



The Chiapas Project

A Catholic Worker Community

www.bishopruizproject.org

Special Edition, 2008

I nstead of giving a rifle to somebody, build a school; instead of giving a rifle, build a community with adequate services. Instead of giving a rifle, develop an educational system that is not about conflict and violence, but one that promotes respect for values, for life, and respect for one's elders. This requires a huge investment. Yet if we can invest in a different vision of peaceful coexistence, I think we can change the world, because every problem has a nonviolent answer.

Rigoberta Menchu
September 24, 1996

Rigoberta Menchú Tum, is an indigenous Guatemalan, of the Quiché-Maya ethnic group and a life-long advocate of indigenous people in Mexico and Guatemala. Menchú became well-known after her first biography, I, Rigoberta Menchú was published in 1983 when she was merely 23 years old. Later she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, the youngest person to ever receive the Nobel.



The Poor Are with Us

by Richard Flamer

"Christ is there with us. What we do is very little. But it is like the little boy with a few loaves and fishes. Christ took that little and increased it. He will do the rest. What we do is so little it may seem to be constantly failing. But so did he fail. He met with apparent failure on the Cross. But unless the seed fall into the earth and die, there is no harvest. And why must we see results? Our work is to sow: Another generation will be reaping the harvest."

-Dorothy Day

The poor, like Angelina, will always be among us. Angelina works in a Youth Hostel on the weekends for 50 pesos a day (fewer than five U.S. dollars). Her husband left her some years back with a house of two bedrooms, one

of which she rents out on occasion though at the moment her four-year-old grandson is staying with her. Her two grown children have long ago moved away and can barely feed themselves, let alone help their mother.

Angelina was fortunate enough to be a part of a Japanese/Mexican program that worked with older women in an effort to make them more independent. She has now completed courses in "self-esteem," massage therapy, and herbal medicines. She tells us her favorite class was learning how to read and write. Araceli and Angelina spend countless hours at our house reading and writing. Last week Angelina came to us for something to eat. We learned that her son was not giving her money to care for the grandson, and Angelina was preparing food for the four-year-old and neglecting herself. Araceli went with Angelina to

visit the son at his home and got a promise of another 150 pesos a week. I wonder how impoverished my life would now be if I were not allowed to live among people who are starving?

Magdalena cleans houses, when she finds the work, and is mother to two school-aged children, Carlos and Lupita. They go with her everywhere. The hovel in which they live is too dangerous for the children to stay home alone. Since Magdalena must take her children wherever she works she has only a few clients and cannot work a regular job, like in a hotel, etc. Magdalena comes to our house each week to do the laundry and clean. She and her family live on the fifty pesos we pay her, along with the other two clients she has (who only pay her

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The Chiapas Project

The Chiapas Project Founder
Richard Flamer
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Founded by Richard Flamer, the Chiapas Project is an intentional community located rural Chiapas near San Cristobal de las Casas in Mexico.

Influenced by his disillusionment during his U.S. Army stint in Vietnam, his subsequent years of photographically documenting the stark realities of war and poverty in Central America and southern Mexico, and the time he spent living in Catholic Worker communities in the Midwest, Flamer recognized the San Cristobal area in Mexico as a place of great need for works of mercy.

The Mayan people of southern Mexico are among the poorest in this hemisphere. Victims of widespread discrimination, high levels of unemployment, disease and malnutrition there is little reason for hope. It is here that Richard Flamer and his wife, Araceli have committed themselves to changing this bleak outlook. The Groff family; Jim, Pat and Chris as well as daughters Anna and Ruth have committed to help them in this project. They receive no monetary pay for their work.

The Project began with a shared vision when Flamer, Bishop Samuel Ruiz, and other area clergy initiated a community center with the acronym of SY-JAC (Service to our people in Tzol Tzil). Since its founding seven years ago, the Chiapas/Bishop Ruiz Project has supported and built the community center which now includes a day care center, a modest kitchen, and classrooms for adult literacy, sewing and carpentry.

The aim of the Chiapas Project is to live in voluntary poverty with others, to advocate for justice for the poor, and to be a prophetic, non violent witness against injustice and militarism. The work is to live as the Gospels have shown us: recognizing our failures, giving food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, building shelters, while seeking forgiveness from those whom we have wronged.

Together with supporters from throughout the world the Project welcomes others to help and work with them, in a nonviolent spirit that is their response to Globalization.

Donations

Mail donations to the Chiapas Project to
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Information?

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or visit the website at: www.bishopruizproject.org

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The Poor Are with Us

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25 pesos each.) Lupita caught a cold recently and was ill for a week until Araceli was able to take Lupita to our doctor friend, who wrote her a prescription for which Araceli paid because Magdalena could not. But, Lupita is better. Yet it begs the question of what happens when Magdalena gets sick? The last time (two years back) we took the children for four days while Magdalena was placed in the hospital. What about the next time?

Don Santiago works at our farm. He lives on \$72 a week with his 14-year-old daughter and his wife. While he owns two parcels of land, one inherited from his father, he cannot afford to keep his 30-by-60-foot lot with a small 12-by-18-foot wooden because of the levies imposed by his rich neighbors who have bought up the surrounding land. The levies, in lieu of land taxes, are to "improve" the drainage, electrical, street repair, etc. The levies were \$11,000 pesos last year (or around \$1000.) which he paid from a weekly paycheck of 720 pesos. We were able to give him some relief from this burden by helping him put in a small register and drainage so that he could connect his new place to the drainage in the community and give him most of the materials needed for the job. It's what neighbors are supposed to do, I think.

Then, there is "The Walker," a beggar who walks each day from a far end of the city past our house to the center of town where he begs each day. The walk is more than six miles each way. The Walker tells me he doesn't know when he was born, but he refers to his children who were born in the 1920s. Sometimes I walk with him in his stilted shuffle as he uses his stick to fend off passing dogs and other pedes-

trians. He is only about 4'6" tall but he tells me he used to be taller when he was younger. He won't take money from me as we walk. If I want to give him money for his begging, I have to wait until he is in his favorite spot at a traffic light in the middle of town. He persuaded a maintenance worker once to make to lengthen the time between lights changing so he could approach than one car as they waited in traffic. He passes our house at eight a.m. and again at 6:00 p.m. He tells me that he rises at 4 every morning. Sometimes I wonder how I can help him more. I realize each time he passes our house is another gift from God.

The "Guero," or white guy has an auto repair shop across the street from us. I have often had vehicles repaired at his shop, though why I keep taking them to him I do not know. His father was a German working man who fled after W.W. II to Mexico (rumors in the neighborhood suggest he had been a Nazi soldier) where he met and married a local woman. The children, all six, are light skinned and handsome, and all are reprobates... Juan Carlos loves Baseball, Beer and Women, not exactly in that order. He is, when he works, a terrific intuitive mechanic. As one would guess, he is an expert at German cars and loves good engineering. The problem is that when he takes my truck into his shop, it stays for weeks or months while he fixes every little thing that I didn't ask him to fix. This last time I took it in for him to replace two wires involving the pump for the gas line- he just finished the wires after two months, than told me I couldn't have it yet because he had taken the brake pump off to repair a seal; and, oh, by the way,



he decided to drop the front end down a little bit to level out the load so he had taken the "lift" kit apart to drop the springs down one inch for a better ride. His older daughter, now 15, has suffered greatly early on in her life, from malnutrition. She has to struggle harder than the other children around her to get good grades so that she can get a real job and marry a man who doesn't drink. The parents have learned from their first child so the new girl of two is doing well and is nourished. Though the family lost their son at five months, this last year. A virus, they say, though they are not sure since they took him to the hospital and neglected to get the medicine since they had no money at the time- and than the child just died, two weeks out of the hospital.

These are only a few of the extraordinary souls with extraordinary stories that grace our lives. Here at our little farm and in the city of San Cristobal de las Casas we are truly blessed. I am often frustrated with the concept of "results". Are we a good Catholic Worker? Do we live up to the standards of Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day? I know that these days I do feel the sense of "The Long Loneliness" but I have my love for Araceli to stave off the pangs. Are we doing the right thing? Comenius tells us that "The labyrinth is much more the norm than a guiding path. ■"

Richard Flamer (left) with Bishop Ruiz.

Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia was bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico for forty years. In that time he was a tireless advocate for the indigenous people of the region. He was under constant threat from the wealthy landowners and other powerful people who benefitted from maintaining the status quo. It is because of Bishop Ruiz's concern for the poor of Chiapas that our project bears his name.



Why Dairy Goats?

by Jim Groff

My wife Pat and I have been married for 37 years. In that time, on several occasions, we have had the opportunity to raise



Nubian dairy goats. We adore the animals for their beauty, personality and temperament. We have made cheese, butter, yogurt and ice cream from their milk and love its rich sweet taste.

Right now we have two milking does, Dora and Beulah that we milk twice a day. We also have three goat kids, Dora's daughter and sons from this year. We live on five acres in the Texas Hill Country near the small community of Mico. We also have fifteen chickens, collect eggs and make cheese. We take a couple of dozen eggs and some cheese to the Catholic Worker House in San Antonio when we can and give the rest to our neighbors and coworkers.

I read a news group called Nubiantalk where people who also like Nubian dairy goats post messages. One day a message appeared on the news group from a person in Mexico who wanted to

establish a dairy goat herd on his farm. He didn't get many responses

Richard Flamer and I began corresponding and discovered that we had two sides of the same vision. He wanted to create a foundation herd of Nubian dairy goats on his Catholic Worker farm, and I wanted to find a way to send goats to poor communities in Mexico.

And so the Bishop Ruiz/Chiapas Dairy Goat Project has been born. We will collect Nubian goats on our place in Texas and once or twice a year Richard will come up from Mexico and take them to Chiapas. The school that Richard works with will, using a Grameen Bank model, sell them to the local women who will repay the loan for the goats with the profits they make from selling their milk to a local cheese making coop run by a different group of indigenous women.

One small problem arose. Using the Grameen Bank model, this would make a relatively self-supporting system with infusions of new genetics from the U.S. regularly. After having thought out the logistics and the finances (a bit), we learned we had forgotten one small thing—namely, the animal import and export regulations. We discovered that Mexico has not allowed U.S. dairy goats to be imported for breeding purposes since 2004.

Why dairy goats? Dairy goats are ideal for ultra-small farming operations. They are only about one-fifth the size of a typi-

cal cow; they have a much less demanding diet; and they produce a large volume of high butterfat milk. The cheese made from the milk is in high demand. Also they generally produce two offspring a year, so a herd can grow rapidly. They can drop their first kids after only about eighteen months, and the excess males make an excellent source of meat for the diet of the family. The plan is to help local women establish their own herds of goats. By constantly bringing in new stock, particularly bucks, the quality of the herd genetics will be maintained. There is an existing women-owned dairy coop that produces cow's milk cheese that would provide a market for the milk from the goats, and there is local demand for the cheese so the women would be able to dramatically increase family income in a relatively short time.

So our plans have changed a bit. We have been able to find a source for high quality dairy goats in Mexico. The Project will raise money to purchase the goats for Casa de Camillo Torres farm. We will also accept donated goat and dairy equipment. Richard will build the herd from Mexican stock and will help the women establish their dairy herds the imported bucks have generally been too large for the local does with disastrous results at kidding



Finn, (pictured above, one our younger frequent visitors) waits patiently for supper to be served. Children are the heart and joy of the work of the Chiapas Project. From the Back-to-School Project to the many ways we help their parents earn a living; they are part of everything we do.

time when most of the does died and few kids survived. We had an opportunity to see some high quality Nigerian pygmy dairy goats on the farm we visited. Not only are these animals good for both milk and meat, but they are almost exactly the size of the local goats in Chiapas.

So, we have decided to expand our vision to include developing a high

quality Nigerian pygmy goat foundation herd that can be used as a source of bucks for breeding with the local does to improve the overall quality of the goats in the region. It is a big project and we are just getting started on it. You can help. ■



Join an Educational Delegation

A critically important aspect of our work in The Chiapas Project includes the Educational Delegations we host. These delegations are comprised of U.S. visitors who come to Chiapas and engage in a seven- or eight-day experience among us. We, who live here, try to expose the delegates to a sampling of our work and the lives of those with whom we work—the poverty, the great faith, the tactile aspects of building, and other complexities of life in Chiapas. When working with each educational delegation, we are never sure just who is educating whom. We can say that no one who comes to Chiapas from the United States leaves unchanged. Various delegates have written with great hope of their time visiting in the region but the very best works are those of the young people. Shana, at 13, is thus far the young-

est to come. Emily at 17 came once on the delegation and then came back to join us.

In recent years we have held twelve delegations, mostly small, but all packed with heart and enthusiasm. We can host a delegation with three or more delegates. The cost

is \$600 per delegate plus airfare and transportation to our site. The fee covers housing, meals, translators, and some transport fees inside Chiapas.

For more information, check our website at www.bishopruizproject.org ■



Araceli Flamer, co-organizer and conscience of the Chiapas Project.



Strong supporter of the Chiapas Project and Des Moines, Iowa, resident Lois Crilley, and Des Moines Catholic Worker, Frank Cordaro have both participated in Educational Delegations.

Chiapas Dreams

We have many dreams for our community, so we present this project list for the Chiapas Project for your consideration. (Costs are in U.S. dollars.)

PROJECT	COST	DESCRIPTION
Bunny Project	\$1,200	To build hutches with local welders that are raised off the ground (to protect the bunnies and to collect the excrement for recycling) alfalfa pellets, feeders, etc. The meat currently sells at \$5.50 a kilo, hides at \$3.00 each, excrement goes to our worm farm.
Worm Farm	\$600	To build four canals in concrete with a canopy overhead, 4 kilos of red worms. Using rabbit and chicken excrement along with coffee husks we can produce 100 kilos of organic fertilizer and 4 kilos of worms for each trough (using one kilo to start.) We give one kilo to a neighbor who pays us back 2 kilos after his first crop. Worms are selling at \$50. a kilo and are being sold mostly to coffee farmers who need organic coffee in this current marketplace. We sell part of the fertilizer (at 50 cents a kilo) but mostly use it for our own fruit trees on the land.
Back to School	\$360	To send a child to school, the money pays for a complete uniform, shoes, books, school supplies and supplemental food for the mother (one time) setting out a breakfast diet which can be subsequently followed.
Shelter for Migrants	\$8,000	We are three hours from the Guatemalan border on the Pan American highway and many migrants come to us for help. We are already providing short-term work for a bit of cash and food. We would like to build a dormitory and a small chapel to house as many as 12 passing migrants at a time.
Nubian Goat Project	\$10,000	To buy five milk goats (4 females and a male from five different families) to start a cheese industry with the local families. A secondary but important purpose is the bettering of the goat races locally (the goats here are badly inbred.) The money would cover the purchase of the goats, a trailer for transportation (around \$1200.) building appropriate housing and fencing and obtaining other cheese-making and milking equipment..
Workshops in Business for Two Women	\$5,000	These funds cover university courses and an internship for two women to learn accounting, forming a cooperative, how to open a bank account, complying with Mexican tax laws, etc. A year in school with each of the women reporting back to their cooperatives (One woman is from San Andreas, Larrainzar, and works with a weaving cooperative. The other is here in San Cristobal working with women in crafts and herbs.)
Woodshop in Simojovel for a Carpentry Cooperative	\$10,000	The existing cooperative works with the Zapatistas in reforestation and building doors and windows—among the 16 young men they have a table saw, a router, two hammers, one screwdriver and two chisels. The plan is to get them a combination of used and new tools from the US (most of which are not available here) and bring them into Mexico. Half the money is for import taxes.
Sewing Circle	\$350	To buy a new sewing machine and send two women to the sewing classes at Syjac for 8 weeks of training. There is a Singer Sewing machine plant nearby with parts readily available. In the past we have tried to bring machines down from the states with little luck as we can't get parts for them once they are here (plus we end up paying exorbitant taxes to import them).
Bakery	\$3,500	To buy and make wood-fired/solar ovens with a small building and storage for local women to make and sell bread. The women split two thirds of the money; one third returns to us for maintenance of the bakery.



Each Bunny Project provides a Chiapas Family with a way to have a sustainable and livable income.



Back to School



Members of the first carpentry class with their families.

Two BIG Dreams

A documentary studio to produce educational DVD's in the languages of this region from young people, i.e. send them out with video cameras to document their lives on film in their native languages to be edited at our center and shipped to SCOLA-TV in Omaha for broadcast around the world. We need about \$30,000. dollars to purchase the equipment, build a small studio, etc.

Establish a small construction company for local NGO's (such as Habitat for Humanity, etc.) but mainly for training young workers. \$200,000. would get us a tractor, dump truck, bulldozer, tools and around \$20,000. in working capital to build roads, small bridges into isolated communities, etc.

To make a donation to the Chiapas Project (for any of the projects listed or for our day-to-day operations), make your check payable to "The Chiapas Project" and mail it to:

The Chiapas Project
c/o Holy Family Church
1715 Iazard St
Omaha, NE 68102
(402) 345-1062



Sewing Circle Project