

Life in Guatemala

Guatemala, bordered to the west and north by Mexico, and to the east and southeast by Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras, is a beautiful, diverse, and culturally rich nation.

- Around 50% of Guatemala's population is indigenous, descending from Mayan, Xinka, and/or Garifuna peoples.
- Although Spanish is the official language, there are 23 other Mayan and Amerindian languages spoken regionally.



I was placed in the province of El Quiché in the western highlands of Guatemala. The town I lived in, Chajul, was a unique placement both geographically and culturally:

- Chajul is a rural town in the mountains, the last stop on the road leading out from the capital of El Quiché
- About 95% of Chajul's residents identify as Ixil, an indigenous Mayan people. Close to 90% speak Ixil as their first or only language.
- Due to its isolated location, Chajul has maintained much of its traditional culture, evidenced in the language, food, clothing, and daily activities of its residents.

Youth in Chajul

- 60% of Chajul's population is under age 20
- About 10% of the population has a middle school education or higher
- Many young people are required to leave their studies prior to finishing middle school to care for or work to support their families.
 - Young women as young as 14 may leave their homes to start their own families
 - Young men finishing 6th grade often leave school to farm for their families.

Developing Youth Potential in Chajul del Quiché, Guatemala

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Project Information

Peace Corps Guatemala's Youth in Development program's goals are to work with community partners to:

- Encourage youth to develop positive self-esteem and communication and decision making skills
- Promote the understanding of sexual and reproductive health
- Provide training for parents and youth service providers
- Make connections between community organizations who can work together to create opportunities for youth.

Agencies and Community Partners

- **Peace Corps Guatemala:** provides trainings and resources for volunteers, and hosts forums and trainings for youth and adult community members
- **Limited Horizons Ixil:** a local NGO that provides scholarships, tutoring, and language support for middle- and high-school students in Chajul
- **Ministry of Education (MINEDUC):** responsible for the education of Guatemalan children from 1st-9th grade. I was placed in a public middle school.
- **Ministry of Health:** I worked in a local medical clinic at a ministry-run youth program called "Espacios Amigables" ("friendly spaces")

Outcomes

Some of my major projects included:

- "Life skills" workshops for middle and high schoolers
- Sexual violence awareness trainings and community march
- Internship program focusing on job skills development
- Trainings for health center staff
- Series of parenting workshops on healthy communication styles

Skills Developed

- Community entry and relationship building
- Connecting community leaders and projects to better resource and fund events
- Youth participation practices
- Grant writing
- Languages: Spanish and Ixil



Classroom Connections

SW601: Adolescent development and behavior

This course prepared me for working with youth in many different contexts. I felt that I was better equipped with strategies and techniques for working with youth, as well as a better understanding of the course of adolescent development, which I was able to apply to my work in Guatemala.

SW713: Integrative Learning for Community Organization

This course provided me with a solid understanding of the process of community organization. Techniques for community entry, relationship building, and multilingual/multicultural organizing were especially pertinent skills that I gained from this course.

Career Connections

Through this placement, I gained on-the-job experience in community organizing, work with multicultural/multilingual communities, and youth participation.

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Lessons Learned

- **Slow down.** Entering a community and earning trust takes time! Don't expect to be able to jump right in and have people respond to you.
- **Listen.** Productivity happened when I listened to people's desires for their community, not when I tried to impose my own desires.

Advice

- **Know some history.** Read up on the history of the country you're visiting, and especially any roles the U.S. has played in the country's history (e.g. colonialization, development, wars, etc.).
- **Learn the language.** Even knowing greetings and a few phrases can have a huge effect on how people perceive you.

