

Newsletter December 2015

During the winter months, when both the Grahams and the Echenbergs are in Cuernavaca full time, I will be writing monthly newsletters. Please send me suggestions, comments and, if you have topics you would like covered, let me know.

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The two girls that are the focus of this newsletter, Jacqueline and María de Jesús, have lived at Amor para compartir, a sheltered home, since they were very young. Both arrived there when they were about five years old. Now they are sixteen, so essentially this is the only home they have ever known.



Amor para compartir has around eighty children from babies to teenagers. They are housed in a compound with several buildings in Huitzilac, under the care of a couple, Lulú and Sagid. The children are home schooled on the premises by volunteer teachers and tested through the government exams several times of the year. Their track record for children completing grade school and middle school is not great, so we are

especially happy these girls have made it to the high school level. Juntos is a great believer in education and wants to further the education of all children.



Although several boys from Amor para compartir have attended high school, Jacqueline and Maria de Jesús, are the first girls. None of this is easy and there were many steps to achieve this goal. In March 2015 Soryl suggested the girls should go to high school, so she, her daughter Cathy and Claudia visited the school. Next Claudia presented the proposal, that Juntos would cover the educational expenses, to the couple that run the home. They responded enthusiastically and gave the names of four girls but two were disqualified because they were over eighteen. In April Patty del Río was hired to do the leg work, first to give further details about the school and then to see if the girls met the entrance requirements. Once all the paperwork was in place, she made arrangements for a tutor to prepare the girls for the entrance exam. In addition, Xin, one of our board members, visited the school, spent hours doing the model test so the girls would have the answers and coached them for the exam.

At present the two girls are enrolled at the Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Agropecuario No.154, an impressive institution. It has some 500 students divided into three specialties, accounting, computer technology and agriculture. The students must be under eighteen when they start and it takes three years to graduate. Although the school offers three majors, its focus is on agriculture and food production and most of the students are enrolled in that programme. They have a common core curriculum the first year, choose their majors in the second and have specialized courses in the third year.



On the day Claudia, Will and I visited, we were shown many installations, among them the English classroom pictured here. The English teacher explained, in English, that the course is taught with the computers and added that the students have a lot of trouble learning the language. All the people we met were extraordinarily helpful and friendly and we got the feeling the girls would be monitored carefully and given help when needed.

Students attend four or five classes every day, some traditional high school courses like math, chemistry and algebra and other specialized courses in the food sector: yogurt and cheese production, mushroom production as well as raising rabbits, goats, cows and poultry. To that end there are buildings and installations for all. The picture below shows the entire campus, made up of many small buildings, classrooms, laboratories and on the periphery, sheds for the animals as well as a basketball court and soccer pitch. This is not a pre-university high school; the aim is to prepare the students to find jobs in the food industry. Nevertheless, the diploma they obtain does allow those who wish it to go on to university.



Jacqueline and Maria de Jesús had never attended a regular school and it was not clear how well prepared they were in terms of basic knowledge and skills. Nor did we know how they would adjust to the freedom of being outside the confines of the sheltered home and in classes with strangers. When school started in August they were placed in separate groups but immediately requested to be put together. The institution was happy to oblige. Now they have the same teachers and the same assignments and can help each other. We are delighted that their first report cards show they are doing well. One of the girls is doing better than the other but both are pleased and happy with their own successes.

Although the distance is not great, they take two buses to arrive before the bell rings at 7.45. They spend the entire day at school and don't get back to Amor para compartir until 4PM. They have one meal at school, and their main meal upon their return. When asked about homework, they said that they have about two hours every day but some days there is more and they just keep working until it is done.



In contrast to the computer classrooms, the picture above shows cilantro seedlings growing in a recycled water bottle. These will be transplanted and the produce sold. On the day we visited there were students selling lettuce which we of course bought.



We saw this kitchen / lab filled with students. Some were making candy, others pear jam, each group working with a teacher. Another teacher showed us samples of other products made recently: peanuts, salted, unsalted and with hot peppers and 'cajeta', a sweet used for cakes. The students seemed happy and the general atmosphere was very positive.

And where does Juntos go from here? First we are investigating if other students, both from Amor para compartir and the other sites, could attend this school full time. Second, the school also offers a part time programme that would suit many others and is open to students of any age. They study on their own and attend the school on Saturdays only. It is organized by modules which the students complete in order and are therefore not overwhelmed. The next session begins in February and we will report if we have students in the part time programme.

None of this happens without the hard work and financial support of our volunteers. Two donors, Soryl and Susan, have come forward to pay the school fees, transportation, books and supplies. Thank you all.

Most importantly Jacqueline and María de Jesús have learned the importance of education and how it can change lives. We hope they will spread this message to the other children at the home.

In their thank you notes to the donors María de Jesús writes:.

It is something that you have taught me to want and what I really want is a better future and which these studies will provide.

Jacqueline writes:

I realize that the opportunity to continue studying is not available to everyone, but I am sure that I have the opportunity thanks to you for which I give you my friendship and

want you to know I am very grateful. It is something that you have taught me to want and what I really want is a better future and which these studies will provide. I am grateful that your collaboration and your incomparable help in this case is directed to me.

As I say good bye I hope you can continue to support me.

Many thanks dear friends and benefactors.

Thank you Soryl and Susan



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