

‘They Must Carry On’

By Beth Soltzberg

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Arlington, Mass. -

On our last morning in Teosinte, Kim Holt, Elizabeth Dray and I make our way up the main road to a meeting with Teosinte’s schoolteachers. We walk carefully over cobblestones slick from last night’s rain. Roosters crow, and tropical birds unfamiliar to us fill the air with their chatter.



The school is striking. It’s a simple cement building around an open courtyard, but behind it loom craggy mountains, dark purple with the morning sun behind them. If you squint, you can see rows and rows of corn and bean plants etched faintly on the mountainside. Vivid murals adorn the courtyard walls: a boy sitting under a tree with a book, a still life of mangos, bananas and melons, and a multicolored map of Central America.

The school, which serves 63 students in kindergarten through ninth grade, is bright with handmade posters. A flowery sign on one of the classroom doors says, “Herminia, Marleny and Yudith, we love you very much. Thank you for teaching us, today and always. From the 8th and 9th grade.” A cleanup chart decorated with a cheerful boy and girl holding a broom indicates the student whose turn it is to sweep the floors after classes. A flower-shaped poster entitled “Magic Words” teaches the universal importance of saying “please” and “thank you.” Several new posters have been hung to welcome us, the “*hermanas* from Arlington.”

We sit in an empty classroom with Teosinte’s three teachers, Herminia Alvarenga, Yudith Guardado Mena, and Marleny Serrano, and they tell us the difficult history of their school. During El Salvador’s Civil War (1980 to 1992), the people of Teosinte were forced from their homes and took shelter in a Honduran refugee camp. It was there that Herminia and Yudith began their teaching career as kindergarten instructors. They were fourteen years old. “We were teenagers with adult responsibilities,” says Herminia. “This has been my life.”

The villagers returned to Teosinte in August, 1988, to rebuild their lives as subsistence farmers despite the ongoing war. Establishing a school was one of their highest priorities. Along with fellow teacher Marleny, Herminia and Yudith’s responsibilities went well beyond traditional education. “When there was shooting or bombing, we’d try to keep the kids calm,” recalls Herminia. “If it wasn’t too severe, we might send them home. If it was bad, we’d keep them at the school.”

“We were also afraid for our own lives,” she adds. “Many people were killed just for being teachers, so if soldiers were around, we’d suspend classes.”

“Our work was very hard, because we had only completed sixth grade ourselves. We taught all week, and on Saturday and Sunday we would walk to a nearby village to study all day with other teacher,” continues Herminia. “We weren’t paid,” Yudith adds. “We were volunteers.”

Today, their experiences are an educational tool. Yudith tells us, “I see that the kids are very interested in learning about real things. We teach a unit about Oscar Romero, Rutilio Grande, and other Salvadoran human rights leaders. We have the kids do theater about them. We teach them about hiding in the mountains during the war, and about resettling our town. We tell them, ‘Go ask your parents for their stories.’”

Marleny talks to us about the challenges facing Teosinte’s youth today. “We worry about the kids. Some are too pessimistic. They’ve seen friends who got their high school degree and then could not find work. Many don’t have the money to go to college. For some who have unclear goals, immigration seems like the only option.” Two years ago, after dialogue with Teosinte’s town council, the Arlington Teosinte Sister City Project started a scholarship program to help Teosinte’s youth to afford high school and college and thus enhance their ability to find work in El Salvador.

The sister city relationship between Arlington and Teosinte is built on a principle of mutual respect and exchange, and in this spirit, we also talk about the challenges facing Arlington’s children. We discuss the lure of commercialism, a weakened sense of community and mutual responsibility, the “playdate” replacing unstructured creative time, worries about safety that limit our children’s freedom of exploration. As throughout our week in Teosinte, this exchange gives us all a fresh perspective on the more subtle forms of wealth and poverty that exist in each of our communities.

Our discussion closes on a hopeful note, as Yudith emphasizes what the teachers have accomplished. “We have the satisfaction that we’ve made a difference in the lives of youth here. We now have high school and college graduates who have passed through our hands, through this humble school. Our country has a terrible gang problem, but our community has always been healthy. We teach the students our history, and tell them that they must carry it on.”