

Casa Guatemala Christmas Giving and Activities

The Season of Giving and Gratitude!

December 14, 2017 By Heather Graham, Director, Casa Guatemala Children's Home Well here we are, only weeks away from Christmas! There is a hustle and a bustle everywhere we turn! Here at Casa Guatemala, the children are busy making decorations and practicing their carols for the big Christmas party at the end of our Vacation Program. We just participated in the first ever Rio Dulce Christmas Parade and we stole the show, winning best float! Of course, having connections to the big man in Red helped! We are so grateful for our Santa and Mrs. Claus who, if you didn't know live in Rio Dulce when they are not in the North Pole! This year we have 115 children in our vacation classes and it has been a really positive experience for them all. We even have quite a few new children who have joined us now so that come January when school starts they will be better adapted and know a little bit of Spanish. It helps to have the new pre-kinder kids start early since they usually have only ever spoken Q'eqchi before coming to Casa Guatemala! Our Christmas Concert is scheduled for Wednesday, December 20th and we will have a special lunch for the kids, songs and plays performed by each grade, and of course, a visit from Santa and Mrs. Claus with presents for all! It has been such a joy to include this extra celebration in the last 2 years since most of the children will be going back to their far away villages and won't get to share the night of the 24th with us. It means a lot to see the sparkle in their eyes when Santa arrives! Sharing joy and teaching gratitude is a wonderful way for us to end the year! And of course, to do this, we need your help to bring that joy! Locally we have started our Christmas Toy Drive, with drop-off boxes in the local marinas. Our friends here in Rio Dulce are welcome to help us to gather presents as well as treats like apples and grapes for our big events! Our biggest need for presents is for both boys and girls in the age range of 9-12 years old. This is stuff like books, board games, hats, hair gel and baseball caps for the boys and jewelry, nail polish and hair accessories for the girls. Soccer balls are always a big hit and Barbies are still fun! Other ideas are playing cards, fishing hooks and line, play sets (food, kitchen, doctor), arts and crafts, and cars of all sizes! We already have a good number of toys for babies and a few things for 3 to 5 year olds but our biggest need is for girls 6-12 and boys 9-12. Little girls like dolls, skipping ropes, play kitchen toys and books. Some great spots to check out are the "Mundo de 3" stores in Fronteras. There is a new 2 story shop right beside the Banco Industrial! They have lots of things at very reasonable prices! Anyone wanting to donate funds instead, we will use them to purchase the meals for the kids and all the fruits and treats we need to make it special! If you can't be here with us and would like to help, you can make a donation online! To donate in US dollars, click here. To donate in Canadian dollars, click here. MORE opportunities and an engaging story by a Casa Guatemala volunteer - click "Read more..." below the next photo.

The night of the 24th is always a very special tradition for us. We will receive around 400 children who will all receive a gift from Santa and a sit-down turkey dinner! We will make over 700 tamales to share with the families who join us from our surrounding communities. It means a lot for us to be able to share this special event with the families who we support!

For those of you who live here in Rio Dulce, you are welcome to join us at either event! Just get in touch and let us know how you want to help or if you just want to come along! (Heather: 4212-8223) And if possible, I will try to have live coverage via our Facebook page! Sometimes there is not much signal but if I can, I will be sure to broadcast so you can all share in our joy! Giving Tuesday was a Success! Thanks to our incredible #GivingTuesday donors, we were able to surpass our goal and raise over \$12,000! I have to say, I am completely blown away! We are very blessed to have so many amazing people by our side! We were able to raise \$12,150 all together and this will help towards our year end goal of raising \$60,000 to cover all of our year end costs, celebrate Christmas and be ready to receive the children back to school in 2018. It is a monumental amount to raise in one day but we still have a long way to our goal. We keep our costs as low as we can and thankfully have been generously given a matching fund of \$50,000 that will go towards our infrastructure! This means that the funds we raise throughout the end of the year will be for our programs so we can ensure that our kids are getting the best education available, healthy meals every day and medical care. It is not cheap to run a whole village of children so we need everyone to help as much as they can. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but in our case, it takes a lot of villages from around the world! You are part of our village, part of our family and your love and support is felt by all of us! We will continue to raise funds throughout the month and I am sure that like you, our other supporters will help us to reach our goal. Your donation is changing the world for the kids of Casa Guatemala. More than a donation, you are making an investment in their future and the future of all of Guatemala! Who is Grateful? Some of our volunteers become regulars and return year after year. Their connection with Casa Guatemala and our children doesn't just go away when they go back to their "normal lives." Quite often, life is never quite normal again. Recently, some of our returning volunteers had a chance to go and visit with one of the families we support. We hope by sharing, you will have a better idea about the families we believe in, and why our work is so important. Rodrigo Gutierrez had this to say about the experience: It has been already 34 years full of experiences, I would never have dreamed to live all that I have lived in this time. My friend in this incredible experience is one year younger than me, but I am sure that, although I tell this story in a very personal way, I also speak for her. I have lived in 5 different countries, but the experience in Guatemala has no comparison. These 10 months at Casa Guatemala have been epic, but everything has gained even more meaning thanks to the last 12 days. The visit to Tzuncoc has made me understand everything I didn't understand before. A visit to the humblest part of the planet, an adventure to nature in its purest state, a journey to the essence of man, to the primitive nature of the human being. Now everything makes sense, not to flush the toilet, spit on the floor or not use the cutlery becomes something natural. The absence of roads, electricity or phone, is compensated with impassable muddy paths, solar panels less than one square meter and unthinkable conversations in a Spanish and Q'eqchi mix. Never before had anyone closed the doors of their house to me, but nobody had opened them to me so unconditionally.

I have seen little Lili peeling fruit with a knife longer than her arm, Edi playing with a machete that was half the size of his body, Juana carrying a sack on her head filled with corozos (a fruit), Danilo hauling wood like an adult, Rudy lowering coconuts 10 meters high, Daniel accompanying his grandmother at 3 am to walk 5 kilometers to buy some fish, Lester guide me through abrupt fields to collect bananas, Herlinda collect cardamom to sell and buy a g¼ipil (traditional blouse), or Estuardo helping in the construction of the new community church. None of them are over 15. Obviously, the person who left Spain will not come back, these children have changed my life and my world vision, and their families have upset my whole universe. The days we shared were less than 2 weeks, but they have been worth much more. I doubt there are enough megapixels to capture the happiness and laughs of Rafa, Danilo and Jaime's mom while playing with 3 animal toys, and no way to understand that the closest neighbors came over attracted by the volume of the laughs. I have understood more than ever that human beings live and grow conditioned by their environment. When daddy is the humblest person in the world and apart from working in the milpa (corn field), is also the midwife of the village, it is normal that their children become the most adorable kids in world. If daddy is an alcoholic and mistreats the family, it is admirable that their children, despite having violent outbreaks, have a heart so big that it does not fit in their chest, or that the oldest of them struggles day after day to study a career, even if it means a 4 hours daily walk. I am not able to describe what I've experienced these days, but I hope that this text can make you think what it has meant to me.

At this point you still may wonder why the title of the article, so here is the answer: We went to visit some of the kids and the dad with a really limited Spanish, and visibly moved, just thanked us for going to visit them and take care of their kids in exchange for "nothing". While we were the ones who should thank them for opening the doors of their houses in such an unconditional way, giving us almost what they don't even have for themselves. We will always feel in debt for so much love received. As long as we remember all these people, our first thought will be of gratitude. Thanks, from the deepest part of our heart, thanks like we have never felt before. So, who is grateful? I hope now it's clear. Eternally, it is us. B'antiox! (Thanks!) CH'EN

Celebrating 40 Years Did you know that 2017 marks our 40th Anniversary?! Since 1977 we have been caring for the most vulnerable children of Guatemala. A lot has changed since then, but our core mission of providing a safe and loving home; a warm and healthy meals; and excellent education and healthcare to the children who depend on us is still the driving force behind everything we do.

In this, the Season of Giving, we hope that you will help us to celebrate this milestone by continuing to support us to keep this dream alive so that our work will continue for many more years to come. We have set up our annual year end fundraising campaign and thanks to a very generous Canadian donor, we have a matching fund for \$50,000 which will be used towards our infrastructure! That means every dollar donated to our campaign will be matched, allowing you to double your impact. Your donation will go directly to support our education, nutrition and health programs where we need it the most! We are so grateful for our huge Casa Guatemala Family and our thousands of supporters from around the world that make this all possible. Thank you for being a part of this! Casa Guatemala is so very grateful for your support. Thank you for believing in us and contributing to our cause. Sincerely, Heather