



CAPACITAR

Letter from Guatemala



December 2018

Dear Friends,

Greetings to you from Santa Cruz del Quiché where I recently worked with Mayan health promoters who are involved in a project focused on healing gender violence in their communities. The training was part of a 4-year project funded by the Swedish Embassy and held at Centro de Paz Barbara Ford, a beautiful center in the Quiché developed and directed by Sister Virginia Searing, SC, and the Sisters of Charity of New York. Capacitar's work in Guatemala is all the more significant because many of the men, women and families in the caravan coming to the US border are fleeing the violence and poverty of their own communities.

The Quiché is one of the areas of Guatemala that suffered the most during the 36 years of civil war. Many people, mostly Mayan (86%), were brutally massacred in a systematic and strategic campaign of the army and state, with many tortured and thrown into clandestine graves. In the final report of the Guatemalan Truth Commission on the conflict in the country (1960-1996), 626 Mayan communities were destroyed in a genocide that claimed the lives of over 200,000 people (killed or disappeared), with 1.5 million displaced, and 150,000 who fled to Mexico. The state and military were responsible for 93% of the human rights violations.

Often in places of war, violence is internalized as a culture and directed against women, children and the most vulnerable in the society. According to Human Rights Watch, violence against women in Guatemala is a chronic problem, along with rape, incest, sexual violence and child pregnancies. Quiché has some of the highest statistics of violence in the country, as well as in unemployment, malnutrition, and poverty, with few possibilities for youth. Many youth are attracted to drugs and gangs or leave looking for opportunities in Mexico or the US. For that reason Centro de Paz Barbara Ford (www.centrodepazbarbaraford.org.gt) has developed some important programs to train youth in a variety of educational, entrepreneurial, leadership and community service skills such as, human rights and civic responsibility classes, beekeeping, organic gardens, silk screening, cooking, integral health and medicinal plants. The project to form Mayan health promoters has been part of that effort.

My first visit to Guatemala was in 1985 with Witness for Peace and Peace Brigades International to learn of the struggle of the poor for human rights in the midst of the conflict. In the 1990s, as Capacitar developed and became recognized in different circles, we were invited to offer healing workshops for human rights groups, feminist organizations, the union movement, FESTRAS and the food unions, the Conference of Religious, NGOs, grassroots organizations and Mayan communities in different areas of Guatemala. In the late





Mayans connecting with their energy and the earth



Sandra Quixtan and Marcia Santos with the Mayans



Lt: Team self-care. Rt: Antonio Lux with a new mother

1990s, synchronistically I met the Sisters of Charity in Guatemala City and was then invited to work in the Quiché, first with Caritas and Utz K'aslemal, and most recently, with Centro de Paz Barbara Ford (CPBF).

Since 2015, I have visited Guatemala four times a year to offer Capacitar trainings to 60 men and women representing different Mayan communities. In between my visits and the trainings, the CPBF team of Integral Health—Marcia Santos, Sandra Quixtan and Antonio Oxlaj Lux—have accompanied the health promoters as they offered workshops to schools, community centers, health clinics, church groups, women's groups, midwives (Comadronas), youth in sports teams, and the elderly. The health promoters come from many backgrounds and experiences: some work in churches or health clinics; some have their own healing centers; some are teachers or counselors; several are students studying to be teachers or learning a job skill; others are spiritual guides or Mayan elders; and some are the Comadronas who serve as counselors, healers and spiritual guides to women and deliver the babies in their communities. Some of the health promoters are also survivors of the political violence and many deal with their own trauma or domestic violence.

It has been fascinating to watch the changes in the health promoters over the four-year period, as they healed their own lives, grew in self-esteem and gained skills in healing practices for use with their families and communities. Many reflected on their personal change during the last class. One woman who was a survivor of the violence described how she feels like a different person, able to think positively about her life and to work more effectively healing individuals with trauma by using the Capacitar practices in her community. Two men who worked at a health clinic grew greatly in self-esteem and began to ask questions and give their opinions in class. Several of the women healers described the “miracle” healings of traumatized persons who left their sessions without pain, able to move stiff or paralyzed limbs after the use of the different healing practices.

In the team evaluation at the end of the project, Sandra Quixtan made some significant observations regarding the value of the Capacitar training. She said that she always has been passionate about Mayan cosmology and spirituality that connects us with the energies of earth, heaven and the cardinal directions, along with the spirit guides (Najual) who accompany us. Sandra said that in Capacitar she recognized a commonality of vision so that the theory and healing practices integrated very naturally with the Mayan vision. Antonio reflected that because of this integral connection, the Mayan people were open to accept and adapt the Capacitar practices as part of their lives and healing, rather than seeing the work as something foreign to them. In all of our training sessions we always started the day with a Mayan ceremony with a beautiful center altar of flowers and candles. Together we connected with the sacred energies of Mother Earth and Father Sky and the directions, along with the spiritual energy of the Najual guide of the day.

Sandra also made some interesting comments about how the Mayans first approached the training. When they arrived four years ago they didn't know what the training would be about. Most of their educational experiences had consisted of sitting in a classroom, listening to a talk that didn't involve their reality. With Capacitar, for the first time in their lives, they were given tools and were encouraged to connect with their feelings, their experiences, their histories and their inner selves, as part of a deeper educational and healing process. By using the different practices (Finger Holds, Tapping,

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Switching, Tai Chi, etc.) in their daily lives, they began to understand the meaning of healing within, empowering them with skills and understanding so they could offer healing to their families and communities. For many of the Mayans this process empowered a discovery of themselves as persons of dignity and wisdom and enabled a deep healing of the traumas that had overwhelmed their lives. With this experience they saw how the practices could also empower the healing of their families and communities.



One of the assignments that I gave the Mayans for the end of the training was to create a “Netmap” that showed the numbers of people to whom they had taught or multiplied the healing practices. Their presentations were quite amazing. One man said, “Without this “Netmap” process, I never could have imagined the hundreds of people whose lives I have touched as a health promoter through the workshops and individual healing sessions I have given.” Another woman said: “I feel such pride and dignity in helping so many people who are very poor and traumatized and have few resources. I have been empowered to give them tools so they can heal themselves.” In total from both groups, the health promoters of the project reached out to over 37,500 people during the 4 years. One remarkable and enthusiastic Mayan who offers ceremonies and rituals to many was able to reach over 15,000 people this year alone, incorporating the healing practices in all that he does. He described how the Capacitar practices have changed the way he works.

One of the values that the Mayans especially appreciated was their connection with the global Capacitar family. Two years ago when I told the group about the people of Afghanistan and the challenges that women face there, Marta and Maria came to me and said, “We know what the women are suffering, because that also has been our experience in Guatemala. Can we write them notes to tell them they are not alone, and can we send them some little gifts of our friendship?” In a special Mayan ceremony the group blessed little bags they had made containing a corn seed, a shell, and a crystal to represent their hopes and possibilities for healing in Afghanistan. After we presented these gifts to the Afghan youth, we brought back to the Mayans peace scarves of solidarity with the words “Border Free” embroidered by Afghan women in Dari and in English.

It was difficult to come to the end of this project, but the health promoters made the decision to continue meeting every month to practice, to share experiences, to learn from each other and to celebrate their Mayan rituals. They also plan to connect through a Facebook group. And, of course, I will continue to accompany these wonderful Mayans with future visits and some classes via Skype.

As we celebrated with diplomas and graduation gifts on our last day, one young man came to me and said: “Do you realize that as a baby I participated in one of your workshops when I accompanied my mother to your training in Lemoa. So I have been part of healing circles of Capacitar for all of my life!” Two of the Mayan mothers also brought their young children to our last training. The children did all of the practices perfectly like adults because their moms practice with them daily. One of the new mothers, who recently gave birth, said her little son has been part of everything we have done. So I was given the honor of being his “grandmother”. Seeing these children in our circles, I recognize that Capacitar is alive and well in future generations of the Mayan community!



With peace and blessings,
Pat Cane
Capacitar Founder/Director