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Center for International Education

Fall 2008

IA ALUMNA DESCRIBES HER EXPERIENCE IN MEXICO AS PART OF THE WITNESS FOR PEACE DELEGATION

by **Katie Strifolino '07**



Katie Strifolino with new friend in Mexico

I got over my fear and ate a grasshopper the last night I was in Oaxaca, Mexico.

According to Oaxacan tradition, if you eat *chapulines*, or grasshoppers, you will return one day. I intend on returning, mainly because of my participation in the most recent Witness for Peace delegation, *A State of Crisis: The Roots of Migration in Oaxaca*.

Prior to my participation in the March 2008 delegation, I had studied the crisis in Oaxaca, but the first-hand knowledge that I acquired during the delegation is immeasurable. It is this knowledge that will help me become a stronger advocate for human rights and social justice.

I was a little apprehensive before the trip--I had no idea who the other delegates would be or what was in store for us in Oaxaca. After the first night my apprehensions were eased and replaced by excitement, and I was ready to learn from various civil society organizations and activists the truth behind Oaxaca's migration and its social movement.

One of our first meetings was with two of the founders of an organization created to defend the rights of the victims of the social conflict that occurred in 2006. The two founders educated our group on the specific work they do: the defense of people tortured by Mexican officials, the legal representation of people still in arbitrary detention, and advocacy efforts for due process. The speakers made it very clear that many cases of corruption and impunity have been and are still prevalent in the Mexican criminal justice system; municipal, state, and federal police forces; and various governmental offices.

The next day, the founder of another organization expressed serious concern that these same institutions may soon receive U.S. funding. The Merida Initiative, the Bush administration's proposed \$1.4 billion security assistance package for Mexico, would fund these exact institutions that have a long history of human rights violations, corruption and impunity. The speaker estimated that 60% of the U.S.'s \$1.4 billion would finance the very military, police and governmental forces complicit in the detentions,

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torture, and murders committed in Oaxaca in 2006. Grave concerns regarding the proposed Merida Initiative were a recurring theme throughout the delegation.

Later in the week we met with a teacher who had been involved in the protests in 2006. He informed us that justice has not prevailed since the conflict, and that the APPO (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca) and Section 22 (the Oaxacan Teacher's Union) are still in the midst of ongoing struggles. After detailing the unjust treatment of the teachers, the teacher pointed out that "we are not afraid of the police or the armed forces because the demands we have are right and just." The determination expressed in his statement reveals that the factors contributing to the social movement in Oaxaca have not been resolved.

After hearing about the current status of the social movement, we traveled eight hours outside of Oaxaca to the indigenous community of San Juan Mixtepec. Through the coordination and guidance of FIOB (Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations) we were welcomed into the community and arrangements were made for us to stay with members to learn about the impacts of NAFTA and the roots of migration from Oaxaca. Oaxaca is among the top states in Mexico for sending migrants to the US. Once arriving at the community, direct evidence of the impact of US trade policy became blatantly apparent in the form of countless abandoned and half constructed houses skewed across the landscape. The reason, we would soon find out, is that almost everyone in the community has either migrated to the US to work at some point, or has family members that are currently working in the US and sending back remittance money.

Through talking with the farmers and other members of the community we learned of NAFTA's devastating impact on small rural farming communities throughout Mexico. We toured their fields and learned about the care and pride that they take in the production of their goods, as well as the various techniques that they have utilized for hundreds of years. They wanted us to pass along the message that they still live and exist even though it is getting increasingly difficult to make enough money to survive in their communities.

This poverty causes migration, and thus the dissipation of their rich culture and traditions. They informed us that we need to be international advocates against free trade agreements, because they will eventually do away with any market the rural communities have for the local goods that they produce.

Despite the financial status of the community, we were welcomed with open arms. They cooked us every meal with the same care and compassion that they used to nurture their fields and celebrate their culture every day. Being with this community for the short time that I was there has changed my perspective on a lot of things both personally and professionally. I now have a more thorough understanding of why community members feel the need to migrate, and that some truly have no choice but to send themselves, family members, or even their children to the US to work. After talking to people directly impacted by NAFTA, I understand how devastating these trade policies are. I am now able to use this first-hand knowledge as a tool in my advocacy efforts in the US in an attempt to influence US foreign policy.

So what did we learn and what can we do? We learned that we must be the voice for those who do not have the ability to tell the world their story because their ability has been taken away. We are planning on writing articles to educate people on our experience and share the first-hand knowledge we acquired on our visit to Oaxaca. We are excited to hold some meetings on Capitol Hill in an attempt to educate US policy-makers on our findings as well. We are also looking forward to keeping in contact and acting in solidarity with many of the people we met, both US activists on the delegation, as well as the many Oaxacans who inspired us on our trip. We need to join together in solidarity with all of these people to project one voice--a voice that is informative with truth at its core, advocating for fair and just policies both in the US and abroad.

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