

Project Learn Belize

On behalf of the community of Dangriga, especially the students, teachers, and families of Sacred Heart Primary School, **Project Learn Belize** wishes to acknowledge and thank its benefactors for their generosity:

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Project Learn Belize

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Project Learn Belize / School of Education
2130 Fulton Street
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A Brief History of Belize

From the 4th to 9th century, the ancient Mayan civilization flourished in Belize, reaching an estimated population of 400,000 in the country at its peak. The Mayans were excellent craftsmen, skilled at making pottery, carving jade and crafting elaborate costumes of feathers, but are perhaps most famous for their incredible mathematical systems and calendars and their use of a complex writing system that is still not completely deciphered. In the 10th century however, the Belize population began suffering a mysterious decline and most immigrated to Yucatan.

Nevertheless, there were still many inhabitants in Belize when the Spanish arrived and began conquering much of the Americas in the 16th century. The Spaniards tried to control Belize as well, but the Mayan warriors held them back. Even though the Spanish never managed to get a lasting hold on the area, they further decimated the Mayan population with the spreading of European diseases.

By the time the English arrived in Belize, there were no more Mayans living along the coast and it was not until the late 18th century that their records show any contact with the once great civilization. The first English in Belize were pirates and adventurers who eventually turned to cutting logwood that was used to produce a dye for wool. This would be the economic basis for the English settlement in Belize for over a hundred years. Although England and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris in 1763, which allowed the British settlers to continue cutting logwood in Belize, it was not until 1798, when a small contingent of British soldiers defeated the Spanish in a battle on tiny St. George's Caye, that Spain put a permanent end to the claim of territorial rights in Belize.

In 1821, Spain granted independence to Mexico and Guatemala; both countries asserted claims to Belize, which were rejected by the British government. England declared Belize to be the colony of British Honduras in 1861, which encouraged people from several parts of the English Empire to come and settle in Belize.

During the Great Depression, the economy of Belize suffered. Throughout the country, poverty and unemployment were all too evident. The situation worsened when in 1931 a major hurricane swept through the area, killing thousands of people and causing further economic problems.



possible by the matching grant of the first benefactor of **Project Learn Belize**.

The generosity of third grade girls at Convent Elementary School in San Francisco bought desks for their new Standard III friends at Sacred Heart.



Plans are already underway to fund repairs of Sacred Heart's small kitchen and lunch room. The school feeds breakfast and lunch to over 100 students each school day, who would otherwise go without meals. The renovations will include moving the stove butane gas tanks that are currently housed inside the room.



The **PLB** literacy and special education workshops, in March and June, had an unforeseen consequence. Faculty and Administrators at Sacred Heart now realize the need for reading rooms/library, which would provide "quiet space" for students to improve their literacy. The support of **Project Learn Belize** benefactors may well make this dream a reality for the Sacred Heart community.



Project Learn Belize expanded its understanding of "benefactor" to include the contributed services of a volunteer, who joined the others for



the June 2008 trip. Lawrence King, a friend of **Project Learn Belize**, spent two weeks doing a variety of repairs at the school (from a rewired school bell to the reconfiguration of space for the anticipated renovations of the school kitchen). Most notably, he designed and constructed large secure storage cabinets outside the principal's office. Leaving all of the tools he had brought was Mr. King's final gift to the school.

PLB: other Colleges & Schools of USF

The central unifying feature of the various opportunities of *Project Learn Belize* is its “educational” nature, in the least restrictive sense. Education must address both hearts and minds; it must attend to all dimensions – social, cultural, health, economic, spiritual – that allow true learning to occur.

With this broader, inclusive definition of education, opportunities for participation among other colleges & schools of USF begin to appear. Dangriga shares in the challenges of other developing nations in issues of health education and wellness. Opened in October 1999, the Southern Regional Hospital in Dangriga is one of four regional hospitals in Belize. Along with approximately fifteen doctors, the hospital provides health care for approximately 32,000 residents of Stann Creek District.

Clinical training opportunities outside the United States have already been initiated for students of the USF School of Nursing (most notably, the *Global Issues in Community Health* course and the *Guatemala Health Care Project*). Both the town of Dangriga and its school system provide a potential site for similar programs that the School of Nursing can sponsor. Dr. Judith Karshmer, Dean of the USF School of Nursing, traveled to Dangriga, while the USF student group was there in January, 2008. At that time, Dr. Karshmer met with the Administration and Staff at Southern Regional to explore partnerships between USF and the local medical community. She also identified opportunities for USF School of Nursing students and faculty to assist in health education and wellness assessments for both children and families. The follow-up visit in June of Dr. Susan Prion further clarified opportunities for a joint partnership of School of Nursing undergraduate and graduates students with *Project Learn Belize* during 2008-09.



PLB: Building the Future

Project Learn Belize is also committed to the renovation and expansion of facilities at Sacred Heart and other schools in Dangriga. January, 2008 witnessed the addition of 5 classrooms and a school office, made



The worsening economy led to agitation for independence from England. Several political parties were formed and strengthened over the years, and on September 21, 1981, the colony of British Honduras became the independent nation of Belize. Guatemala, which had been hoping to reclaim the country since 1821, refused to acknowledge Belize’s independence and even threatened war. It was not until 1991 that Guatemala dropped its claims on Belize and officially recognized its independence. Since then, the two countries have finally established full diplomatic relations.

Dangriga

With a population of approximately 11,500 (2007), Dangriga is the largest town in Stann Creek District. Located in the heart of the country's citrus industry, Dangriga is also one of the most colorful of Belize's district towns and is growing as a tourism center, mainly because of its close proximity to many of Belize's cayes and the Barrier Reef.



Considered the unofficial capitol of Garifuna culture in Belize, most of Dangriga's citizens are black Caribs, people of South American and African descent, whose ancestors inhabited the island of St. Vincent as a free people in the 17th century. By the end of the 18th century, British colonizers had brought most of these independent-minded people under control, and due to oppression, many

Caribs immigrated to Southern Belize. The most memorable of these journeys took place on November 19, 1832 when a large group of Caribs arrived in Belize, having traveled from Honduras in dugout canoes. This event is celebrated annually in Belize as Garifuna Settlement Day, but no other town is as lively as Dangriga, as the town explodes with dancing, drinking, colorful costumes and the celebration of Garifuna heritage.

Dangriga is a major cultural and artistic center as well, being home to some of Belize's finest painters. It is also where the Caribbean music, Punta Rock, originated and where some of Belize's best folk bands can be found.

Education in Belize

The Ministry of Education is the official governing agency in Belize for schools throughout the country. Each of the six “districts” of the country is loosely supervised by a District Education Manager. Based on the British system of education, elementary education is broken into eight “standards” (Infant I, Infant II, Standards 1 – 6); secondary education is composed of “Forms” 1 -4 (the equivalent of high school grades) and Form 5 & 6 (junior college). While the government espouses mandatory school

attendance until age 16, it is painfully common to find “dropouts” as young as 10 – children who fall hopelessly behind in an educational system incapable of differentiated instruction or accommodation for varied learning style.

Surprisingly, there is no real system of public schools in Belize. The vast majority of elementary and secondary schools are affiliated and run by private organizations (predominantly church-sponsored). The government pays the salaries of administrators and faculty, but costs related to maintenance and supplies must be often assumed by the local school. Only in September, 2007 did the government finally provide free textbooks to elementary schools. Banking its investments on a “survival of the fittest” mentality for educating its youth, the government appears, to many, to favor post-elementary schools with significantly more financial support and attention. Students who are able to make it to First Form have a high probability of completing their secondary education. Sadly, the vast majority of these graduates leave the country in search of employment opportunities, contributing to the national “brain drain”.



Sacred Heart Primary School, Dangriga

With a campus first built in its present location in the early 1940’s, Sacred Heart is the largest elementary school in Dangriga, with over 730 students. Related to the “brain drain” referred to above, a significant number of students do not live with parents (who have moved to the US) and are part of extended families of grandparents, aunts, cousins, etc. The phenomenon is evident in the wide disparity of “school readiness” among children in the lower grades, which relies on parental attention and cognitive developmental reinforcement.

The 2007-2008 staff at Sacred Heart consisted of 24 teachers and 3 administrators, a student-teacher ratio of over 30:1. Even the most basic of educational supplies are in short supply, given the lack of financial support from the government. Seldom are students turned away if families cannot afford the \$20 (USD) yearly tuition. While sharing the same property with Sacred Heart Parish, the school is considered only



start, it was hoped that teams of SOE faculty, from Teacher Education, Special Education, and Digital Media and Learning, might provide training workshops, along with follow-up mentoring for teachers in the classroom. The “added value” of these ventures would be the long-range effects of “teaching teachers”.

In March, 2008, Dr. Hazel Brauer, Adjunct Professor in the Teacher Education Department, traveled with Dr. Dillon, the *Project’s* director, to Sacred Heart School in Dangriga. After two days of observing teachers and students in their classrooms, Dr. Brauer, a reading specialist for the



Jefferson School District (Daly City), conducted a day and a half workshop on “best practices” in children’s literacy for the staff of Sacred Heart. Faculty members and administrators gave up the first two days of their spring break to attend the workshop. Appreciation for Dr. Brauer’s presentations was best summed up by Vice Principal

Eunice Nunez: “with such excellent training for our teachers, as Hazel gave us, we can easily become a model school for the entire country.” Along with contributions from *Project Learn Belize*, a USF Jesuit Community Foundation Grant provided funding for the *Exchange*.

In June, 2008, *Project* director Dillon and Dr. Yvonne Bui, full-time faculty member in the Special Education Program of the School of Education, brought three recent USF master’s graduates (Elias Barlow, Mary Busby & Robin Ire)



to Sacred Heart Primary School. The four specialists provided a full week of teacher in-service training, focused on students with learning disabilities, for thirty-two Sacred Heart staff and faculty. The “team” administered over forty individual student assessments for children identified by their teachers with potential special needs. In addition to daily workshops, the USF group engaged in classroom observations and demonstrations of differentiated instruction. Partial funding was provided by the USF Jesuit Community Foundation’s grant to *Project Learn Belize*.

Dangriga and Sacred Heart School provided a solid basis for this pilot project.

In this first venture, four undergraduates (USF's Arts & Sciences *Dual Degree in Teacher Preparation (DDTP) program*) and one graduate student, all enrolled in the Teacher Education Program, traveled to Dangriga with other USF students during the Intersession (January 2-16, 2008). Working in tandem with participants in USF University Ministry's *Arrupe Immersion Program*, the PLB~TED students served as teaching assistants in the classroom. Beside their talents and energies, these Teacher Education students shared their recently acquired knowledge and passion for teaching with the faculty and staff of Sacred Heart School. At the same time, participants in PLB~TED were exposed to, and hopefully transformed by, the realities of cultural diversity, tradition, and challenges of education, health, and governance in this developing country in the Caribbean Basin.



A highlight of this trip, for both the USF students and the Sacred Heart School community, was the visit of Fr. Stephen Privett, S.J., President of USF and Dr. Judith Karshmer, Dean of the School of Nursing,

All USF participants were required to participate in pre-service orientation meetings during the fall semester, prior to traveling to Belize in January. Those selected for PLB~TED were responsible for purchasing air transportation, room, and board for this two-week program.

PLB: Teacher – to - Teacher Exchange

Common to elementary school teachers throughout Belize, most of Sacred Heart School's very dedicated and enthusiastic faculty have only a form of Belizean teaching certification, comparable to the U.S. two-year Associate of Arts degree. As such, Belizean teachers receive only the minimum of teacher preparation training. Faculty members of the School of Education can provide a potential rich resource for on-going teacher professional development. Such continuing education partnerships through *Project Learn Belize* will focus on content and pedagogy in the areas



of children's literacy, the needs of exceptional children, and the use of technology in educational instruction. From *Project Learn Belize's*

one of many in the parish's network of Catholic elementary schools throughout the region. Financial support from the parish is minimal.

The other Catholic school, Holy Ghost Elementary, is located on the south end of town. The student population of these two Catholic schools combined constitutes the vast majority of elementary aged children in this town of 11,000.

Previous Initiatives of the University of San Francisco

Dangriga & the USF Arrupe Immersion Program

Sponsored by University Ministry at USF, the *Arrupe Immersion Program: Belize* began in January 2004. The original Program brought 10-12 USF students, along with USF staff and School of Education faculty, to the town of Dangriga. As part of the Immersion Program, USF students worked at Sacred Heart Elementary School for two weeks in early January.



During the first week, students operated a "camp" for grade-school age children of the town, with a variety of educational and recreational activities. In the second week, USF students were paired with Belizean teachers and served as classroom aides. Beyond the work of the school, the USF participants were invited to immerse themselves in, and grow in solidarity with, the rich culture and diversity of this unique town. In addition to the yearly January programs, a similar Arrupe Immersion group traveled to the small coastal village of Seine Bight (approx. 60 miles south of Dangriga) to work at St. Alphonsus Elementary School during Spring Break, 2007.



Sacred Heart & USF Information Technology Services (ITS)



As part of the University's Retired Computer Allocation Program, several schools in Dangriga have received used desktop computers. With the generous assistance of staff members of ITS, a state-of-the-art computer center was established at Sacred Heart School in the fall of 2005, with over 30 computers. In subsequent shipments, more

computers have been donated to Sacred Heart, as well as Delisle High School, an alternative vocational / technical high school, founded by the Sisters of the Holy Family. While the other Catholic elementary school, Holy Ghost, could profit from a computer center, the current physical facilities cannot support it. The entire campus has been scheduled for

demolition and rebuilding by the government for several years; thus far, no progress has occurred.

Project Learn Belize

The Genesis of the Project

After several trips to Belize, first as an observer and then as a participant in University Ministry's *Arrupe Immersion Program*, Fr. Jeff Dillon, S.J., a member of the USF School of Education faculty, began to see an exciting potential in Belize. Several avenues of opportunity might



serve both the interests of the community of Dangriga and advance the lived expression of the Mission of the University of San Francisco.

Project Learn Belize should be considered not so much a single program, but many ventures into which various members, inside and outside the USF community could enter. The unifying feature of these efforts would be their "educational" nature, in the least restrictive sense. Education must address both hearts and

minds; it must attend to all dimensions – social, cultural, health, economic, spiritual – that allow true learning to occur.

The title, *Project Learn Belize*, is meant to evoke the multiple effects on its participants, no matter the nature of a particular program's work focus:

- participants are first those who have come to learn: open and attentive to the realities of cultural diversity, tradition, and challenges of education, health, and governance in this developing country;
- with this immersion, participants grow in understanding and solidarity with the community into which they have entered;
- this expansion in world view perspective leads participants to critical reflection and analysis of their own culture, traditions, and the call to action and transformation;
- in turn, participants offer whatever skills and talents they possess, in response to the community and its expressed desires for what they need to realize further their own potential.

Why Belize?

As previously noted, Belize is the only English-speaking country in Central America, and certainly can be counted among "developing third world countries" in this hemisphere. Relative to travel distance, it is second only to Mexico in terms of accessibility from San Francisco and the United States. The rich cultural and ethnic diversity of the country provides an excellent international opportunity to broaden a participant's "global perspective".

Why Dangriga?

Due to the success of past Arrupe Immersion Programs, significant bonds have been established between the members of the local community of Dangriga, the students, faculty and families of Sacred Heart School and the University. While Dangriga is the third largest town in Belize, its relatively small population of 11,600 is such that efforts of *Project Learn Belize* would not only impact the USF participants, but promise significant contributions to the growth and development of the community. Especially in works related to education, the concentric spheres of influence are readily accessible.

Project Learn Belize: First Steps

A PROSPECTUS for *Project Learn Belize* was first circulated during the month of October, 2007, both inside and outside of the University of San Francisco. The response to the proposed goals and central features was very positive. *Project Learn Belize* received the approval and endorsement of the President of the University of San Francisco and the Dean of the School of Education. Shortly after, a restricted gifts account fund for *Project Learn Belize* was established by the University of San Francisco, to be housed in the School of Education.



In November, 2007, *Project Learn Belize* received its first financial contribution. The donor matched funds (\$5,000) raised by the Sacred Heart School P.T.A. in Dangriga to renovate an abandoned building, which provided five additional classrooms and school office.

PLB: Teacher Education Program - Students



This was a first attempt to provide students in the Teacher Education Program with an education-focused experience outside the usual confines of American education. Belize provided such a unique opportunity, as it is English-speaking, as well as situated in Central America. The previous ties that had formed between USF and the town of