

Justin Hargesheimer
Peace Corps – Guatemala
justinhargesheimer@hotmail.com
011-502-4010-3664 (Guatemala)

Peace Corps volunteer uses plastic bottles to build school in Guatemalan village

Project promotes trash cleanup, environmental awareness and community involvement

Peace Corps volunteer Justin Hargesheimer, 32, is spearheading the construction of a 1,033 square-foot school in the Guatemalan Village of Nuevo Paraiso, in which plastic soda and water bottles are placed within the concrete walls.

The project, funded with the help of American NGO Hug It Forward (hugitforward.com), benefits the environment and provides a much needed education facility for children currently forced to attend classes outside, with only a metal roof overhead in the rain-soaked lowlands of Western Guatemala.

The community broke ground May 24 with completion targeted for Aug. 15.

“It’s inspiring to watch the community come together for the benefit of their children, who desperately need a permanent building to conduct classes,” said Hargesheimer, of Fairbanks, Alaska.

In recent months residents of Nuevo Paraiso and surrounding villages rallied to collect 6,500 plastic bottles and stuff them with inorganic trash like candy wrappers, plastic bags and Styrofoam. These bottles, or “eco-bricks,” are inserted within the school walls, keeping trash out of landfills, reducing construction costs and teaching important environmental lessons.

Nuevo Paraiso’s elementary school students attend classes on a mud floor without side or rear walls. The two classrooms have only a thin metal roof overhead and a chalkboard at front. The mornings are hot and heavy afternoon rains often force an end to classes.

Hug It Forward has funded bottle school projects throughout Guatemala. The organization donates funds for materials and skilled labor, but requests the recipient community provide the unskilled labor and bottles, giving villages such as Nuevo Paraiso direct involvement.

Hargesheimer began his Peace Corps service in coastal region of Guatemala in November 2010. He will continue until October of 2012.

“The project is rewarding in so many ways. A community is joining together, the local environment benefits and most importantly, children will have a space conducive to education,” Hargesheimer said.

More information about Hargesheimer’s experience as a Peace Corps volunteer and the bottle project, including pictures, can be found on his blog at: chuchosenlacalle.blogspot.com