

## Episcopal Relief & Development in Belize

Episcopal Relief & Development's network of diocesan and seminarian coordinators meets each spring to reconnect, share best practices and hear the latest about ERD's programs and plans. For the first time our annual meeting, held over the Memorial Day weekend, occurred outside our borders in Belize City, Belize. The location was chosen because the Belizean diocese, supported by Episcopal Relief & Development, could "provide Diocesan Coordinators an opportunity to witness our partners' life-saving work firsthand and to help them tell the story of our work more effectively," in the words of Network Coordinator Luke Fodor. Field trips were planned to allow us to see the ERD-provided HIV/AIDS prevention curriculum in elementary schools and to see recipients of ERD-funded microfinance loans.

Parishes in our diocese have participated for years in mission trips to Belize and in recent years to Holy Cross Anglican School in San Pedro. That connection led to my having the good fortune of being invited by the Rev. Jan Lamb, Deacon at St. Luke's, Durham, and Holy Cross volunteer, to visit the school as her guest prior to the annual meeting's start.



And what good fortune it was. Holy Cross, located in San Mateo, an underserved area of San Pedro, is an elementary school educating just over 500 children from Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. During my short visit I sat in on 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes where I saw evidence of the HIV/AIDS prevention curriculum and listened to oral testing for end-of-term exams; I experienced a donated computer lab; I walked to school with a beautiful 2<sup>nd</sup> grader

named Aaliyah; I ate lunch with the children and sat in on their weekly chapel services (separate services for the youngest, middle and oldest children); and I walked with Jan through the San Mateo neighborhood.

What I found was a school of happy children delighted to be in the school environment and eager to learn in spite of their challenging circumstances. Teachers were effective and students knew their subject matter. Younger students were variously attentive and older students were quickly responsive to the oral testing. In a positive way, the Holy Cross visit gave me a foundation against which to compare the field trip schools. A visit to the Holy Cross web site (<http://www.holycrossbelize.org/>) will be time well spent.

Jan returned with me to Belize City as my guest at ERD's annual meeting, which was hosted by the Rt. Rev. Philip Wright and the Anglican Diocese of Belize.

One field trip took us to two Anglican schools, St. Stephen's in Flower's Bank and All Saints in Belize City. The rural Flower's Bank community includes a small



church, a community center and a 3-room school. St. Stephen's school has about 20 children in the elementary grades. Its principal and primary grades teacher is a young woman with an AA degree who drives over 30 miles to reach the school, teaches with enthusiasm and makes good use of limited resources. Another of the teachers, George, is the lay missionary for the church and aspires to become a priest. Six of the children delighted us with a folk dance

performed in costume.

In Belize City we visited All Saints School, which supported the same elementary grades but which was much larger (about 30 students per class) and better equipped than St. Stephen's. At both schools we witnessed the ERD-sponsored HIV/AIDS prevention curriculum in practice. With Belize having the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in Central America, Episcopal Relief & Development has worked with



the Anglican Diocese of Belize since 2006 to provide a program for its schools that instructs teachers on how to deliver the age-appropriate training; increases students' knowledge of HIV/AIDS and teaches life skills to prevent infections; and increases parent and community awareness of the disease.

A second day of field trips introduced us to four of the nearly 100 entrepreneur recipients of microfinance loans from ERD partner Belize Enterprise for Sustainable Technology (BEST). Cherrymae Galvez's loan from BEST allowed her to prepare and sell fast foods in the evenings from her roadside grocery store and fruit stand. The community's demand for Cherry's products is ensuring her success as a businesswoman.

Lorie Wallace operates a craft and souvenir shop at Altun Ha (Mayan) archaeological site where she sells her husband's carvings and other products he makes. Already a successful shopkeeper, Lorie borrowed from BEST so she could expand her inventory and increase sales. Lorie and her husband now both have shops at Altun Ha.

A widowed father of five, Alan Jones is Justice of the Peace in the community of Lucky Strike and is a skilled wood craftsman. Needing to work at home after his

wife died, Alan borrowed from BEST to purchase carving equipment and a variety of woods. He displayed (and sold to us) beautiful carved pieces – bowls, crosses, birds, sea creatures, household items -- that he usually sells from his home, at the Altun Ha archaeological site and at the Tourist Village in Belize City's port. Alan's business has grown to include two employees now.



Chosen Belize's Female Farmer of the Year 2010, Julia Gonzalez, with help from her extended family, operates a farm without benefit of electricity or farm machinery. One of her loans allowed her to purchase additional farm implements to help grow a variety of vegetables, manage a few head of cattle and build a small tilapia pond. The Ministry of Agriculture placed a greenhouse on Julia's farm in which she is growing a variety of peppers. Julia told us she would rather work on her farm than in her house, and it's a choice that has worked well for her.

It was uplifting to meet small business owners who, with the help of Episcopal Relief & Development, are maintaining a living standard above the poverty level in a country facing so many challenges. These visits, too, demonstrated why undesignated gifts to Episcopal Relief & Development are such an important source of funds for everyday development programs.

Back in the annual meeting, we heard about ERD's new USA disaster preparedness program and the developing *NetsforLife* Inspiration Fund (about which we in NC will learn more this summer). An emotional program was a slideshow about the Haiti earthquake presented by a Haitian Episcopal priest who was present when the disaster occurred and who is now helping to rebuild his countrymen's lives. And as a final gracious act, the Diocese gave each of us a wooden cross carved from the cathedral's pine beams that originally came from the U.S. two hundred years ago.

By going to Belize I experienced the long-term value of Episcopal Relief & Development's programs that help people lift themselves from poverty and illness. I've seen ERD's partners' work firsthand, and their stories are now real.

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