Writing an entry for the November Newsletter makes me particularly happy because Día de los Muertos/Día de los Santos (November 1st) is a holiday that means a lot to me. While visiting Chiapas, Mexico during this holiday two years ago, I decided that I wanted to come back to Latin America to learn more about Mayan culture and development work here. Two years later, I am working at FUNCEDESCRI, an incredible Guatemalan non-profit that focuses on sustainable agriculture and community development in the Mayan communities of Cumpur, Cunén, and Nebaj.

This year, I spent November 1st in the cemetery of Santiago Sacatepéquez along with hundreds of locals and tourists. Santiago is famous for the large circular kites that are flown and presented in the cemetery on this day. The kites are made of paper and have brightly colored intricate designs that relate to Guatemalan history and culture. The kites are supposed to carry messages up to loved ones who have passed away. Not only was the cemetery decorated with these beautiful kites, but also each grave was covered in pine needles and yellow and pink marigolds. The rich grave decorations, elaborate kites and vibrant outfits of the Mayan women turned the cemetery into a kaleidoscope filled with radiating color.

As I stood observing the cemetery and its beauty, I thought through all of the incredible experiences I have had in my first two months trying to decide what I would write about for this update. (continued in page 2)
From getting to know my colleagues to living with an incredible host family and from visiting the communities we work in to climbing a volcano and Mayan pyramids, I feel like everyday is an adventure and I know I have been learning more than ever before. Even though I have had many interesting and eye-opening experiences, nothing has impressed me more than the community consultation in Cunén.

According to Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, indigenous communities have the right to determine how they want to use their land and their natural resources and the right to express their collective opinion through a community consultation. Twenty countries, including Guatemala, have signed on agreeing to this convention. Communities usually request a consultation when their land is being threatened by outside companies that want to use their land for extraction mining, hydroelectricity or other large industrial projects.

These types of projects exploit the land, destroy the natural resources and leave the land infertile for farming. These interventions destroy the livelihoods of the subsistence farmers who depend on the land for their own survival. Moreover, the companies instituting these projects keep 99% of the profits. The remaining 1% of the profits is given to the Guatemalan government, leaving the local communities with nothing. Companies usually claim that their projects will bring jobs to the local communities, but these jobs are limited and usually have very poor working conditions. Skilled, well-paying jobs are taken by foreign experts and technicians. These industrial projects are usually initiated and carried out without the consent of the communities that the projects affect.

In order to take a stand against these types of interventions, communities organize a community consultation. During the consultation, each member (8+ years old) of each community within a municipality votes yes or no to the question, “Do you agree that national companies, foreign companies and foreigners should be allowed to exploit our natural resources including our forests, water, etc with industrial projects?” If a municipality has a majority vote of “No”, then it is officially registered that this specific municipality is against exploitation of their natural resources. Companies and governments should then respect the decision of the people regarding their land and not allow industrial projects to invade the land. (continued in page 3)
While my job for FUNCEDESCRI is to help create partnerships with donors and volunteers in the United States, my organization wanted me to witness this interesting democratic process in our partner municipality, Cunén. Community leaders within Cunén had been planning this consultation for months and hoped that October 27th would be remembered as the day that all 72 communities of Cunén said “no” to the exploitation of their land and natural resources.

I was stationed in the media center for the day in order to translate articles written about the process into English. From my seat on the tiled floor in the closet-like media office, I got a prime view of all of the day’s action. Given this privileged position, I was one of the first to hear the results trickle in from the 72 communities. I sat next to the leaders of the consultation as they were being interviewed on independent radio and watched the main plaza fill as thousands of residents came to vote. The final vote of the day for the two communities located in the city center, San Juan and San Francisco, was set for 2p.m.

By 2p.m. at least 30 communities had voted against exploitation. As the members of San Juan and San Francisco funneled into the main plaza to vote, one could feel the excitement and anticipation in the air. The excited tension built every minute as the mayors of San Juan and San Francisco carried out the official proceedings and declaration of rights. I stood with my camera ready, waiting to capture the grand moment when the mayor would ask the question and the crowd would shout back yes or no. We waited. My hand grew tired. We waited some more. I started to run out of memory on my camera. More and more people lined up in front of the stage. Men, women, and children waited anxiously to voice their opinion. Chants of “Sí a la vida, no a la minería” (Yes to life, no to mining) rang out. Cunén was ready to vote. (continued in page 4)
All of the sudden, a cheer rose from the crowd. I had no idea why because at that point the mayor was speaking in Quiche, the Mayan language spoken in Cunén. I anxiously waited for the Spanish translation. Cunén was about to vote!

The mayor asked, “Do you agree that national companies, foreign companies and foreigners should be allowed to exploit our natural resources including our forests, water, etc with industrial projects?” Before he could finish the end of the question, the crowd erupted with a powerful “no” and shot their fists up into the air as a sign of their solidarity. Thousands of Cunen’s community members had just rejected the exploitation of their lands. Not one person voted yes.

Chills ran down my spine. Seeing a community come together to fight together for their rights and their livelihood was beautiful. I felt so lucky to have the opportunity to witness this important form of community expression. It was definitely a once in a lifetime experience that never would have been possible if I had not been working at FUNCEDESCRI.

I continued to be impressed by the fact that some people waited in line for up to three hours to sign their name on the document to officially confirm their opposition. In the end, 11,116 adults and over 8,000 children took a stand against the exploitation of their lands in Cunén. The mayor hailed it as a day that would go down in the history of Cunén.

If someone had told me two years ago while I was in Chiapas that I would watch history being made in the Mayan communities of Cunén, I would not have been able to fathom how that experience would be possible for me. I am truly grateful to Princeton in Latin America and all of its sponsors for this incredibly unique opportunity.
Dear Friends of PiLA,

In just one month, the office will fill with applications for 2010-11 placements! I have already been contacted by dozens of interested students and have had interesting conversations with so many enthusiastic people. News from the field continues to roll in, from our fellows in the Peruvian Amazon and cloud forest as well as from more urban sites like Santiago and Mexico City. This month, we offer you a moving and thoughtful report from Janine Kacprzak, stationed at FUNCEDESCRI, outside Antigua in Guatemala. She was lucky enough to observe a huge public referendum as well as partake in the Día de los Muertos celebration in her town.

Many of you have already received our yearly appeal and I hope that you will consider making a donation this year (by Dec. 31 if you would like it to count for this tax year). We would like to offer 20 placements this year, as we expect another record year of applications and we cannot do this without your help. Although I have not done this before, I am interjecting a specific plea this month, so please bear with me. In particular, I hope that someone (or a group?) out there might be willing to sponsor our Convivencia Educativa (CEAC) placement. This fellowship was undertaken by Cristina Lara (2007) and Vera Kiss (2008) and while we wanted to offer it for this year (and there were several highly qualified candidates), we simply could not fund it ourselves. CEAC is an amazing organization but they lack the means to support our fellow; their work on rural education reform is truly groundbreaking and they found the PiLA fellow to be a tremendous asset. As the founder of CEAC can help a little bit with the housing, the overall cost of this fellowship will be $10,000 this year. If you are interested in supporting the 2010-11 CEAC fellow, please contact me at (609) 258-9200 or pila@princeton.edu

Next month, I will update you on the applicant pool, as we will have received this year’s batch by then and also send you an essay from Kirsten Harmon, this year’s Arias Foundation fellow, in San José, Costa Rica. She follows ably in the footsteps of Nathan Fabian, although she is not, to my knowledge, coaching American Football.

Saludos from Princeton,

Claire Brown ’94
Executive Director

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