

# GUATEMALA 2015

reflections from our mission team



# ABOUT OUR TRIP

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In August of 2015, ten youth and five adults from St. Thomas journeyed to Guatemala to work with an organization called Safe Passage in Guatemala City. Safe Passage brings hope, education, and opportunity to those living in extreme poverty in the community around the Guatemala City garbage dump.

The Guatemala City dump is the largest dump in Latin America – receiving over a third of the trash from Guatemala's 15 and a half million people. The ravine that has been filled with trash since at least 1960 is the size of 22 soccer fields. Hundreds of vultures circle overhead. The smell permeates for blocks outside of its walls. And roughly 6,000 of Guatemala City's poorest citizens work in the dump, making a meager wage sorting through trash to find recyclables to sell. Thousands more survive off the economy of trash in the neighborhood around the dump – an area of the city called Zone 3. One estimate says that 80,000 people are supported economically by the trash.

In the middle of this community filled with immense poverty is Safe Passage. Walking into one of Safe Passage's five buildings around the dump is like walking into another world. Walking into Safe Passage is an experience of God's kingdom.

The rooms and courtyards of Safe Passage are full of laughter, eagerness to learn, and unconditional love offered by teachers and volunteers. During our week at Safe Passage, we tutored in English classes for students from 4th through 7th grade, we taught English to students in Safe Passage's preschool – the *Escuelita*, and we planned and taught lessons for 5th and 7th grade classes. We did an egg drop, made paper airplanes to teach trial and error, we played an incredibly fun game to teach about interdependence in ecosystems, and we taught math lessons – even teaching fractions in Spanish.

The projects we prepared and led were important for classroom learning, but the greater value for us, and hopefully for the students of Safe Passage, were the relationships that formed across culture and language. Nearly every one of our team members bonded with a student or two during our short time at Safe Passage.

In the following reflections, you will hear stories about Safe Passage's many programs for children and their families, and you will hear about Safe Passage's long-term volunteers – young people who are deeply committed to offering hope and opportunity in a community in which it is often lacking. Through these stories, you will hopefully catch a glimpse of God's kingdom and the many ways the youth of St. Thomas joined in the work God is doing through Safe Passage.

It is with great joy that our team presents this book of our reflections. Thank you to all who supported us through prayer, encouragement, and financial contributions to make our journey possible.

– The 2015 Guatemala Mission Team





# LINDSAY

## *I saw God at work in the growing and evolving outreach done by Safe Passage.*

In 1999, a woman named Hanley Denning began teaching children from Zone 3 of Guatemala City in a small church building by the side of the dump. Who knew that her idea would start an organization that serves over 600 children and their families? Even after her death in 2007, Safe Passage grew and added so many more programs to provide families working in the dump with education and opportunity.



The church building where Safe Passage started

God's work is never over – and that is why I believe that Safe Passage is such a great example of God's work. Hanley started a wonderful school, but other staff have added tutoring programs, a gorgeous library, and the social entrepreneurship program, just to name a few. God's work is growing, changing, and evolving to meet the needs of the community, and throughout the years Safe Passage has done just that.

While touring all of the Safe Passage buildings, I was shocked by the extent of their outreach. I saw kids that were 2 years old, and others that were graduating high school. I saw English, math, science, drawing, music, and computer classes. I saw a health clinic and a playground. So many programs that we witnessed were described as “brand new” or “fairly new.”

Specifically I experienced God's work in abundance in a building down the street from the main school. The adult literacy program was downstairs and the social entrepreneurship program, *Creamos*, was upstairs. We were taking a small lesson in Mayan language with two of the women working at *Creamos*. As one of them told us her story, she broke into tears of sorrow when talking about the discrimination she faced as a Mayan woman in the city where indigenous peoples are the minority. But the tears soon turned into those of joy as she described how Safe Passage had turned her life around. She had a safe place for her children to learn and she was able to speak Spanish and was therefore treated better than when she only spoke *Achi* (a Mayan language). Like all women working with *Creamos*, she was taking self-esteem classes and was enrolled in school (this woman was in the 3rd grade!). The gratitude that this woman had for all of the different ways Safe Passage had changed her life shows more than anything the presence of God in Guatemala City for me. God's work is not one thing, but everything. God is not only working in the classrooms at Safe Passage, but in every nook and cranny of their organization. It is stretching through the work, school, and home lives of families.

In years to come, staff at Safe Passage plan to add so much more outreach. Our church's outreach has now grown all the way to Guatemala! God's work is growing by leaps and bounds in Guatemala City and I am glad that we were able to play a small part.



# CLAIRE

*I saw God in all of the volunteers, the kids, and I realized that I see God in my family as well.*

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First the volunteers, they put so much time and energy into their work at Safe Passage. Leah, one of the English teachers, has put off going to college so she can play a part in educating the kids of the garbage dump. She graduated high school a semester early, and three days later she was at Safe Passage in Guatemala City. Leah only intended to stay for six months, but it has now been two years.

Then there is Shannon who teaches at the pre-school. She has been working at Safe Passage ever since she graduated from college eight years ago. She also told us that, unlike most of the other volunteers, she wants to stay there for the rest of her life. Her job is to teach English to the preschoolers, but that's not her main focus. She told us that she wants to focus on the kids' self-esteem and making sure that they are supporting their peers.



English teacher, Leah, in her classroom

Another place that I saw God in was the kids. They have so much happiness and joy in their lives when they are at the school. One experience that really stands out to me was on the first day at Safe Passage and we had just come back from the first two meetings. One of the English teachers, Emily, brought two girls to us who wanted to ask us some questions in English. They asked us how our weekend was and were so nervous and giggly coming up to us. And once they asked us, they were so happy and proud of themselves. It was so cute. Another experience that I remember was working with the kids in English classes. They all light up when they would answer a question or when they would win the game that we played. In one class we played a game that involved drawing. The young boy I was working with, who was around eleven, was amazing at drawing and when I asked him what his favorite class was he looked up at me and said, "Art!" with the biggest smile I have ever seen.



There are so many more experiences and people that I saw God in but there is one more experience that really impacted me. On the first night during Compline we talked about fears that we had for the trip and I realized that I was not really nervous to see any of this; I didn't feel intimidated by it. I thought I was ready. But on our way to visit the dump the next day we were driving through the neighborhood around the dump, Zone 3. As we got closer to the dump, we could smell it even from a few blocks away and I started to get a nervous pit in my stomach. As we pulled into the cemetery where we viewed the dump from above we could see vultures circling the dump and I filled



up with nerves. As we got out of the car and looked out at the dump it took my breath away, but not in a good way. Brian asked us how we felt and no one really said anything. When people started saying what they were feeling, I agreed with them all, but then we went quiet again. Brian asked us a few more questions but none that I can really remember. I was starting to think about my sister, Josselyn, who is adopted from Guatemala. I realized that I had no idea where she would have been in that society, there is no way for me to know and that's what really struck home for me. Later that night during Compline, I started tearing up thinking about the day and mostly my sister. Then my friends that I know from Latin American Heritage Camp, a camp for families with kids adopted from Latin American countries, came into my mind just like Jo did. I started crying. After Compline, Stephi, Gabie, and Lindsay asked what was wrong, like great friends do, and I explained it to them. That's when I had the realization that I was so lucky to have my sister. We fight and all but I have no idea where I would be without her – she is my family. I now have come to see God in my family and all of my adopted friend's families. We have given her all this stuff, like a home and other material things, but what we get back in return is family and I love saying, now more than ever, that Josselyn is my sister.



Workers in the dump need to watch for trucks and heavy equipment as they search for recyclables



A worker takes a break amidst mountains of trash



# STONE

*I saw God at work in the Safe Passage volunteers and staff who live their lives to serve this community.*

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I experienced God in the power of nature in Guatemala. Every night I felt God in the thunder and lightning storms we experienced when we returned to Antigua. It was a great reminder of God's presence during our nightly service of Compline. Guatemala is a country of tremendous natural beauty – the countryside and volcanoes were amazing! We were proud to bring a little bit of Seattle by waving the 12th man flag on top of Pacaya, an active volcano!

The sight of the dump seemed unreal – both in the sheer amount of garbage, and the fact that there were so many people working in the trash. I was impressed by the honor code of the dump workers. If someone puts down a bag of trash they have collected, no one will steal it. Also, the first one to put their hand on a newly arrived truck gets first dibs on the contents of that truck. Even amongst the dirt and garbage, that was a positive thing to see. Then to know that some of that garbage is put to use (for instance making beads out of trash at Safe Passage's social entrepreneurship program, *Creamos*), shows that you can find beauty in unlikely places.

The kids at Safe Passage are very energetic and outgoing, and we felt God there every day. You would think there is nothing wrong with their lives at all. They were all so happy, grateful to be there, and welcomed us with open arms. They all just lived in the moment, and were incredibly positive all of the time. They didn't focus on the negative circumstances of their lives outside the walls of Safe Passage, but instead enjoyed their safe place and their friends. The staff and volunteers are amazing. Many of them intend to stay only a few months, but end up staying much longer. I think that is because they want to stay and see the students that they work with go as far as they can.

I want to thank the members of St. Thomas for their support of the trip – both through fundraising and with your prayers. This experience will stay with me forever, and I would love to return to Guatemala one day.





# ELLSLEY

*I saw God in the purposeful living of the volunteers.*

The volunteers and staff at Safe Passage told us countless stories – most of them inspirational and heart-warming success stories of children and mothers that had seen the benefits of the organization. However, the one that resonated most deeply for me was about a ten-year-old boy who loves to break dance.

Shannon, the preschool English teacher, told us about a former student of hers who really enjoyed dancing with her, so in true Safe Passage fashion, Shannon makes herself available to him every day to continue teaching him break dancing. Every single day he and Shannon blast the music and forget that they are surrounded by heartbreak and overwhelming poverty. Every single day Shannon then walks her friend back to his house where his family is selling glue out of their home. Glue is a cheap and accessible drug in the neighborhood that people inhale to get high. She told us that she has to let go of his hand and watch him walk towards the drug dealers and drug addicts, hoping she will be able to dance with him the next day.



Preschool English teacher, Shannon, teaching a student to dance

In a way this was another success story; after all, he is enrolled at Safe Passage and is able to spend his afternoons in a safer environment than would have been available to him. But it also broke my heart, and clearly Shannon's as well, because all she can do to help is dance with him and hope he stays in the program – hope he grows up and chooses a different direction for his life.

Before coming on the mission trip, I knew there were horrifyingly sad stories and I had been told several times that they would seem all the more real and touching once I saw them in person. But it wasn't until this story, on our last day at Safe Passage, that I truly believed it. God is the strength Shannon needs to let go of her friend's hand every day; God is the opportunity given to each and every one of Safe Passage's students; and God is the hope that every person in the organization has for a better, safer Guatemala City. God is also the purpose that I saw in the life of everyone at Safe Passage.

Leah, an English teacher, said she graduated high school early and flew straight down to Guatemala to help the organization. The idea that in a year and a half from now I would know exactly what I wanted to do and would be willing to put college on hold to do it is insane to me. The fact that Shannon knows what she will be doing for the rest of her life blows my mind. These women are living the lives God intended, not because of the good they are doing, but because wherever they feel a sense of purpose is where God intended them to be. I hope all of the children at Safe Passage and that everyone in our amazing youth group finds that purpose in their lives. I am so thankful for the chance to go to Guatemala and see God in every person there.

# ISABEL

*I saw God in the joy around Safe Passage.*

At first, it seemed like God was nowhere in Guatemala City. Vultures circled over the dump in a column reaching hundreds of feet into the sky, a beacon of desperation and lost hope visible from every vantage point in the city. The sickening odor of rotting garbage wafted on the breeze, mixed with the smells of ammonium, trash, gasoline, and other city scents. Stray dogs, their ribs jutting out like rocks in the desert, prowled the streets, nosing at the piles of trash spilling into the street for any small morsel of food or comfort. Blank-eyed addicts wandered the streets, glue-soaked cloths pressed to their noses, lost in a hazy world deep in their own minds where the desolation of the city was

nowhere to be found. Battered cars from ages gone by sat on cinder blocks on the cracked asphalt, their windows shattered, their owners long gone. Where was God in all this? Where could anyone possibly find the One who is supposed to bring light, hope, and salvation here, where hope was scarce and love even rarer? God, it seemed, was nowhere out on the streets of Zone 3 in Guatemala City.



And then we stepped through the doors of Safe Passage and God was everywhere. I saw God in the full, nutritious meals, thoughtfully cooked by the kitchen staff and gobbled up by the hungry children. I saw God in the bright, cheerful announcements and projects decorating the halls, beckoning the kids towards the joy of learning. I saw God every time a child asked me how to say something in English, or guided me through my halting Spanish, eager to understand and make connections. I saw God in the proud, courageous teenage students, who, after caring for their younger siblings throughout the night, still had the energy and will to come to school the next day, striving to



better their lives and the life of their family. I saw God in Leah, the English coordinator, in her bouncy step, excited nature, and engaging curriculum, even at the age of 19. I saw God in the *Colegio* (first through third grade) teacher who demanded quiet and attention but kept things fun by teaching the children Shakira songs in English. I saw God in Shannon, the passionate *Escuelita* teacher, who plans to stay in Guatemala City for life to continue her family-nurturing programs and to teach the preschoolers about dance, English, and the excitement of life. I saw God in my fellow missionaries, who made individual connections with kids (with or without speaking Spanish)





and worked as hard as the full-time volunteers to make sure the children had engaging and educational lessons.

But then I had to pinpoint God's presence inside myself and my experience in Guatemala. Yes, God's handiwork was all over Safe Passage, that much was clear. However, as I experienced the emotional rollercoaster of desolation and joy in Guatemala, I had to wonder how God could work through me, a sheltered, privileged girl from Seattle, in a place that's so different from where I've grown up. But, as I tried my best to learn and grow with the kids at Safe Passage — attempting Spanish, organizing projects, teaching English — I realized that I didn't have to be able to relate to the kids on such a basic level like our upbringing, because God was with us and connecting us on a deeper level: through joy. A joy that filled Safe Passage and characterized every leader and volunteer inside of it, including me.

Guatemala is a complex place, full of extremes: the extreme poverty and hopelessness of the dump, contrasted with the extreme courage and progress in Safe Passage. But it's also a place full of God, who is present everywhere there's joy, learning, and love. In the places that seem devoid of anything even remotely relating to God, you just have to look a little deeper to find him.



# SPENCER

*I saw God at work through the eyes of the volunteers at Safe Passage, many who left their comfortable lives in the U.S. or elsewhere and dedicated themselves to bettering a community which is forgotten in so many places throughout the world.*

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After participating in two previous mission trips, I knew that my time in Guatemala would be a special experience. However, just about everything else was speculative. Looking back, I now have a different appreciation for the depth of the word “special.” Driving from the airport to Antigua, I was amazed and intrigued by just about everything. This theme of amazement continued throughout my time in Guatemala. Working with Safe Passage was a privilege that I hope to have again, and I learned so much about myself and serving others that I won’t forget. It might sound cliché, but I saw God in every one of the kids we saw...even the “trouble makers.” After hearing that every one of them has likely suffered some sort of abuse, I struggled to find any signs of it in them. While at Safe Passage, they all were happy. Outside the landscaped yards was a totally different world, but the students taught me a lesson of letting go of your problems when you can, and just focusing on the moment. God was clearly with them at Safe Passage. I also saw God in the Mayan women we met at Safe Passage’s store where they sell jewelry made from recycled paper – part of Safe Passage’s social entrepreneurship program. Here are women who have almost nothing to their name, yet they found time to come teach us privileged Americans some of their language in a fun and engaging way. This was a special gift and is a clear sign of God’s presence. It shows that no matter what you have, you are able to give back to others.



A lot of the time, it was hard to find God at work in Guatemala. Looking over the dump gave me a feeling of hopelessness. However, when we took the 7th grade class we had worked with throughout the week to a water park I saw God. In a country with so much poverty, the waterpark seemed like an escape from it all. I saw God at work in everyone who was working a job, such as our guide on our hike up a volcano. Jobs keep people from getting involved in drug trafficking or gangs – things that are all too common in Guatemala. I do believe that what we saw overall was a country working to better its ways. While there is lots more work to be done, I am confident that it will get better.





# EMILY

*I saw God in the wonders that Safe Passage is doing for the community.*

The mission trip to Guatemala that I was fortunate to take part in was unlike any experience I could have imagined. And I mean that wholeheartedly. I made many new friendships with other youth group members and can happily say that I now feel very much a part of the St. Thomas community. During our time in Guatemala, it was very clear that God was diligently at work. The men and women that work at Safe Passage work hard to provide anything and everything they can for the children. The love that consistently radiates throughout Safe Passage is evidence of the presence of God's Kingdom. This experience has furthered my relationship with God and strengthened my faith more than I expected – but what a great surprise.

In a community like Guatemala City, full of corruption, poverty, and violence, it is amazing how I could still feel and see the great presence of God. This experience has taught me the importance of sharing God's love, especially in a place where God's Kingdom is harder to see.

While God's presence is clear and visible within the walls at Safe Passage, I am just now beginning to understand how Safe Passage may be one of the few places where the children get to experience love, care, and compassion in their lives – a place free of violence and the dangers of their world. Until this trip, I took my experience of life for granted. When I explained to my sister and parents that almost ALL of the children return home to some form of abuse, they could not believe it. I still have trouble believing that such a thing is



possible. Safe Passage works in the middle of this to bring wholeness to these children, their families, and the community. God allowed us to be his hands and feet to show his love to the children at Safe Passage, even if only for a short time.

My experience at Safe Passage has inspired me to go back and help. If not to Guatemala City, then I know that there are many other places in the world where God is at work and inviting us to join in.



# GABIE

## *I saw God at work in Safe Passage.*

The truck bumps on the misshapen cobblestones, jolting everyone in the van. My head hits the window as the people across from me slam into each other, laughing. As we start to leave Antigua, the cobblestones abruptly meld into smooth asphalt and stay that way for the remainder of the ride. We are trucking to Guatemala City, about 40 minutes away. Today is our first day working at Safe Passage. Safe Passage is a nonprofit organization focusing on education for the kids of the families foraging in the Guatemala City dump. After a massive fire in 2005, the government was forced to put regulations in place to protect people who are so poor that they have to work in the dump to feed their families. Children under the age of 14 are no longer allowed to work in the dump, and there are stricter safety restrictions too.

As we finally reach Guatemala City, the smell of the dump is everywhere in the city. The smell only intensifies near the preschool and the main Safe Passage building. The people on the street walk in ragged clothing, some with no shoes. Both small and large dogs are everywhere, and trash is in large piles throughout the streets. Armed guards are commonplace, and the streets are cracked and broken.

We pull to a stop and park next to the sidewalk outside Safe Passage. Our team coordinator and guide, Charlotte, hops out first and waits until all of us are out to walk to the entrance. As we walk in, an armed guard greets Charlotte. They quickly chat in Spanish, then he waves us to come in. We all greet him and thank him as we pass. It

turns out today is just a tour of Safe Passage. Charlotte walks us around the building, showing us where the elementary, middle, and high school classes are. Then we exit the building, walk a little ways, then go into the English building. The English building is where the English, art, and recreation classes are. We have our first class, English, with a class of 5th graders. We played a version of Tic-Tac-Toe, altered so that in order for one to cross or circle a number 1-9, they had to say a phrase in English (for example, "there is a black truck").

After the class, we head back to the main building. It was amazing to me how happy the kids were. They have such horrific living situations, full of poverty and government neglect. Their parents and older siblings have to work in the dump to feed their families! Despite all that, I never saw an unhappy face. Not even the high school kids had frowns. Every single kid was laughing, smiling, and shouting to one another as they passed teachers and students alike.

I brought back many memories from Safe Passage. Some were sad, but most were very happy. One of my favorite memories was of the projects we did with the 7th graders. One half of the support team, my group, was in charge of planning the projects for the 7th graders. The other half of the team planned projects for the 5th graders.



Safe Passage's main facility in Guatemala City



Our first 7th grade lesson was an egg drop to teach currency values and trial and error with manipulated variables. Each team was tasked with buying objects with beads as currency: Styrofoam cups, cotton balls, masking tape, straws, and boxes. Each team had 30 beads and whoever spent the least amount of beads, but kept their egg intact, won a large amount of Starburst candy. Every team got about 3 candies per person, even if they didn't win.

At first the kids seemed bored. Some were not paying attention, some were talking to their tablemates, and others even walking around the room or falling asleep. But as time went on and the kids knew they were going to



drop eggs on the ground, more and more started to get engaged. In no time at all, all of the kids including the support team and leaders, were in 100% working mode, laughing, drawing, and negotiating ideas with their teammates. Emily and I worked at the “Bank,” where the extra beads for withdrawals and egg protection supplies were kept. Some of the kids were shy and only spoke when asking how much something was; others tried to speak in English the entire time. They were completely unafraid of mistakes or miscommunication, and they looked me in the eye when they spoke. It was so cool how it had

only been about an hour since we first met and now everyone was talking and laughing as if they had known each other for years.

Of course, there were some very somber moments. One that I remember most vividly was at the preschool, the *Escuelita*. The preschool is for kids ages 2-6, with about six classes. Two of the classes are strictly for 2-year-olds while the rest are 3-6. The reason for this is so the kids can each get special attention from the teacher, on account on how small the classes are. The best part is, if a 6-year-old is lagging behind, they get the work the 3-5 year olds are doing, while still being with the rest of the class. The same goes if a younger kid's work is too easy for them, they can have the older kids' work while still being in the same classroom.

We also worked with Shannon, the English teacher at the *Escuelita*. The day we worked with the kids, we drew pictures of our families to practice English. Some kids drew their entire families, complete with a dog or bed; others only drew their mother or sister and wouldn't draw anything else. But one student, who I was sitting next to, caught my eye. He drew a pink-bodied figure, with brown curly hair. Then he drew a brown bubble in the figure's right hand. I asked him what it meant, but he didn't respond. Then he moved to the left hand and drew several bubbles each connected to the other. With a jolt, I realized they were trash bags.

In the long run, the good memories outweigh the bad by far. I saw some of the most saddening poverty situations of my life in Guatemala. But I'm not angry or upset I saw it, I'm actually glad. We live in a very sheltered world, where you hear about the bad happening but no one sees it. It took me going out of the country to fully understand that not everyone is fortunate enough to have a household or a family. Seeing the bad, in almost the worst it can be, by people having to forage among the remains of more fortunate peoples' lives to feed their families makes you want to go into the world and fix everything. But you can't; no one can fix everything in the world. The best you can do is fix little pieces and help peoples' lives. That is exactly what Safe Passage is doing for the kids.

# BERET

## *I saw God in the Guatemala City dump.*

During this year's mission trip I saw God's work being done in a bitter sweet way at the Guatemala City garbage dump. The city dump occupies 40 acres of land in the nation's capital. This landfill, one of the largest and most toxic in Central America, houses over a third of the country's waste, including trash, recyclables, and discarded food items. There are few, if any, health and safety restrictions limiting the items that can be disposed of in the dump. Anything ranging from an apple core, to a bloody tissue, to human and animal corpses deteriorate in the dump every day. Other dangers threaten the safety of the workers in the dump, including landslides, which are present during Guatemala's annual rainy season. There are also accidents from collisions with garbage trucks and injuries resulting from broken glass and other hazardous items that often prove fatal. The government has only set some very basic regulations, including a wall around the dump, age restrictions, and permits issued to workers at the dump. Those regulations were put in place after a massive fire in the dump in 2005.

Reportedly, 30,000 people live along the perimeter of the garbage dump. Approximately 6,000 people, mainly women, work in the dump, scavenging for items, for re-sale on the open market. Those who are unable to find space in the margins of the landfill are considered lucky if they can find a few square feet within its borders and among the picked-through trash. I couldn't help but feel sad and even pity towards the workers. However, after our volunteer leader, Charlotte, told us that the



Guatemalans feel great pride in working in the dump, I was surprised. I learned that their work in the dump gives them the little money their family needs to survive. Also, when people work in the dump they frequently can stay away from the harmful gangs and bad members of the city's community. By staying away from bad activities their kids are more likely to keep on a right path. For women working in the dump, this often means they don't have to resort to prostitution or other degrading jobs for money. Even though working in the dump is not the most ideal job, I saw God's work shining through with the people's good healthy attitude towards life.



# STEPHI

*I saw God at work in the entire organization at Safe Passage, from the overall mission to the individual volunteers and the kids.*

Despite the hopelessness of the dump and the surrounding poverty, Safe Passage provides a safe place for families – a protected, happy place in which God is abundant. It amazed me how all the volunteers stayed longer than they had originally planned, devoting their time to this community with such enthusiasm and passion every single day. Even the mission and curriculum at Safe Passage is completely devoted to the children, leaving so much room for their growth and love of learning to develop. I especially saw this in the reading program because it is so focused on helping kids to enjoy

reading rather than measuring their abilities. I really think God shines through in this program and the people that made it possible, developing a love of learning in the children Safe Passage serves. Most of all, I saw God in the face of every kid as they leave the outside world behind and come into this sanctuary with such joy and playfulness. During recess at the preschool, my little friend and her buddy were showing off and competing, seeing who could climb the highest or do the coolest thing, but when one of them got stuck, the other would run over to help them down. And I saw God in our interactions with all the children. Despite the language barrier and me knowing about five words in Spanish, we managed to communicate, not only instructions for activities, but also chat about favorite celebrities and music.

Seeing Safe Passage, especially the teachers' passion, inspired me and I want to return as a long-term volunteer once I graduate.



# GREG

## *I saw God at work in the smiles of the children of Safe Passage's preschool, the Escuelita!*

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“Go this way.” This is the gentle push that I have felt several times in the last few years. God has moved me to a role in the construction of the Ebsworth Life Center, to become a part of the staff of St. Thomas, and most recently to be a part of the mission team to Guatemala City and Safe Passage.

I don't think that I would have done any of these things if I hadn't surrendered to God and left my often times stubborn “I know best” on the side of the road! What a mistake not surrendering would have been, particularly for the mission trip to Safe Passage.

I heard all the familiar tapes playing in my head – “What can I offer kids in Guatemala, I don't have time, I don't know Spanish, I might get sick, etc.!” But I also kept hearing God say, “I'll be with you, you'll know I'm with you!” I am so glad that I put my fear aside and let God lead me.

God was with us and present to us all in the smiles, sparkling eyes, amazing stories, loving hugs and simple gestures of love and care we experienced every day from the children, staff and volunteers at Safe Passage! God was also with us as we experienced the absolute poverty that is the life of those that work in and around the Guatemala City garbage dump – the community that Safe Passage serves.

Despite the poverty and terrible living conditions, all of the children we had the privilege of meeting and working with were so loving and welcoming. They were eager to learn. They wanted to know us and, they wanted to be known. The teachers, volunteers and staff of Safe Passage treated them with such love and care. This was not just a school. Safe Passage is a place where the Kingdom of God is being built daily! This was something that touched all of us, particularly as we were invited and welcomed into this family!



The joy that we felt from the children was tempered by the sights, sounds and smells that we experienced as we looked into the dump and saw in the neighborhood around the dump as we walked back and forth between Safe Passage's buildings. These experiences sparked anger, frustration and guilt, as well as a renewed sense of gratitude and abundance for all of God's blessings.

As we explored our feelings, the stories of sacrifice and commitment that we heard from the teachers and volunteers of Safe



Passage, and our own deep reactions to our experiences, we felt God's loving presence. We came to see and know that God wanted us to be in Guatemala, not to fix the problems we saw, but to be present and share our love and faith!

In one of the Safe Passage classrooms, there was a poster that said, "Be the reason someone smiles today." This was the classroom where our students taught several classes. They developed the content, prepared the lessons, planned the activities and presented the lessons in Spanish. Learning, laughter, love, and smiles filled the room at the end of each class. God blessed us with the opportunity to be the reason the children of Safe Passage were smiling!



It is my fervent hope and prayer that we will continue to support Safe Passage through prayer, financial contributions and as volunteers in the future. To Brian and my fellow team members, you all are such a blessing! Thank you!



# DAPHNE

*I saw God at work through the staff at Safe Passage and their desire to make connections with others and improve the lives and community of the students they serve.*

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Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? This question, part of our Baptismal Covenant, was our ethos for this trip. And I think we lived it.



As humans, we want to make connections with others. I told our students repeatedly that we all speak the same language; we just have different words for what we're saying. As humans, we all long to be in community and relationship with each other. We want the same thing for our families – health, happiness, and safety. The people at Safe Passage have seen a need in the community and are doing their best to meet the needs of arguably some of the most marginalized people in the Americas. They have seen injustices, said “Enough,” and taken a stand against poverty, illiteracy, and hunger. God is working through Safe Passage to right the injustices of poverty, illiteracy, and hunger.

During our final afternoon at Safe Passage we had the opportunity to meet a woman named Shannon who had been working for Safe Passage for eight years. She has left the comforts of her home to live beside and be in communion with the families who live in the poorest neighborhood in Guatemala City. She spoke words of love and positivity and her message was clear: it doesn't take much to make a difference in the world. Even a smile and a “How are you?” can be enough to change someone's life.

I felt God in our midst during our time as a group. I saw God in the way our youth treated each other and the students at Safe Passage. Watching our youth and the Safe Passage students leave their comfort zones to make connections with each other brought me bliss. God is in joy, laughter, noise, and holy chaos! I felt God in our community

when we prayed Compline together every evening and when we worshiped with another mission group from Texas. I saw God in the questions – big questions – our students were asking such as, “How can we harness our privilege to make a difference in the world?” My prayer for all of us is that we choose to live for others rather than ourselves, truly fulfilling our Baptismal Covenant.

It takes a short time to physically unpack from a mission trip; it will take a lifetime to emotionally unpack from this trip. My hope for our team is that we continue to seek opportunities to serve others before serving ourselves.





# ARNE

*I saw God at work in the faces of the children, teachers and staff of Safe Passage and I saw him at work in the faces of our youth as this truly transformative experience evolved from day to day.*

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¡Hola, Buenos Dias!

I decided before the trip that I would keep a detailed journal during our time in Guatemala. It was my hope to capture random thoughts and feelings that I could then reflect on years from now. Little did I know that I would have such rich material from which to draw and how deeply fulfilling this journey would be. At the end of the journey I had over 30 pages of notes!! What follows is an excerpt from our first day at Safe Passage:

The morning was mostly taken up by joyful tours of the school but we quickly descended into a reality none of us have ever known and likely will never see again. The images, smells, and visuals that followed will live with us forever as they are deeply burned into our memories. We visited the dump today, looking down into the ravine from the Guatemala City cemetery. To say that the cemetery and the dump were horrific doesn't properly give service to the experience. That said, I believe that it was a blessing for the youth, future leaders and influencers for sure, to have experienced this at such a young age. I saw the face of God in them at the moment they peered over the ledge of the cemetery into the morass of the dump. I saw their transformation begin right then and there.

I was personally struck by the resilience of the people who work in the dump. They are clearly hard workers and intelligent (imagine creating a living out of nothing!!). It struck me then that what I was seeing was the result of centuries of governmental and societal indifference. Perhaps it has evolved to indifference. As I later learned, the history of Spanish atrocities against the indigenous Mayan population was clearly the basis for what we know as Guatemala today: a society of vast differences in wealth and opportunity.

Our trip back to the school and our time there the rest for the day was filled with the sights and sounds of energetic children and their equally energetic (and deeply dedicated) school staff and teachers. All this in stark contrast to our morning at the cemetery and dump. I'll never forget my experience in Leah's class with my new friend Darlin (12) and Kevin (11). Both appeared very weary from whatever desperate lives they were living outside of the school and I was energized by their intense desire to learn.

I saw God at work this day!! I saw him at work in the faces of the children we met at Safe Passage; their teachers; the School Director, Todd; and I saw him at work in the faces of our youth as we ended the day with a sweet and memorable Compline service. And I felt his deep presence in me. I know God is working through me and I felt my personal transformation begin.

¡Vaya Con Dios!



# JAMIE

*I saw God at work in the optimistic outlook of all of the students and teachers at Safe Passage. The students were all there to learn. The teachers were all there to help the students be successful.*

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During our time at Safe Passage we assisted in several English classes at various grade levels. One of my favorite English classes was the third-grade class in the *Colegio*, the primary-aged classrooms. The kids were learning English verbs including wake up, play, sing, and stand up. The teacher used a clever game of charades to make it fun for the kids to learn the words and associate them to actions. At the end of the short class period, the teacher left just a little time for one more fun activity — a cute dance routine she had been coaching them on! She was teaching them the dance to Shakira's song "Waka Waka" and we got to join in on the fun. I thought this was great because several

of our St. Thomas students already knew the routine and were really good at getting in and dancing with the kids. What a great bonding moment brought together by a common song!

Of all the lessons we taught to the kids, my favorite was the egg drop. Even though this was the first lesson we did, I think it was the most successful. The kids were very engaged in the project and worked really hard trying to protect their eggs. Best of all was the dropping of the eggs. All the kids would count down in unison "CINCO, CUATRO, TRES, DOS, UNO!" Then the protected egg would be dropped and the team would gather around anxiously waiting to find out whether or not their egg broke. It was amazing to see how eager the kids were to get their results.



Our team with students in the *Colegio* - school for students in first and second grade



# BRIAN

*I saw God in the youth of St. Thomas as they discovered their calling to join in God's work in the world.*

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As the youth director at St. Thomas, my experience on our yearly mission trips is oftentimes slightly removed from our primary task of serving those in the places we travel. Dealing with logistics, schedules, and details tends to take a good deal of my attention. But I also stand back and observe our youth – looking for clues about how they are processing the experience. Part of my role is not only planning the activities we engage in, but helping our team reflect on the activities and experiences. On mission trips, this reflection relates to the ways we see God at

work in, around, and through us; and who God is calling us to be as Christians in the world. This role is both a joy and a privilege.

The paradox of mission trips is that we oftentimes receive more than we ever give. We go with the intention of serving others. We give our hearts to our work. And then we discover that we are the ones who are changed. Our understanding of the world, God, and ourselves is expanded beyond what we ever thought possible.

I hope that you have gotten a glimpse of the many, many ways God is working through Safe Passage in the reflections of our team. It truly is an embassy of God's kingdom in the heart of Guatemala City's poorest neighborhood – a neighborhood that seems far from the wholeness, health, and beauty God intends for creation. Encountering God's kingdom through Safe Passage was an invitation for me and for our team to join in God's work of restoring creation – an invitation to be a part of God's kingdom.

Our youth returned home from Guatemala as remarkably different people. They returned with passion, conviction, and a desire to be intentional with their lives. Intentional living was one of the themes that emerged during our time in Guatemala. It was a joy to watch our youth as they discovered purpose and began to reflect on the ways they will use their lives for others. Many of the long-term volunteers at Safe Passage taught us that by sharing their lives and stories with us.

Preacher Fredrick Buechner once said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Our challenge is to discover and discern where that place is. Many of our youth returned home from Guatemala seriously asking themselves where God is calling them to play a part in meeting the world's deep hunger for wholeness. It is clear that God is not only working through them as they serve others in the world, but also working in them as they join in God's work of restoring all of creation.





