

El Horizonte: Looking to the Horizon with the Zapatista Communities in Chiapas
A Service and Learning Program of Wake Forest University
and the University of Texas, El Paso

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Reflection on the experience by: Tracy Chao and Alena Thom

Preconceptions/Thoughts:

We went into this trip without any expectations, not knowing exactly what we would be doing, exactly where we would be going, or for that matter, exactly who the people we would be interacting with were. We had never been to Mexico, and our ability to communicate in the native language made that quite apparent. Our one hope was that we would be able to connect with the people in other ways. Luckily, our group was blessed with bilingual individuals willing to use their knowledge to educate us in matters that were important to the Zapatistas. However, we couldn't count on others for everything and we were banking on the common connections found through soccer, music, and dancing to personally relate and contribute to the communities.

The Group

A unique aspect of this trip was that seven undergraduates from Wake Forest University led by Dr. Simonelli joined together with four undergraduate and graduate students from The University of Texas, El Paso led by Dr. Earle. Both groups came from very different backgrounds and cultures (the El Paso group having a leg up on Mexican culture and perhaps not feeling quite as foreign), providing a variety of unique views and ideas. Initially we “stayed in our shells” so to speak, but within a few days, we opened up to each other and made wonderful and unexpected friendships. Any potential barriers

that could have caused conflict between two diverse groups of many different individuals, instead meshed into fuel, forming an incredibly dynamic and positive atmosphere. To this day, we're still keeping in touch.



The March

The anticipation on Jan 1, 2003 was high as the group waited for history to be made. We had been in San Cristobal, Chiapas for two days now, waiting for the go ahead from the Zapatista communities to come to their villages. Rumor had it, that something big was going to happen. Early that morning we were informed what that something was. The Zapatistas were coming to town in what would mark their first public gathering since March 2001.

Nobody knew at what time they were going to arrive so we took to the streets to see what was going on. In the main plaza, a podium complete with Zapatista paintings was set up in anticipation of the nightly events that would follow, along with other

extraordinary, politically focused paintings strung to scaffolding outside of the church. Even with these additions to the Plaza, something was missing. The government's military that usually patrolled the corners of the streets and plaza were nowhere to be seen, an observation worth noting.



providing entertainment for ourselves.

Unknowingly, we ended up sharing this entertainment with a rather large group who had gathered in a circle around us. This kept us busy for a good majority of the day.

It wasn't until after dinner that the Zapatista's actually made it to town and wouldn't be for another two hours until all that could physically fit, filed into the plaza. As the group came closer, we could hear the overwhelming sound of thousands of machetes, unyieldingly clanging together, sounding out the cries of their cause. "Clink, clink, clink..." Signs, protesting terrorism and governments were held overhead. Trucks rolled in with loud speakers. Men with ski masks, women, and children, faces covered with red Zapatista bandanas, paraded on foot. We moved back and forth from our manned pillar

With nothing left to do, we bought a hacky sack from one of the street vendors with the intent of



in the Plaza to one of the side streets watching this incredible demonstration as they came in.



Over twenty thousand Zapatista men and women gathered for this event, sacrificing a day's work. With the help of our friends from El Paso, we were fortunate enough to understand the Zapatista's commitment to their cause, and also what and who they were fighting for

Also we tell you brothers and sisters of the world what we do not have to ask permission from anyone because to do good you do not need permission from anyone to tell the truth. Because of this, rebellious brothers and sisters of the world, we support the struggle of the pueblo and we are fighting for a dignified place. We are fighting for democracy, the liberty and the justice for all the pueblos and nations of the world. Because the life of humanity is sacred and as such we are deserving of having a more just life, more dignified and human than any other place you can find in the world. Because the resistance has demonstrated far and wide that this world that we have been able to survive by organizing ourselves as we see fit and we have never asked anyone permission for what we have to do and much less what we are going to say.

-Comandante Mister

Lifestyle Adjustments/Culture Shock:



We had been given an idea of what to expect upon arriving in the Zapatista communities, but the actual experience of living in their simple environment was still a bit shocking, however nothing that we didn't get used to. Daily rain led to an abundance of muddy situations, making the adjustment a little more difficult. One such



situation, to which we quickly became accustomed, was the “outhouse.”

A common trip involved special preparation complete with flashlight, toilet paper, a bucket of water, and usually a slippery walk down muddy steps. Because there was no running water, after every major use of the toilet, we provided our own flush by emptying our bucket into the latrine. At first this seemed a bit laborious, but like a lot of other everyday tasks, the adventures with the outhouse became second nature.



Just as there was preparation in using the toilet, there was also a process to bathing. Hot running water and the

privacy of your own shower are easily taken for granted here at home. A typical bathe included a half-mile hike to the river with clean clothes (or cleaner clothes) and shampoo in hand. Once at the river, almost all inhibitions were lost, and we’d jump in with everybody, bathing as they would, unashamed like it was almost normal (although we were too modest to take off all our clothes).

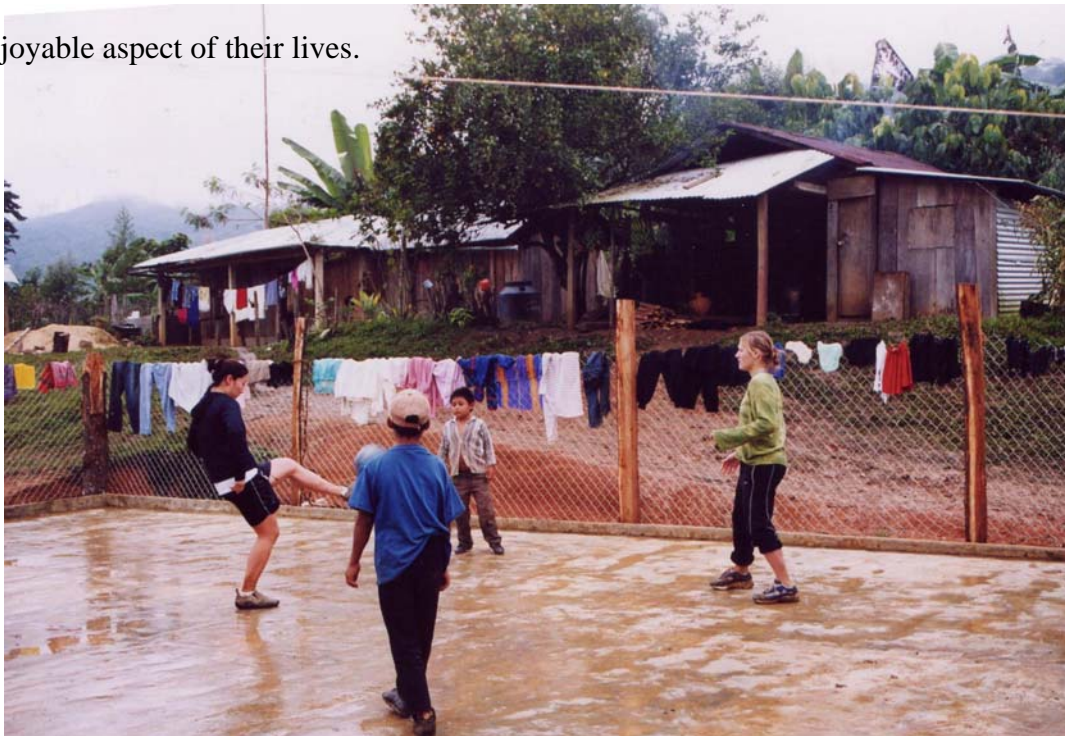
However, after changing into our clean clothes, within no time we were again dirty. But we didn’t let the dirt affect our



desire to crawl into our sleeping bags at the end of a long day. Even though we slept in very tight quarters with one another, we valued the time to reflect on the day and the rest to get ready for another.

Interactions with the Community:

Soccer is a major aspect of our lives that provided a way for us to communicate with some of the members of the community. Without having to know Spanish, we were able to interact through the common love we shared of the game. The majority of the time, we played on less than ideal surfaces such as a concrete area that doubled as space for drying coffee. However, this did not affect the way we played or interacted. When we fell down or slipped on the muddy concrete, we all laughed and then bounced back up to continue playing. The guys seemed a bit shocked that we were girls able to hold our own in a culture where soccer is predominantly a man's sport, and respected us, because we didn't let that fact or the mud stop us. It was a great way to be included in an enjoyable aspect of their lives.





A previously forbidden and memorable activity was teaching English. The mothers of the community fear that if their children learn English, they will leave to find work in America. Unfortunately, most of the available work is high-risk labor and some of their children have come home in caskets. However, they recognized the importance of English to help them in the international market, so our lessons began. The children gathered around a tiny chalkboard as we led them through interactive learning, playing “head, shoulders, knees, and toes” and also teaching them basic, everyday phrases. The learning didn’t stop with the lessons; it was now our turn to learn Spanish. The tables turned as they enjoyed our feeble attempt to their language.



Besides fun and play, there was work to be done. One of the hardest things for us to understand was our role of providing service to them. We all had envisioned service as building houses and cultivating land. Some of our jobs included picking coffee,



planting and shucking corn, making tortillas, and plucking chickens, but the fact was, we were horrible at their jobs and ended up being more of a burden than actual help.

Nevertheless, they humored us, allowing us to pretend we were needed. Even though we didn't speed up the work, it was worthwhile for them to include us in this aspect of their lives. Struggling through the hands on experience allowed

us to appreciate the importance of the land to their survival and showed us the amount of work that goes into what has to be done in order to survive.



Our activities did not stop when the sun went down. One light bulb, a couple of benches and a guitar was enough to provide hours of

entertainment. We shared our songs with them, a repertoire of about three, including “Lean on Me” and a rendition of the blues. Similarly as we sang for them, they shared their songs for us, mostly revolution tunes and traditional love songs. In addition to listening to music, we taught a member of one community how to play one of our songs on the guitar. We quickly realized that we had never been taught Spanish words for the guitar and so through repeated play and demonstration of the proper finger positions he was able to pick it up pretty fast with the occasional help of physically placing his fingers in the proper positions. It was a unique experience that I doubt the three of us will ever forget.



A night that started with the guitar, usually ended with dancing. Unlike many of the Zapatistas, we were anything but shy in this event. We let loose and danced every silly way we could think of. Whether we were dancing in groups, with partners, or individually, we gave them huge amounts of our energy and enthusiasm, bringing out responses of laughter and sometimes a little disbelief as well. The dancing was exhausting, but it was important that we were fully engaged to show respect for these dances that were thrown to thank us.



Leaving:

The nights before leaving each community, the group would come together to share their feelings and thoughts on the experience of the past days. The communities spoke about how much it meant for us to have traveled hundreds of miles to be there for them and provide laughter in a world that for them is seldom funny. They thanked us for

taking the time to become aware of their struggle. They weren't the only ones with thoughts to share. We too had thanks to give. A community with not much to offer of material belongings shared their food, shelter, life, and struggles with us. They illustrated the importance of family and extended family forcing many of us to reevaluate our own values. We realized how much we take for granted in America and how much we don't really need to have a fulfilling life. They use the land to its fullest and although they don't have luxuries such as running water and industrial machines, they are proud of what they do have: their families, their values, and their history. They respect the land because of what it provides for them and they respect each member of their family because of their individual roles that contribute to who they are and what they believe.

It was hard to leave our new friends, and it was incredible to see the impact that we had on them and equally, their impact on us. Some of us promised we'd return, and they made certain that we'd always be welcomed as friends. At the beginning of the trip we were worried about not being able to speak Spanish. In the end we found a more important language. One that narrowed the gap between our cultures: the universal language of laughter. It became our tool for exposing the basic human needs, of which the Zapatistas are struggling to obtain and of which no group should ever be deprived.

