspaper page with the heading "the subject is not security, but opportunities" (Seijo 2006, 8). The article included an interview of Emilio Goubaud, the director of the Guatemalan-based Alliance for Crime Prevention. In Seijo's article and interview, Goubaud argues that a tough-language response focuses on the wrong target, or at best a secondary one. Goubaud advises getting at the root of the problem, an epidemic of poor, disillusioned, and desperate youth. "There is no civic participation, there is no social fabric, and there is no work," says Goubaud. "It is much easier for a youth to access weapons and drugs than an education or a job" (Seijo, 8).

What Goubaud enumerates as essential for the improvement of Guatemalan society are precisely the aims we had in mind when we began developing a youth-empowerment program in the rural Guatemalan village of Cerro Alto. Young people are perhaps the most important and underutilized resource for changing Guatemala's future. The truth is that the villages need them as much as they need the villages.

A COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTION

During my first summer of living in Guatemalan villages three years ago, I made numerous trips into the towns and cities researching youth issues. In visiting orphanages, schools, and agencies, I learned of the difficult realities many of the young faced on the streets. Some suffered from street crime and rape, some sniffed glue to ease their hunger pains, and some were brutally beaten by their own police officers simply for being street kids.

The rural villages I lived in represent a stark contrast to the vortex of crime consuming the urban areas. I frequently tell concerned travel companions (and their parents) that I feel as safe in the rural villages as I do anywhere in the world. More than 60% of Guatemala's 14 million people are indigenous Mayans. They are a humble and peaceful people with welcoming hearts and a rich culture. The Maya people make up much of the rural communities and agricultural sector. Living among these villages, I found myself baffled in trying to understand how the same country could know such turmoil.

The more time I spent talking with young people in the villages, however, the more I came to understand the challenges that caused many to change their environment and take on desperate lifestyles. Guatemalan youth frequently lacked opportunities to grow and rise from the cycle of poverty that their families had experienced for generations. Most survived on family incomes of less than \$2 a day and could not continue their education beyond age eleven. One exercise that Stetson University facilitated with thirty rural youths revealed that below the surface even their beautiful communities were unraveling. They cited problems with alcoholic fathers, abandoned mothers, and the penetration of drugs and gang influence into their villages.

Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous woman from Guatemala who won the Nobel Peace Prize, recalled what she was told growing up as a Mayan girl: "They told me I would have many ambitions but I wouldn't have the opportunity to realize them. They said my life wouldn't change, it would go on the same—work, poverty, suffering" (1984, 48). More than twenty years

later, Menchú's words persist in the defeated voices of countless Guatemalan children.

The idea for developing a community-based youth program in Cerro Alto began, appropriately, with the young. Hearing of my work establishing youth-development programs for at-risk children in the U.S., they felt that they deserved opportunities of their own. Their initiative was bold and inspiring. These young people wanted a voice.

Thanks to many generous supporters in the U.S.—ranging from a compassionate group of at-risk teenagers in rural Nebraska to business leaders in Washington, D.C.—we raised enough funds to launch the Guatemala Youth Empowerment Project in the rural village of Cerro Alto. Nestled in mountains and home to more than 2,000 residents, the average family income in Cerro Alto is less than \$2 a day. The dream of the youth for new opportunities through their own program began to come alive.

EMPOWERMENT

The Guatemala Youth Empowerment Project is built on a philosophy of engaging young people not as passive recipients of a foreign service, but as active partners in developing their own local program and contributing to their community. We recognize them not as problems, but as problem solvers. Indeed, we view young people not as the leaders of tomorrow, but as leaders *today*.

Empowerment has become a modern-day buzzword frequently considered to be a "good thing" but infrequently applied with any kind of consistency in definition or process. North American political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba describe empowerment as the transition from "parochial" and "subject" mentalities toward a "participant" mentality (1963). As the nineteenth-century political philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote, "more good may always be made of an energetic nature, than of an indolent and impassive one" (1869, ch. 3). Almond and Verba's definition was intended for developing a participatory democracy. It functions just as well, however, where empowerment most sensibly needs to happen first: in local environments among silenced children and teens. Those are the roots from which a new era can grow.

Most fundamentally, for any meaningful empowerment to take place, the young must be recognized for their inherent present worth and the value of their voice. No one understands the challenges, needs, and experiences of

Guatemalan young people better than they themselves. They should be valued as experts in their communities.

Resistant adults in all parts of the globe tend to perceive the young as apathetic and irrational at best, ill tempered and destructive at worst, and as liabilities to the community rather than assets. Granted, this image has not emanated from thin air. The timidity of many young people and the rise of violent youth gangs in Guatemala have only fueled these perceptions. As an old fable goes, the longer one wears the mask he is given, the more likely he is to accept it as his face. The youth of Guatemala intrinsically desire a better image and a better lifestyle. They just need access to it.

PROGRAMMATIC EMPOWERMENT

As I spend time with youth initiatives in different parts of the world, I have come to see a distinction between emotional empowerment (a product of committed relationships in the spirit of unconditional love) and programmatic empowerment (a product of a democratic organizational structure with opportunities for authentic leadership and involvement). The latter is much more structural and tangible. In order to institutionalize opportunities that encouraged youth input, at the core of the youth program we created the Youth Council.

With the support of caring adults, the Youth Council is charged with determining the vision, goals, and activities of the youth program. The Youth Council consists of six sub-committees, each led by elected young people from the community. If the program is the vehicle for improving the lives of the young of Guatemalan villages, the Youth Council is the driver.

The Guatemala Youth Empowerment Project places high emphasis on the authentic engagement of its young for three reasons. First, we recognize them as valuable resources in the community and the program. Second, we believe that we stand a much better chance of cultivating active and concerned citizens if we start at a younger, more formative age. Finally, we want them to come. Let me explain.

If young people are not invited to invest their ideas, time, and energy into a program vision and activities, then they will lack a sense of ownership. If they lack ownership, they often lack the incentive to participate in the activities and help the program to succeed. In the language of economics this is the “principle-agent” problem (Wheelan 2002). Some public corporations have tackled this dilemma by giving employees and board members (the agents) stock options (ownership) in the company (the

principal) so as to align their individual incentives with those of the company. Similarly, we strive to give young people a greater stake in the organization by providing opportunities for leadership on the Youth Council.

In a visioning activity, the youth council members conveyed their dream for a better future in their village and their country. They agreed on the following aspirations:

- ◆ Developing youth leaders
- ◆ Building a community youth center
- ◆ Having a library and computer center in the village
- ◆ Eliminating gangs in Guatemala
- ◆ Improving the environment
- ◆ Encouraging young people to go into professional jobs
- ◆ Accessing education for all youths

Their big dreams give testimony to the laudable and altruistic aspirations of these timid and impoverished individuals.

EMOTIONAL EMPOWERMENT

For a while I had a habit of training social workers and youth programs much more on the programmatic side of empowerment, making the mistake of conveying that as the whole package. While I always knew the need for supportive relationships in the empowerment process, I did not dedicate the amount of attention it deserves. A mentor in child advocacy—one who lives his life consumed by the details of complex policy proposals for improving young lives—once shared with me a very simple piece of wisdom. He said, “Matt, every single child needs one person who is absolutely crazy about them.”

I have discovered great truth in my mentor’s comment. Program leaders frequently focus on the institutional aspects of their organization: number of participants, level of funding, structure of meetings, strategic plans, and so on. These are great. But what young people need most are consistent relationships that provide accountability, security, affirmation, and unconditional love. If they fail to find these in their communities, they will endure a death of spirit or they will seek it elsewhere, in the illusory temptations of gangs and street life.

No matter how extraordinary the opportunities offered by a youth program, many young people will forgo them if they lack basic hope and

confidence in themselves. Hope derives from a sense of dignity, and the most critical way for us to give a young person dignity is to love him or her.

With this understanding three staff members were hired for the program in Cerro Alto. They all live in local villages and have the heart to pour themselves into the lives of children and teens. Over time, these relationships develop a mutual trust and respect, and the young people begin to take bigger steps in their lives. In a culture where young Mayan women frequently seem timid and apathetic, a few of our most active committee leaders are Mayan girls. Amanda, the chair of the sports committee, approached me with tears at the last visit to let me know that the youth program has been the most meaningful part of her year. That did not happen naturally. It was a process of transformation that took place through gradual emotional empowerment. We also recognize that we have much more to do.

The Cornerstone youth programs in Uganda provide one of the best models I have seen for emotional empowerment. Cornerstone has established group homes and leadership academies throughout the destitute and war-torn East African country. Ask any youth in any of the facilities about his or her experience, and the response will almost always include two words: "love" and "family." That is our dream for Guatemala. Relationships first.

As Stephen Covey, author of the bestselling *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, suggests, the first steps toward leadership have to involve the private victories of personal transformation and character development (1990). Character development will set the stage for empowerment to take place at a public and programmatic level. As one Ugandan youth mentor advised, "the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart."

ACTIVITIES

At the end of each month the Youth Council develops a calendar of events for the following month. The activities often change, depending on the decisions of the committees. Because the Guatemala Youth Empowerment Project is modeled after a few successful youth-empowerment programs in the U.S., some question whether it works "to plant a U.S. program in a developing country." The answer is "yes and no."

The concept of youth empowerment demonstrates transferability. Because of the empowering structure of the program, however, it inherently becomes a very local and organic initiative. We know that the involvements will meet local needs and culture because local young people design them.

Still, while the specific activities fluctuate, we do aim to include opportunities each month that fall into four areas of programming.

Leadership, education, and skill development

Despite their hearts and strength, many young people throughout the developing world lack the skills and competencies to be change agents for themselves and their communities. World Bank economist William Russell Easterly has written about the pattern of a “human capital trap” in developing countries (2001, 285). Human capital includes the skills, education, and outstanding attributes that an individual possesses. Easterly explains that the fewer people in a society with skills, the less incentive there is for others to acquire them. The result is an unbroken cycle of poverty.

This phenomenon became clear in some villages where the idea of a youth program was not popular. Parents in those communities had little faith in education and youth programs, believing that their kids were better off working in the fields. Leadership workshops, guest speakers, carpentry classes, and group cooking projects are all examples of the kinds of experiences that enable the young to develop practical skills. This skill development rebuilds faith by enabling young people to achieve social, personal, and economic advancement.

Service

One of the most remarkable findings I have discovered in programs for disadvantaged children and teens around the globe is the enormous healing power in serving others. We sometimes assume that those who have it bad need to focus on themselves, not on helping others. Yet, when youth-organized service experiences with meaningful reflection are available, young people often end up changing themselves in the process.

The young need to know that their pain is legitimate. They also need to know that their own pain can take shape as a strength as they get in touch with their awesome capacity for compassion. For example, last fall our youth prepared gift baskets and delivered them by chicken buses to villages left in shambles from the mudslides following Hurricane Stan.

Latin America has been led by many educated leaders over the last century. Many of them have only perpetuated the epidemics of corruption, greed, and violence throughout the region’s history. Guatemala needs leaders who are first and foremost compassionate servants.

Cultural celebration

There are few people who leave Guatemala unaffected by the beautiful nature of the Maya culture, with its long and rich history of traditions and accomplishments. As customs begin to deteriorate with the influence of western culture, urban assimilation, and the unraveling of some rural communities, many families look for ways to keep their children in touch with their roots. The youth program organizes a number of cultural nights with traditional dancing and opportunities for young people to practice traditional music and art.

Recreation

One theme that came up frequently in Rigoberta Menchú's biography (1984) was the lack of childhood in the lives of Mayan youth. As soon as children are old enough to work, they work. This is regarded as such a normal part of a child's life that the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child includes "full opportunity to play and recreation" (1959). Through sports, movie nights, parties, and games the young gain opportunities to celebrate their youth and their contributions to the community, to build friendships, and to discover positive alternatives to unhealthy engagements.

THE POWER OF YOUTH

One year after starting the program, the young of Cerro Alto continue to set off ripples throughout the area. Community authorities have responded by providing teens with free space in local schools and public buildings for their activities. Parents increasingly encourage their children to participate rather than set up obstacles. The handful of original youth members has persuaded nearly sixty of their peers to participate in meetings and activities each week. Now, young people and adults alike in surrounding villages are asking for their own youth council.

During World War II, Janusz Korczak, a famous child psychologist and victim of the Holocaust, predicted "the unknown person inside each child is the hope for the future" (qtd. in Lifton 1988, 62). Like Korczak, those of us involved with the Guatemala Youth Empowerment Project have found endless hope and potential in each youth we encounter. We have often heard the age-old proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child." I agree. The humble young leaders of Cerro Alto, however, have convinced me that a child can also raise a village.

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