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Friends In Need: Deported Guatemalans Find Colbians Are Waiting With Surveys, Job Fairs, Assistance

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Friends in Need

Deported Guatemalans find Colbians are waiting with surveys, job fairs, assistance

By Stephen Collins '74

Between high school and Colby, Emily Muller '17 took a gap year that included travel in Latin America. During a homestay in Guatemala's highlands, the father of her host family recounted his trips north to work in the United States without documents. He would walk through the Sonoran Desert at night, burying himself in the sand by day to avoid detection, breathing through a straw. "That was how he supported his family. He went back and forth a bunch of times, and it proved to be worth the risk," she marveled. And for Muller, worth exploration.

Now a global studies and anthropology double major, Muller has joined the Migrant Peacebuilding Project, an initiative launched by Colby students before she arrived on campus. This summer she plans to spend two weeks in Guatemala to continue research and to help find jobs for Guatemalans forcibly returned from the United States. She's working with project

founder Javier Monterroso Montenegro '15, a government major and economics minor from Guatemala, and Greg Morano '17, a Latin American studies and government double major.

Four members of the Class of 2015, then sophomores, started the project in 2013 with a Davis Projects for Peace grant. Little did they know then that a surge of Central American children arriving on the U.S.-Mexico border would grab national headlines.

They did know there was a crisis. Every year plane loads of Guatemalans are repatriated from the United States, where they had been living without proper documents—48,000 in 2014. They arrive at a military base in Boeing 737s, 135 passengers per flight. All are in handcuffs, some for violations as benign as a parking ticket or just not having documents, Monterroso Montenegro said. "It was shocking."

Some who arrived in the United States as children have no real history in Guatemala and don't speak fluent



Joseph Long '15 (left) and Javier Monterroso Montenegro '15 describe the Migrant Peacebuilding Project at a TEDxColbyCollege event in 2013. The project to assist Guatemalan nationals deported from the United States continues this summer.

Spanish. Others are seen as foreign, having acquired Mexican accents in hopes of a shorter trip if they are sent back by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Monterroso Montenegro said. Their employment and economic prospects are poor in Guatemala, and many immediately begin the perilous trek north to reenter the United States.

It's a situation that had never been studied when Monterroso Montenegro set out with Sam Chase '15, Joseph Long '15, and John Bengtson '15 two years ago. They went to Guatemala with a three-step program to aid forced returnees: conducting research on stigmas the returnees confront, working with Guatemalan corporations and institutions to establish a dialogue

actually starting an organization from the ground up," he said. "They themselves are coming up with solutions to really complex and difficult problems that both governments and NGOs have struggled mightily to address in the past."

Fallaw said Davis Projects for Peace "encourage students to think collaboratively and big, but they've gone beyond that." There are signs the program may provide a model that's sustainable into the future. The students reached out to NGOs and government policymakers in Washington, Fallaw said, "and they're getting good signals so far."

“Some who arrived in the United States as children have no real history in Guatemala and don't speak fluent Spanish. ... Their employment and economic prospects are poor in Guatemala, and many immediately begin the perilous trek north to reenter the United States.

and policies, and finding jobs for as many returnees as possible.

Muller, Morano, and Monterroso Montenegro plan to spend two weeks in Guatemala this summer to continue the work. Muller and Morano have refined survey instruments to get better data in the second phase of what Monterroso Montenegro called "the first-ever study on stigmas of forced returnees." And following up on a successful 2013 job fair that found employment for about 40 people, the trio will focus on another job fair hoping for even bigger numbers.

Professor Ben Fallaw, chair of Latin American Studies, said he hasn't seen anything like the project in his 15 years at Colby. It allows the students to "try to address some serious problems facing Guatemala, not as part of an organization at an intern level, but

Morano persuaded Monterroso Montenegro to continue the Migrant Peacebuilding Project after seeing how immigration rose in national importance with President Obama's executive order last year and Vice President Joe Biden's Plan for Central America, released in January. Morano's interest stems in part from his work at El Centro Hispanoamericano in Plainfield, N.J., near his home, where he worked with Latino immigrants and taught citizenship classes.

The project, now a model of interdisciplinary inquiry, grew from a policy brief that Monterroso Montenegro wrote for an Economics of Migration Jan Plan taught by Caroline Theoharides '06. Said Theoharides, now an assistant professor at Amherst, "It was beyond my wildest dreams that he would actually implement it."

