

# Blog Post 1: Together we can make a difference

I must express my complete gratitude to the PSAC Social Justice Fund for being chosen to represent the Prairie Region on the 2014 [Education in Action](#) (EIA) delegation.

During this trip we will be working hand-in-hand with the [Campesino Committee of the Highlands \(CCDA\)](#) to help paint classrooms and build a community centre. We will also be picking coffee and meeting some of the key players in the social justice movement in Guatemala. I am looking forward to meeting some new people and directly seeing how much of an impact solidarity makes.

Delegations like these are crucial to build solidarity, and the people in Guatemala especially need our support. The people of Guatemala have been fighting for change; a true elective democracy, and many have died for the cause. Their past was wrought with oppression, inequality, and violence with a civil war that lasted almost 40 years. Guatemala has a rich and vibrant arts culture. Access to education is limited, a staggering percentage of the population lives below the poverty line, and it is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Since an elective democracy was established the country is improving, but there is still a long way to go. Guatemala has a rich ecosystem and the ability to export great quantities, but unfair trade prices and practices threaten/inhibit that growth and improvement.

The video below details the coffee trade and how much of a positive impact purchasing fair trade coffee makes (as well as the impact of unfair practices).



Luckily, there is a lot you can do to help. You can [purchase coffee](#) produced using fair trade practices and 100 per cent of the money goes right back into Mayan communities. You can also purchase coffee and cards from the [Education in Action](#) website.

We will have a shared laptop for use while in Guatemala, but I have been told that internet access may be intermittent so I will try to get posts done as often as possible. For instant updates and information check out the [EIA](#) and [CCDA](#) Facebook pages.

I am so excited to take you on this journey with me!

In solidarity,

Jen Botincan

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## Blog Post 2: Living life to the fullest

Buenos días!

I feel I must add a bit of disclaimer before I start here, the Internet connection is intermittent, at best, and so I will likely find myself typing out blogs and then forwarding them for uploading when I can (apologies in advance). Once I return home I will blog about lessons learned and include any videos or links that may be broken/not provided because I cannot use the internet to search/hyperlink.

We arrived in Quixayī this evening, it's so beautiful here and hot! Guatemala City was hot as well, but Quixayī is incredibly humid. Most of our day was filled with fun moments at the market in Chichicastenango, where we all got to purchase beautiful items. Yesterday the tone was very different, though, as we heard presentations throughout the day on the history and plight in Guatemala.

Just after breakfast we heard about the [Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala \(FAFG\)](#) that works to identify the disappeared (as they are called here) people that were killed during the Guatemalan genocide. It was heartbreaking hearing about all of the families with loved ones that disappeared finally getting some semblance of closure many, many years later.

Later in the morning we heard from a very public and famous, activist Dr. Yuri Melini from the [Centro de Acción Legal Ambiental y Social de Guatemala \(CALAS\)](#). Yuri has put his life on the line to fight against environmental exploitation and political corruption in Guatemala. Social activists are regularly murdered for fighting for justice, truth, fairness, and equality. Yuri spent months in the hospital recuperating from being shot seven times. He showed us a documentary that both angered and broke my heart. He is so passionate and inspirational!

We then went for a little walk for lunch and then headed to the Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulam to learn more about the colonization of Guatemala, destruction of the Mayan culture, and genocide of over 145,000 Guatemalans during what was known as Scorched Earth. The museum opened in February of this year and is used mostly to educate the people of Guatemala of their past, whereby preventing history of repeating itself. This museum was unlike any we had ever been to where exhibits told a (very sad) story.

Next we went to speak with a collectivist group called [H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala \(Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio\)](#) headed by young people with the aim of informing people and encouraging independent thoughts and actions (from the government). The schooling system here does not teach students about the past, so many people grow up not knowing much about their own country. The group uses art and peaceful protests to further their cause. Below is just a taste of their street artwork.



There was a common theme on our first day in Guatemala City: truth, remembrance, collectivism, and peace. It was an incredibly emotional day. The level of injustice the people of Guatemala have faced would be unfathomable had we not seen and heard first-hand accounts of it. What absolutely amazes me is that despite everything the people here face—stark poverty, oppression, inequality, exploitation of land and resources—they are incredibly hopeful and happy people. We walked down one of the main streets and saw something that we wouldn't typically see in Canada, everyone gathering to play music, dance, and connect. The people here truly live life to the fullest, where in Canada I feel we don't, yet we're the ones that have all the freedom and (decent) equality.

We have a few days of intense work ahead of us, so at this time I will sign off and head to bed. Until next time!

Jen



Tree of Life Support at the [Casa de la Memoria Kaji Tulum](#)

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## Blog Post 3: A humbling and rewarding experience

The first night in Quixayí was pretty warm and I'm almost regretting my decision not to sleep on the roof in a tent, like half of the delegation will be for the ten days we are here. The first morning here we awoke to the sound of some intense rumbling, and although we may be completely wrong, we believe it may be the Atitlan volcano expressing its presence (completely unnecessary as it's the largest peak around).

We ate some breakfast and showed up at the Centro Educativo Comunal Mixto Santa Cruz to help frame and cover the roof with tin, paint, and prepare the school for classes on Wednesday (March 26). The school has three rooms and is used as an elementary/middle school during the day and high school in the afternoon. I recall wondering to myself how we would be able to get it all done within two and half days without many of the tools we use back home, but with Marcelo at the helm (our carpenter for the trip), and teamwork we accomplished everything! The first day was long and hot, we were all just starting to get used to the change in climate; being out in the sun for eight hours certainly sped up the acclimatization. On the second day while more than half of the delegation worked on the roof a few of us got to paint pictures inside of a Mayan symbol template. Needless to say, the break from the heat was welcomed.



Our Friends at the CCDA Main Office

Wednesday afternoon was the reopening ceremony and we were invited to attend. A few parents spoke, there was a dance and singing by locals, and the director presented the CCDA and Education in Action with certificates of recognition and gifts to express their gratitude for their contributions and our work on the school. After that we were invited to go on stage where the teachers from the school presented us with handmade bags as tokens of their appreciation and we danced and sang. After the formal ceremony we were invited to a reception at the school where we all got to sit together and eat. The whole experience was so incredibly humbling. People kept thanking us, but all I wanted to do was thank them for allowing us to come there, help out, and make us feel like a valued part of their community. What a rewarding few days.



San Filipe – A Community in Need

We head to the beneficio tomorrow for a tour of the coffee processing operations and learn more about what the [CCDA \(Campesino Committee of the Highlands Comit  Campesino del Altiplano\)](#) does. We will be standing in the back of a truck for the ride!

Until then!

Jen Botincan

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## Blog Post 4: The importance of sustainability



Our (now) Preferred Mode of Transportation

I want to talk about our visit to the beneficio and more about what the [CCDA \(Campesino Committee of the Highlands – Comit  Campesino del Altiplano\)](#) does. Everything short of roasting is completed at the beneficio and nothing goes to waste. Small producers sell their coffee cherries to the beneficio, they are shelled with machines, sorted, washed and then placed in rows to dry in the sun. Then they are peeled again to make ‘green gold’, which is coffee ready to be shipped and roasted. The coffee sold to Canada, the USA, and parts of Europe is 100% organic and fair trade. It takes just over 500 lbs of picked coffee to yield 100 lbs of coffee fit to be roasted; the other 400 lbs are used to create fertilizer and compost for future yields. Some of the coffee produced there is sold through Education in Action as Caf  Justicia – 100% of the cost of the coffee goes right back to the CCDA to help communities and small producers. We have been drinking the coffee the whole time we have been here and I cannot wait to place an order when I get home. Please contact [Janet St-Jean](#) to purchase some of your own.

The beneficio is so much more than a coffee operation, though. It is a centre whose sole purpose is to protect small producers and create natural alternatives to now modern (and ineffective) agricultural practices. It's an educational centre that shows producers how to plant crops in different arrangements (other than the typical rows) to obtain optimal water usage, and how different plants grow (natural seeds vs. modified/hybrids). There has been a huge problem with [coffee rust](#) the last few harvests and the CCDA is working on developing plants that are resistant to it as well as natural fungicides that will be effective against it. The organization has different programs in place to provide producers with low-cost or no cost supplies to help them grow organic and fair trade coffee that will be resistant to the rust.

We were already incredibly impressed and amazed with what the organization does we went for a bit of a hike along the side of the mountain Quixayá sits on and found ourselves in paradise. Lush green, plants everywhere and a stream with small rapids left us all in awe – Rio de Quixayá is a slice of heaven. The CCDA uses the land around it to harvest tilapia, coffee, corn, and snails for consumption. The most incredible part of it was that all of the sprinklers and fountains use absolutely no electricity to run, just gravity from the flow of the lake. The best part (in my opinion) is that the program teaches women about sustainability, nutrition, and horticulture and empowers them to be more than a housewife which is the typical career path for women. In a place where indigenous women are voiceless, this is a move in the right direction.



Tilapia Pond – Rio de Quixayá

Sustainability is so incredibly important where people do not make enough to feed their families a balanced diet. A presentation by [IMAP \(Instituto Mesoamericano de Permacultura\)](#) was incredibly informative and I cannot wait to employ some of what we learned back home. Their grounds are incredible, everything was built and created using local materials. Everything from plastic bottles to manure was reused and repurposed in the construction of the buildings. Mind you, most things here are reused and recycled. Part of that is due to necessity and limited

resources, but more of that is the resourceful and prudent (as opposed to wasteful) nature of Guatemalans. They also use the Mayan calendar, lunar cycles, astronomy and the cosmos to work with the land rather than try to manipulate it like we typically do. It was amazing.

The next few days will be spent building a community centre in San Filipe and completing a market activity. I'll report back on those.



Some of the Handymen and Handywomen

Talk soon,

Jen

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# Blog Post 5: Hunger in Guatemala



A staggering percentage of Guatemalan children are [malnourished](#). They are actually the most malnourished people in the Western Hemisphere. It's infuriating that in a country with so much fertile land and natural resources that people could be starving. The reason so many are malnourished became blatantly clear after we completed our market activity, but let me provide some context first.

The minimum wage in Guatemala is around 75 Quetzales per day, which is just over \$11 US, but people are rarely actually paid that. There is very little work to go around and people's desperation is exploited, so many only earn closer to 25 Quetzales (around \$3 US) per day. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention that a round-trip bus fare to the market is 10 Quetzales. When the average indigenous family is around nine people the ability to feed every mouth becomes their main priority.

We split up into groups of three and were each given 10 Quetzales to purchase enough food to feed a family of nine for a day, and we were given about an hour to do it. It was not easy. What will provide the most energy for the least amount? Carbohydrates. We knew we had to focus on those, but when we were asking merchants how much a pound of each item was we thought they were messing with us (ever haggle at a market with up to 100% markup?). They weren't. We honestly went up and down the streets and each merchant gave us either the same, or a similar price. We were pretty blown away over the cost of food in Guatemala. It's not much different than the cost to us here and our minimum wage is closer to \$11 US per hour. This is what my group bought to feed a family of nine for a day.

- 1 lb of corn
- 2 oz of limestone (needed to make tortillas and adds calcium)

- ½ lb black beans
- ½ lb rice
- 1 jalapeño
- 3 plantains
- 1 lb tomatoes

Would that be able to feed a family of nine for a day, though? I still wonder, to be honest. We were told that the person that works the hardest in the family is fed the most and that tortillas filled with sugar are eaten for energy to work. What about everyone else? What about children that require nutrients for proper development? The answer to those questions is that they go without.

The activity really hit home and made me think how fortunate I am to never have felt true hunger. The worst part about the hunger in Guatemala is that it's due to inequality—government, socio-economic, land distribution, and gender to name a few. That's why organisations like the [PSAC Social Justice Fund](#) and [Education in Action](#) that support the [CCDA](#) are so important; they are working on getting people land to grow food to feed their families and teaching indigenous people about proper nutrition.

With that activity constantly in the back of our minds we worked really hard to build a community centre in San Filipe. The community has gone without a central meeting place to congregate and have their children play for the last 17 years. Other than the foundation we will be completely building the community centre. I have discovered that I have a knack for hammering, and really enjoy that everyone from the group has found their niche and used it to help. San Filipe is a community that doesn't have much, there is some stark poverty here and we all feel so grateful to be able to help out. The one thing this community is rich with is amazing children and friendly people. Time to get building!



The Community Centre - Before

We will be working on this community centre until we get ready to leave Quixayá and head to Antigua for a day then to Guatemala City for a farewell dinner. It's really bittersweet. We have been made to feel at home here in Guatemala and I will never forget the experiences here.

Next we will be meeting with the CCDA to discuss their political work and getting ready to leave Guatemala. There are so many lessons I have learned while being here and I cannot wait to share them with you.

Hasta luego!

Jen Botincan

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## Blog Post 6: Forever changed and grateful



The Opening Reception – San Filipe Community Centre

We finished the community centre in San Filipe (*pictured above*) and attended a surprise reception this afternoon, and what a surprise it was! As we were getting ready for the opening we heard amazing music fill the community. We followed our ears and discovered the community centre completely decorated with palm leaves, streamers and balloons – the whole community was there. The best part of the reception was when the children that we got to know over the past two weeks presented us with bracelets. We then danced well into the evening with people from the community until we went off and said our goodbyes. It was a magical evening and I am so glad we all got to be a part of providing this community with a place to gather, connect and play. What an honour. It was the perfect way to end our time in Quixayá.

Tomorrow we go back to Guatemala City and then we go home. I am sure I speak for everyone on this delegation when I say this whole experience was bittersweet. We visited a foreign land, but we were welcomed with open arms and made to feel like we were a part of their communities. We saw much stark poverty, yet the people were the most generous, accommodating and kind. The value derived from their investment in family, community and real-life connections is truly priceless. The most beautiful part was that despite everything—the violence, hunger, poverty and exploitation—everyone was genuinely happy at the core. We didn't see bitterness, just passion and hope for positive change and a better tomorrow.

I am going to change gears here for a moment because it's really important to share. This poignant [article](#) sums up life in Guatemala. That article acts as the perfect segue for me to discuss the presentation by the [CCDA](#) on their political action work on our second last night in Quixayá. Up until that point we had learned about the different sustainability projects the organisation is working on to help Guatemalans feed themselves using very little land and resources through rural development. We learned more about how the CCDA helps with [land claims, agrarian reform and recuperation of land](#) through political action. The case they have been working on most recently is [Cobán](#) where [forced evictions](#) occurred days before we arrived in Guatemala. Intimidation, extortion, violence and forced evictions are a reality for people here every single day. Unimaginable, isn't it?

Upon reflection, I realized we don't change things by going down and building a community centre, or meeting people and hearing their stories. And we don't need to change things, because we can't, nor is it our place to. The people on the front lines change things. We can help, though. We can help by supporting those people and organisations that believe in the very same things we do; the things we have fought for and won, like fair wages and benefits to provide for our most fundamental human needs. The only difference between us is that we don't have to put our lives on the line for those basic rights.

You can help, too. Whether it's by supporting international non-profits, signing petitions, buying fair trade or going on a delegation; I promise you it will be one of the most rewarding things you ever do. Don't stop because you think you're not making a change. Small contributions *DO* make a huge impact.



Thank you for taking the time to come along this journey with me. This experience has been so amazing and my hope is that I was able to inspire you to want to help in some way. None of this would have been possible for me without PSAC Social Justice Fund and the [PSAC Prairie Region](#) – thank you for supporting such important causes.

Want English updates on the happenings in Guatemala? Check out [Breaking the Silence](#) and 'Like' them on [Facebook](#).

If you have any questions about my experience, please feel free to [email](#) me.

Forever changed and grateful,

Jen Botincan  
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Local 50705