

A REMARKABLE DAY AT “SAFE PASSAGE” IN GUATEMALA

By Tim Toben



About 20 years ago a young woman from Maine named Hanley Demming visited Guatemala. A friend invited her to come see something in the large landfill, in the center of the city. What she saw changed her life. Hundreds of families scavenging for food and salvaging what they could to sell—plastic, glass, aluminum, etc.—were living in the massive garbage dump.

There was a strict hierarchy in the landfill. The garbage trucks were numbered. Everyone knew the ones that came from the wealthy

neighborhoods and those were rushed, upon arrival, because the best garbage came from the best neighborhoods. Certain families sorted out those items and cross-over was not allowed.

Hanley saw that the children of these families had no possibility whatsoever of breaking out of the cycle of poverty, and that was unacceptable to her. She called home and told her family that she had to stay and do what she could to help. These children had stolen her heart. She sold her computer and everything she owned and raised \$5,000. A priest offered her his church next to the landfill to start a school.



Source: "Guatemala 18" by Elaine under Creative Commons License



Today that school, named “Safe Passage,” has grown and serves 600 students at a very high caliber. Volunteers from all over the world, but especially Maine,

Source: “Dump Kids” by Katherine Johnson

offer several weeks up to a full year to teach children whose lives would have been lived in the landfill. The school has expanded to include adult

education and vocational training. We bought several gifts that were made by the mothers of these children.

The school is adjacent to the massive landfill, which is dangerous. In 2005, a landslide of trash killed 250 people inside. Two years later, a methane explosion killed others. The district is known as a “red zone,” because it is controlled by violent gangs. But, the gangs respect the school and protect those who work there and visit.

So we spent the day seeing incredibly joyful children, hungry for learning, being fed healthy meals, at that school in one of the darkest corners of social injustice. On many levels, it was breathtaking.



Sadly, Hanley was killed in an automobile accident in 2007, but her legacy is alive and well. The annual operating budget of Safe Passage is \$1.8 million/year and there are 124 staff/volunteers. The quality of education seems extraordinarily high and there is an active job placement program. Children and their parents are indeed leaving the landfill forever and creating lives that are far better than they would otherwise have been. It was very inspiring.

We were all moved to tears.