

From Arlington to Antigua

Virginia Scouts Travel to Guatemala for a Trio of Eagle Projects—and a Whole Lot More

by Mark Ray

Last June, in a classroom in the dusty village of Vuelta Grande, Guatemala, Boy Scout Will Troppe stood next to fellow Scout Chris Stephens, translating into Spanish Chris' instructions for treating water. A group of poor Mayan women that was gathered around them followed their words carefully—until one woman's cell phone went off.

"It was incredible to me," Will said. "That image will stay in my mind for a long time."

It was an image that showed the progress Guatemala has made and the challenges it still faces. Villagers have cell phones but little clean water. City-dwellers have Internet access, but many of their children shine shoes or sell trinkets on the street in order to survive.

In 2006, 13-year-old Will and his father, Mark, made their first trip to Guatemala—not to install a water-treatment system but to learn Spanish from native speakers. Traveling 1,875 miles from their home in Alexandria, Virginia, they enrolled in language classes through Centro Linguistico La Unión, one of the best language schools in Antigua, Guatemala.

They learned Spanish and so much more. Having watched kids who were Will's age begging in the streets, they began talking about the feasibility of doing an Eagle Scout project that would benefit Guatemala. Rather than collecting clothing or other supplies at home and shipping them to Guatemala, they planned to take Scouts, Scout leaders, and parents to the Central American country.

In addition to its language classes, La Unión coordinates volunteer efforts in villages around Antigua, so Will had an agency on the ground with which to work. All he needed to do was convince the leaders of Troop 167—and his mother, Mikki Atsatt—that he could make the trip work.



Will Troppe (left) and his Scouting friends from Guatemala traded stories and experiences during the trip.

"I thought, like Will, that it would be a great way to get some other folks down there," Mark said. "My wife, Will's mother, was a little more skeptical about the amount of work that was involved. I was pretty comfortable with the idea, having been there."

Atsatt quickly came on board in the summer of 2007, when she and Will took a second trip to Guatemala. By then, other Scouts had joined their effort too, including two who were also looking for Eagle Scout service projects.

"When we looked at the different jobs they needed done at the school (in Vuelta Grande), we noticed that several different people could get their Eagle projects done on this trip," Will said. "[The locals] needed water treatment. They needed some bookshelves. They were trying to construct a little library in the corner of one of their school rooms, and they also needed a lot of smaller jobs done."

Eventually, three Eagle projects emerged: Chris Stephens would test local well water and set up a chlorine-based water filtration system. Tom Mosher would collect clothing

and sports equipment, construct bookshelves, and buy books to expand the village library. And Will would tackle a massive erosion problem that threatened the school.

Will's work to put the trip together—recruiting participants, raising money, coordinating details with his contacts in Guatemala—didn't count as part of his Eagle project. However, he learned as much from that work as he did from his actual project. To enhance his language skills, he used Spanish in all his e-mails with the staff at La Unión.

Early on, Will's father had a better grasp of Spanish and helped him translate e-mails as they came in. That soon changed. "As the year went on, Will was much more independent," Mark said. "By the end of the year, I was looking at them and saying, 'What's this, Will?' It was really neat as a parent to see that progression."

Participants in the 2008 trip took daily Spanish lessons at La Unión. They also enjoyed a variety of cultural and adventure activities, including a visit to some nearby Mayan ruins and a hike up an active volcano. They also stayed



Chris Stephens and his father, George Stephens, review plans for the water filtration system.

Getting local participation had long been a key goal of the trip. Will had heard that community service wasn't as prevalent in Guatemala as it is in the United States, and he wanted to set an example. "One of the things we tried to do is demonstrate the value of working together and the things that it can accomplish," he said.

Will and his dad hope their example spreads to other American Scouts.

"We didn't want to do a one-shot thing," Mark said. "We really wanted to do something that was part of an ongoing project. We hoped, and we continue to hope, that there would be other Scouts from around the United States who might be interested in doing something like this."

with host families in Antigua, getting a firsthand look at life in Guatemala.

Perhaps the most exciting cultural component of the trip almost didn't happen. On their 2006 trip, Will and his dad decided to contact the Scout Association of Guatemala to see if they could get local Scouts involved in their project. Unfortunately, Mark said, "it was closed the last day we were in town, so we didn't get to hook up with them until we went back last summer."

When the American contingent arrived at the airport, about 20 Guatemalan Scouts and leaders were there to greet them. "We rode the bus into Antigua from the airport with them, and we heard their Scouting chants and their Scouting songs," Will said. "We spent a couple of hours and talked about the different Scouting experiences in the different countries. That was a really great way to start off the week."

The American and Guatemalan Scouts held a joint dinner at a local restaurant in the middle of the week. The following day, the Guatemalan Scouts showed up at the school in Vuelta Grande to help out. "They brought their equipment and really helped us out a lot at a critical crunch time for the three projects," Will said.

Mark agreed: "They were all ages, boys and girls. Some of the little kids were hanging out with our bigger guys.

It was really a lot of fun. Their Scout leaders were terrific. They jumped right in and were working hard; we really enjoyed their company."

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—Will Troppe

Although other Scouts would face financial and language barriers, he pointed out that Troop 167's trip helped smooth the way for future trips. The staff at La Unión understands what is required to support an Eagle project, and the Tropes are happy to share what they've learned.

Doing an Eagle project in a foreign country may seem daunting, but Will, Chris, and Tom proved that it's possible. After all, Guatemala may be 1,875 miles from Virginia, but it's just a cell phone call away. Just ask the Mayan women in Vuelta Grande.

The Scouts' projects included testing local well water and setting up a water filtration system.

