



Oxlajuj B'atz' (Thirteen Threads)
a Project of
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Quote from an interview with Rosa Garcia from the Patanatik group, January 4, 2010:

"One of the best things about Oxlajuj B'atz' is how they look at what our needs are as a community and offer workshops based on these needs, giving us opportunities to learn the skills and knowledge that we both need and want."

Workshops/Special Events

Rug-hooking Phase II: Creativity and Design. Oxlajuj B'atz' (OB) was delighted to host a second series of rug hooking workshops facilitated by Mary Anne Wise (www.maryannewise.com) in January and February. The first workshop held in June 2009 provided an introduction to this new skill. This following series of workshops were more concentrated, allowing the women to create their own designs. The workshops occurred 2 days per week over a 3 week period, giving the women a chance to practice in the days in between. We invited only those women who participated in the June workshop who were certain to develop and utilize this new skill. In the end, there were 18 eager participants, each of whom designed three different rugs. First they learned geometric designs, then figurative, and the final homework was a combination of the two.

Mary Anne was so motivated by the women's work that she sent an email out to the rug-hooking community with photos of the completed rugs for sale. Almost immediately 14 rugs were snatched up providing an income for the women with a percentage of the proceeds going to the OB project. What an exciting outcome to a productive 3 weeks! Thank you to Mary Anne Wise for your strong effort and inspiration to the women.

International Women's Day Celebration: Artisanal Exhibition and Leadership Assembly.

For the first time since OB's inception, we formally celebrated International Women's Day by hosting 2 days of activities together with our participating women's groups.

Day one, the celebration began with a public event to promote OB and provide a means for OB's participating groups to exhibit and sell their own products. We invited two representatives from each of our 22 groups of women. Throughout the day, a variety of guest speakers took to the platform, notably Guatemalan activist Rosalina Tuyuc, along with an assortment of fun activities including music, prizes, concession sales, games, craft-making, a yoga class, and a theatrical work performed by local artists. A good time was had by all, not to mention all the women's groups sold products!

Day two, we held our annual leadership assembly for the 44 women participants. For the assembly, we organized a forum for the older, more experienced groups to share their work experiences with the newer groups. Also, the women discussed the previous day's activities. The women commented on how valuable it was to get to know other groups with OB and to learn how to improve their opportunities and work better together.

Overall, the day's events were a great success, notwithstanding several ways to improve for the future. Check out photos of the exhibition on our Facebook page.

2009 Best Participation Winner. At the Leadership Assembly, we announced OB's 2009 winner for best participation and most improved group. This is a new competition that we intend to repeat in years to come as an incentive to promote active participation in OB programs.

The winner was the Xeabaj group from Santa Apolonia, Tecpan. These women have worked for Mayan Hands (www.mayanhands.org) for many years making a small but steady income. In recent years, the women are consistently earning three to five times more money than they were. They produce baskets made from pine needles and raphia, as well as clay pottery, embroidery, and numerous crocheted items. They achieved 100% participation in OB trainings and workshops in 2009.

At the leadership assembly, they were honored with a diploma of recognition and an incentive prize where they could choose a day trip from a variety of places of interest in Guatemala like ruin sites, hot springs, a tour in Antigua, the city zoo, and others. Much to our

surprise in the end, the women chose to go to an amusement park (that also included a zoo.) The group of 14 women and the OB staff set off for a day on an adventure together. Having never experienced this kind of activity before in their life, the women entered the park with trepidation, but as the day progressed they were having so much fun, they didn't want to leave. One of the women said to me, can you get us a hotel room somewhere, we want to keep playing! Congratulations Xeabaj! We shall see who next years winner will be...

Collaborative Projects

Como Foundation (www.como.bz) Sewing Program. Two of our four sewing groups have completed the final phase of their sewing classes. Using our new monitoring tool, we have assessed that about 75% of the women from these two groups are able to sew quality products.

Although the classes have ended, the practice will not stop here. Our fieldworker has assigned homework that she will monitor on her monthly visits. She requires each of the participants to sew a new product every month so that the women continue to improve the skills they've learned. The San Rafael and Vasconcelos/Los Morales groups have completed the 3rd phase, Chirijquiac will finish at the end of April and Patanatik, who got a late start, will complete the final phase in May. Their motivation was reinforced when all of the groups sold several of their new sewn products at the international women's day celebration.

In our last report, we informed that there were complaints regarding the machines. Since then we have sent in a professional sewer/instructor to evaluate the situation. He discovered that the problems were not so much problems with the machines but rather the fabric. When the women used thicker fabric, the machine would take a beating. He suggested that in order for the machines to have a longer life, the women should only use the zigzag machines for thin to medium fabrics, and an industrial machine for the thicker fabric. This is a problem in considering producing products using thick woven Guatemalan fabrics, although other opportunities exist. The groups are currently discussing whether they would take out a loan to buy an industrial machine for the group to meet this need. Patanatik wants to focus on machine embroidered products.

Building a NEST Loan Program: The four groups, approximately 80 women, participating in the NEST (www.buildanest.com) pay-back-with-products loan program have one more delivery scheduled for the year 2010. Each group weaves one specific design, NEST then makes them into products such as tote bags, journals, and purses. An order was just sent in January and the final order is due in August of 2010. NEST recently sent the groups a new design so that they could diversify their product line.

We expect NEST will continue to be a resource for the women in a variety of ways. They have expressed interest in ordering products to market outside of the loan pay-back, with particular interest in natural dye products. In addition, NEST may be able to provide work for some of the sewing groups once their products are up to quality standards. Finally, they are creating a product development curriculum which will be offered to OB to facilitate trainings to our member groups.

Community Visits

Group Administration Part III: Division of Responsibilities: This quarter we completed community visits with 16 groups on the third part of our group administration series entitled "Division of Responsibilities." This workshop suggests that in addition to having boards, the

groups assign individuals or teams that are in charge of specific responsibilities so that not only a few are taking on the burden of all the tasks. While each group decides what positions to assign depending on their specific needs, OB provides a list of suggestions and the duties involved. For instance, the positions include members in charge of coordinating quality control, product delivery, materials (distribution and purchase), new designs, new markets, group fund management, new products, and internal group rules. This workshop builds on each woman's capacity, as the members select the best woman or women for the job. The training has been well received as the groups appreciate learning new ways to improve their organization and income possibilities.

These series of workshops seek self-management of our member groups, in other words, helping the groups to decrease the level of dependency they have on outside organizations for their existence so that they are autonomous and sustainable. In our recent annual evaluation, the women have expressed immense gratitude for these workshops as they are clarifying what needs to happen for the groups to grow and evolve and reach their vision. The final workshop, in the series of four, covers group fund management and inversion of funds.

Special Projects:

Nimacabaj: New Group Formation. Some of the members of the Nimacabaj group have displayed a growing level of discontent and lack of motivation. It took some time to determine the cause of the problem but in the end, we assessed that since some of the women's husbands were showing up for the workshops and dominating the discussions, some of the participants felt uncomfortable about talking openly. We discovered that the majority of the group decision making was coming from the men. Since OB's mission is essentially based around women's empowerment, we decided to give the group an ultimatum; OB would continue with the group if only women participated in the community workshops. The men could find other ways to be supportive of the women in their daily lives. With that, we offered them a series of workshops this year on self-esteem, gender, and leadership. The women voted individually and confidentially whether they wished to continue given this arrangement. A little over half the group (6 women) was enthusiastic about continuing, which was not quite enough, so we suggested they recruit new members in order to have at least 10 participants in total.

In January, we returned to the community and the women had formed a new group and signed a year contract with OB. In March, our fieldworker returned for the first workshop on self-esteem. She said the difference was striking. The women spoke out, made decisions, laughed, and played. There are now 12 members, 6 new members. They expressed interest in producing a new product for the group. After the self-esteem workshop, we taught them how to make jam with ayote, a local squash that grows wild in the area. Customarily, local growers would only use the seeds of the squash and then throw out the rest. OB provided them with a recipe for making jam using the squash so as to take advantage of a local resource, with very low material costs. They were thrilled to have obtained this new knowledge and skill. We look forward to monitoring this group's progress since these recent big changes.

Chuacruz: Forming an Association. OB is excited to announce that Chuacruz recently finished the administrative paperwork of forming an association which gives the group legal status in Guatemala and signifies one of the final steps to functioning independently. The association is called "Asociacion para el Desarrollo Waqxaq' Kan" which is the 8th day of the Mayan Calendar, "weaving day." Chuacruz is a group that's been together since just after the war, originally formed by widows. They have undergone many changes since then and have developed in leaps and bounds over the past few years, including obtaining several markets, both local and

international, their products are of high quality, and they are functioning well democratically. Rumor has it they may even be the first group to graduate from OB!

Mohair: Introduction to New Products/Fibers. The purpose of our recent visit by a couple, Sandi and Howie Young, was to find weavers and spinners who can work with mohair. They have worked with a group in Mexico and are interested in extending their efforts to Guatemala. At home, they raise their own angora goats; Sandi then spins the yarn, and weaves it into beautiful, high-end products. Their main objective for coming to us was to find groups who could spin the yarn since Sandi herself is finding it impossible to fill all the yarn orders she receives. Since only a handful of weavers still have this skill, mostly the older women and men, we instead took advantage of Sandi and Howie's knowledge and skills to see what other opportunities could exist for the women.

They visited four of our groups showing samples of the yarn as well as final products and pictures of the goats. Mostly the women were fascinated by the high quality and softness of the yarn and of course they loved the precious goats. In one of the groups, some women know how to spin. The other groups are more interested in weaving the products. Of course, there are several difficulties in the logistics of importing/exporting the mohair. On the other hand, Sandi has a lot of skills to offer including dyeing, spinning, weaving, working with different fibers, and animal husbandry, all of which she is happy to share in anyway that's useful. In the next few months we will discuss the viability of creating a project around any of what we learned. Sandi and Howie, thanks for sharing with us!

New Group Development: In March, three of our six new groups San Antonio, Cajola (weavers and sewers), and Xeabaj II, have completed their year contract with OB. At the end of March, we hired an outside consultant to evaluate each group's progress in order for both the group and OB to decide on continuance of our programs and the terms and conditions. Although we are still processing the information, it is reported that all three of the groups have expressed a strong desire to continue with OB. The community facilitator assigned to each of the groups will provide her recommendations on how to proceed. Each group has evolved in very different ways, bringing their own set of challenges.

San Antonio has been the most motivated and successful in a very short period of time. They are making and selling natural shampoo's and soaps and would like to continue with a series of workshops over two months on learning to make bamboo baskets. Recent OB workshops included labeling, calculating prices, and exhibiting. They now have their own logo and official name for their group, Nuevo Amanecer, translated as New Dawn.

Xeabaj II has been OB's greatest challenge. The group has the highest level of poverty and the greatest needs but also, a severe lack of motivation. We are currently discussing new strategies for intervening with this group. In the evaluation the women mention wanting to raise chickens and pigs and make laundry soap. But instead of just giving them what they want, we will need to assess how to have a strong impact on the group and conduct a thorough analysis of how their productivity can be sustainable.

Cajola (Weavers and Sewers) demonstrated in the evaluation how they have benefited greatly from OB workshops especially in the area of group organization. The two Cajola women's group (also the chicken farm), and the entire community of Cajola, have been supported by the organization Grupo Cajola (www.grupodecajola.org) for many years. Grupo Cajola like Oxlajuj B'atz' is also a project of the Maya Educational Foundation (www.mayaedufound.org). If OB were to continue working with these groups, we would need to come to an agreement with Grupo Cajola so that our objectives are in sync and so as not to duplicate efforts.

Our other two new groups in process, **Totonicapan and Chimaltenango**, are continuing workshops in group organization and leadership skills. They both demonstrate motivation and a clear desire to continue to develop and grow. Their evaluations are scheduled for August and September.

OB in Progress

- **Organizational Assessment Workshop.** We began the new year with a two day organizational assessment workshop held by an experienced Guatemalan organization, Vision Representaciones y Servicios. Participants included personnel from Mayan Hands, Maya Traditions, Sharing the Dream, Maya Educational Foundation, FEPMaya, and the OB staff. This two-day event was incredibly valuable in considering the future of OB. It covered the basics, i.e. where we are now, where we want to be, and what we need to do to get there. One of the methods used in the workshop was a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. After reviewing the 35 page report delivered by the organization, we broke down our greatest areas in need of improvement into three categories; strategic planning, development and new recruitment of the local Board of Directors, and internal team strengthening. At our follow-up meeting, we organized committee's to work specifically in these areas. Our work is currently progressing.
- **Development and Fundraising.** Our Development Coordinator, Maya Moore, recently left OB to continue a project she started, previous to working with us, in Madagascar, Africa. We wish to thank Maya for initiating several new activities for OB's development, including but not limited to, social networking, website maintenance, our volunteer program, designing a powerpoint presentation, writing grants, articles, and our newsletter. We are especially grateful for her hard work on the International Women's Day Celebration Exhibition. The event benefited OB significantly in terms of our local exposure. Thank you Maya and good luck!

At the same time, we wish to welcome to the OB team, Andrea Branchaud, who is taking on the new position of Director of Development and Monitoring & Evaluation. Andrea was working as a consultant for OB in developing a system of monitoring and evaluation. She will continue the implementation and improvement of that system as well as spearhead our future development plans. Andrea's years of experience in these areas are a valuable asset to the future of OB. Welcome Andrea!

We are currently working on a long term development plan that will coincide with our strategic plan. The future of OB includes a capital campaign to move OB to a new location in a historical building in the center of Panajachel. Our intention is to create a cultural center including a store, daily tours to communities, a resource center, artistry or weaving demonstrations and much more.

A huge thanks to our continuing donors, John Prybot and Jayne Kulman for your recent donations. Also to those of you who donated to our Facebook Cause as well as those 14 individuals who bought rugs and included additional contributions for the OB project. Finally, a warm thanks to Guisela Asensio from the Maya Educational Foundation for helping to design and translate our new brochure, now available in both English and Spanish.

We would also to express our deepest gratitude to all our guest speakers, volunteers, and local businesses who contributed in making our International Women's Day event a big success. They include Rosalina Tuyuc, Rosalina Tay, Eva Tecun, Olga

Reiche, Teresa Cordon, Teresa Gomez, Redes Juveniles, Grupo Toca Toca, Sin Telon, Malini Thalhammer, Simone Riddle, Margarita Texaj, Andrea Branchaud, Wendy Minder, Ling Tan and friends, Liz Miller & Andre Mello, Kristin Helker & John Leonard, Marcelle Renkin, Andrea Caballeros, Chalo's Grocery, Banco G&T, Sandra's Market, Marios's Tours, Pizzeria Ulsan, Restaurante Chinita's, Pana Super, Salsariel Guatemala, Gasper, Hotel Isla Verde, Jennifer Kip, To'ik, Deva Prema Designs, Las Pitayas, Crossroads Café, Mayan Hands, Maya Traditions, OB community facilitators Hilda Mendoza Lopez, Maria Chiroy and Ana Lucia Chavez, and last but not least, Nancy Cosme and Maya Moore for their tireless efforts in organizing the event.

- **Annual Group Evaluations:** OB contracted Maria Victoria Flores, a professor and licensed social worker, to conduct our 2009 annual evaluation and a 2010 baseline evaluation with OB's participating groups. The evaluation provides us with evidence based data showing the success of our programs as well as where to improve for the future. Word from the majority of the women is that they still love OB! Lucky for us!
- **Wish List:** Thank you to our friend and supporter Deborah Becker for donating a used Dell computer. OB is still in need of an LCD projector to show presentations of our work, and two desktop computers for our growing staff and volunteers.

Ramona Kirschenman
Project Director
April 5, 2010