

Working Toward a Different Life

By Beth Soltzberg

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Arlington, Mass. –

“I’m very much like my father,” seventeen-year-old Marisela Guardado tells us, as Kim Holt, Elizabeth Dray and I sit and chat with her in the town council building in Teosinte, El Salvador. The daily afternoon rainstorm is pounding on the roof tiles, and a bare lightbulb is sending shadows dancing against the adobe and brick walls. “I’m a happy person, extroverted and responsible. And, I’m sentimental...a romantic.” She smiles shyly. “My favorite movie is *Titanic*. When I saw it the first time, I cried and cried!”



Marisela is the middle daughter of village health promoter Rafael Guardado (featured in last week’s profile). She is studying nursing at a health care college in El Salvador’s capital city, San Salvador. Because of the distance and expense of travel, she lives in the city during the week in an apartment shared with five other students.

In an earlier conversation, Marisela’s father wryly commented that El Salvador takes “first place in violence,” San Salvador having one of the highest per capita murder rates in the world. “No one feels safe there,” says Marisela. “My parents call me every day to check on me.” This is a stark contrast to Teosinte, a tightly-knit village of 280 people in which houses don’t have locks and even as foreigners we felt extremely safe.

“I don’t like the city,” Marisela admits with a laugh. “I love Teosinte’s river, the trees. And I miss my friends and my parents.” Thinking of our own college experiences, we probe a little – don’t she and her roommates go out at night? “We’re too tired!” says Marisela, who gets up at 5:00 every morning to catch the bus to her 7:00 AM class. “No one goes out at night.”

Teenage rebellion and a little wildness at college are so much part of our culture that we ask again – isn’t there a certain freedom in being away from home? “I’ve seen movies from the U.S. that show children rebelling against their parents,” Marisela says, “But here you don’t see that. Parents teach their kids right from wrong, and the kids emulate the parents.” The legacy of El Salvador’s Civil War, which lasted from 1980 to 1992, is also a factor. “Parents here think it’s important to talk openly with their kids about the war, so that kids will understand the context of our struggles that still continue, and so that they will study hard.”

Marisela tells us how she grew up hearing her father’s stories of witnessing the murder of his sister and parents by soldiers, and then fleeing to the mountains with his two younger brothers, where they lived on the run for two years. At age twelve, her father became a guerilla soldier. Marisela’s mother, who was a young child during the war, tells of being hidden with others in a closet when soldiers came to the village, and almost suffocating. “It’s important that we know these stories,” says Marisela.

Despite the challenges of life in San Salvador, Marisela says she is grateful to be studying, and wants us to know how much she appreciates the scholarship she receives from the Arlington-Teosinte Sister City Project. “Arlington people are excellent!” she says. “You are like, well – angels.”

Students like Marisela are hopeful that once they complete their university education they will eventually find a job. It won't be easy, because unemployment is very high in El Salvador, and as rural people, they lack contacts among the urban elite who might employ them. But their alternatives are few. Subsistence agriculture, always an insecure and grueling way of life, is increasingly untenable for villagers due to the rising cost of seeds and fertilizer.

The path chosen by many young people who cannot afford to study is immigration, usually to the United States. The going fee for a smuggler is \$5,000, requiring the immigrant's family to put up their home or farm as collateral to get a bank loan. It can take several weeks to a month to get to the U.S., traveling in the back of a truck or in a freight train or on foot. Many die making the journey. Those who make it and avoid deportation join the underground economy, doing service work or construction, and sending money home.

Last year, fifteen young people from Teosinte left for the United States, the largest group ever to leave the village. None of these young people had had enough money to go to college.

Marisela's goal is to finish her studies and find a hospital post as a pediatric nurse. Someday, she'd like to work with her father in Teosinte or in one of the municipal hospitals nearby. “My father only finished ninth grade,” she says, “And my mother finished sixth. She says she wants my sisters and me to have a different life than she has had.”