

Trip to Oaxaca

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Introduction: I have been to Oaxaca a number of times as a tourist. It was there, through the Guelaguetza festival (which brings dance troupes from all over Oaxaca to a beautiful outdoor festival celebrating the many different indigenous cultures and languages of Oaxaca) that my interest in the lives of these people began ten years ago. My own background as a labor organizer and social justice advocate drew me to appreciate the difficult lives of the thousands of Mixtec immigrants arriving in Oxnard, California, where I live, to work in the agricultural fields. My work as a Family Nurse Practitioner in a rural county clinic brought me into direct and intimate contact with Mixtec families.

The Mixtec are the third largest indigenous group in Mexico today, numbering some 383,000 people. Mixtec culture has existed for 2,800 years, the height of its power achieved in around 500 AD. Before the Spanish Conquest, Mixtec were known for their fine metalworking, pottery and the extensive and important codical manuscripts, which provide extensive pictographic representation of every aspect of the Mixtec culture. The extensive Spanish conquest in the 1500s wiped out 90 percent of the Mixtec population. The portion that survived was pushed to the mountainous regions of western Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Puebla.

In January 2001, we formed the Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project, to aid and empower the Oaxacan immigrant community in our area, which is overwhelmingly Mixtec in origin. In the past three years, over 1,000 Oaxacan immigrants have participated in community meetings, literacy classes, health fairs, our annual Christmas party, and other activities. Many Oaxacan immigrants are taking leadership roles on the Project's Board of Directors and in the various programs. This year, I decided that I needed to see the Mixteca region for myself. I needed to understand why so many people would travel 3,000 miles to a completely alien culture where they would live in extreme poverty and be exploited not only by Anglo society but by Mexican-born foremen, landlords, and shopkeepers as well. So I badgered my friend and Mixteco interpreter Catalina Navarrete until she agreed to accompany me on a one-week trip, which would include the town of San Martín Peras, from which many of our members come.

We tried to do some advance groundwork with the local municipal administration. Getting through by phone was difficult, but we did send a fax stating when and why we were coming. We also started encouraging people in our community meetings to write or dictate letters and get their pictures taken so that we could make contacts with their families there. We got a few names and requests, but not as many as I expected. I later realized this was because no one believed

we were actually going to their village. About a week before we were to leave, a groundswell of families started showing up at the clinic to get their pictures taken, request documents, send messages, etc.

It was also difficult to get information about the area. One example gives the picture. After many Google searches, I finally found a website, Juxtlahuaca.com (the district seat) which had a listing of the municipalities. One of these was San Martín Peras with a “click on the municipality desired” button. Other municipalities brought up lots of good information, but clicking on San Martín Peras brought a blank. This experience was repeated in countless little ways when planning for the trip. It was as if the area has just been forgotten, or perhaps never existed. The people of San Martín Peras seemed to be just as hidden in Oaxaca as they were in Oxnard. So we set out with very limited expectations, but an eagerness to try. The following are my informal notes from the trip.

My heart races as we finally approach San Martín Peras, home of the “Cloud People.” This is a place few “Americans” can even visualize, much less visit. It took two airplanes and most of the day to reach Oaxaca City (a place I once found exotic), and where I was first thrilled by visiting the surrounding indigenous artisan villages.

From Oaxaca City, we located a local bus company, and rode five hours through first good, then terrible roads to Juxtlahuaca. Juxtlahuaca is a vibrant city of 20,000, a central market where twenty types of dried chile, hundreds of varieties of local vegetables, along with a hefty dose of sandals and audiotapes go on sale twice every week in a massive out-door market which serves the entire district. The smells, the tastes of the locally prepared foods, the huipiles and rebozon sale at prices far below those in Oaxaca City, the chilena music, the cuechetes (firecrackers, announcing mass) enticed us to stay for hours.

I am the only *guerra* (or Anglo) in sight. It’s a fascinating experience, to be at 5’5” one of the tallest people in town, and clearly an outsider. But everyone smiles, as I am walking and talking with my Oaxacan friend and companion Catalina, who clearly is “one of them.” Cata buys a huge bag of dried chiles, which we will carry on our backs for the next week. “Don’t they sell chiles in Oxnard?” I ask. My friend patiently explains that these are “costeñas,” having an entirely different flavor which is unobtainable in California.

Finally, we find a driver willing to make the drive over questionable roads to San Martín Peras, home of the several thousand Mixteco immigrants now working and trying to survive in Oxnard, California. Their village is situated on a steep hillside at 9,000 feet. The area is extremely beautiful, but soil erosion is evident everywhere. The UN has classified the Mixteca as one of the most severely eroded places on earth. This has been going on for centuries, begun when the Spanish conquest introduced hooved animals destroying the delicate hillside balance, and hastened by the marginalization of the population to an ever smaller area and the deforestation of the area by lumber companies in the 20th century.

The roads are terrible, curving, muddy. The driver charges us only \$20 (even though the trip has taken over two and a half hours and he is unlikely to find a return rider), and drops us in front of the church, far and away the largest and best maintained building in town. On the other side of the church is the “*agencia*,” or government building. A half dozen men are sitting or standing in front of this building, though nothing much seems to be happening here.

These men tell us the story of San Martín Peras. There are no jobs, and what usable land there is for their crops is far from the village. They are able to grow less than one-quarter of the beans, corn and squash which form the majority of their diet. Everything else must be purchased at

one of the tiny local tiendas or in the market at Juxtlahuaca. Few of the adults speak Spanish, unless they have spent time working in the U.S. or elsewhere in Mexico. Basically, the families are completely dependent on whatever their sons, daughters or husbands are able to send them from the U.S. Water is drawn from a questionable well, or from the river, which is not close and not really safe. The government distributes a type of salt at the Clinic to purify the water, but it is only used irregularly. Most of the houses are grey cinder block, one story, 3–4 rooms with a semi-enclosed outdoor kitchen. There is an outdoor toilet, which is flushed by pouring in a bucket of water.

One is struck immediately by the number of children every-where. Many, many of those in the U.S. have left children behind with other family members. In the house where we stayed, there were ten children ranging from infants to twelve-year-olds. These included the family's own children, and grandchildren from three other children. The family unit was the husband and wife, their two mothers, a daughter, a daughter-in-law and the ten children. In most houses, people sleep on the dirt floor on straw mats called petates. There is little furniture—some plastic chairs and a small table. The homes we were in did have electricity, usually one or two bare bulbs and a television set. Some people are a little better off. I spent some time in the home of a friend and former patient who was fifteen when she had her first baby in the U.S. and worked the fields both before and after, then came back with her husband and child last year “to rest.” She has her interior walls painted, a cement floor, and several pieces of furniture. They will return to the U.S. in a few months, after her second child is born. Most houses have metal doors and roof.

There are many dogs around, but no one seems to pay any attention to them. There are surprisingly few other animals.

The first day, we found three of the families we were looking for. (People don't really have addresses, and often don't know each other by name, unless they are directly related.) Each of these families, and all those to whom we eventually talked, graciously invited us into their homes, gave us cold sodas, and offered to feed and house us. Without exception, they were warm and kind and thankful for the news and pictures we brought. They cried and laughed and shared with us their stories of how difficult things are for them, without any hint of self-pity. I was puzzled by the cold sodas, as it didn't seem as if folks would have refrigerators. What happens is that, as soon as a visitor arrives, a young child runs to the store and brings back refrescos. My most lasting image of this day was a 3 year old boy, living with his aunt and uncle. We had given him a photo of his parents, and Cata explained to him who these people were. He stared at the photo for a good 15 minutes without a word, then left with it still clutched in his hand.

Dinner that night was an enormous piece of beef in a spicy consommé with hot tortillas. I wondered if this represented a week's or a month's worth of meat for the family, but of course I could not refuse the hospitality. Though I don't normally eat beef, it was delicious. As our house didn't have doors, it was a little cold at night, but we had a big warm blanket and slept well.

The next day, we arose bright and early, determined to do a better job of finding our families. We returned to the town building, hoping to find the president. The men said he wasn't there yet, but pointed out where he lived, so we walked to his house. His wife said he was still asleep, having been out late, but that she would let him know we were there. Back at the square, people were becoming more interested in us, as word started to get around that we were OK. I finally got smart enough to start showing photos, instead of just asking for people by name. Things started to really open up, as folks volunteered to go find so-and-so's cousin/brother/mother/grandfather and tell them we had a photo for them.

Around 11 a.m., the president arrived in his brand-new black truck. (No one else seemed to have a personal vehicle.) He spoke good Spanish, and we were able to communicate some of the needs of those living in Oxnard, like being able to obtain birth records, as well as our desire to establish some ongoing communication between our two cities. He was friendly, and offered to take us to see the schools. At the Primaria, they were having graduation ceremonies which were fun to watch. Afterward, the director showed us around, emphasizing the tremendous need they have for better class-rooms. The kids have to use broken-down desks situated in puddles of water. The students were eager and very well-behaved, the teachers seemed sincere and caring. There seemed to be several hundred kids in this school. There was a bilingual Mixteco/Spanish text, although it's not clear how much it's actually used. Understandably, the educators' focus seems to be on teaching Spanish, which they know the kids will need to succeed outside their own village.

The second school we visited was called the "Migrant school." Again, I was puzzled. Surely there were no immigrants in San Martín Peras. The teacher explained to us that this school (which seemed to be smaller and even more poorly equipped) was for the kids who would be leaving with their parents during the year, "to help them get ready." I wasn't able to make sense of the two-tiered system. But again, the teacher seemed caring and the kids seemed happy.

Our next stop was the preschool, which was also having its end of the year ceremonies. Seeing all the little five-year-old girls in sparkling white dance dresses was a stark contrast with the state of most kids' regular clothes. Apparently, there is no tuition to attend the pre-school, although families are asked to make contributions. The regular schools are free, as are books, (though many families who live in outlying "ranchos" have no access to schools.) Parents are only required to buy a uniform. There is no secondary school. When one completes primary school at age twelve, it's time to go to work, which usually means leaving to go to other parts of Mexico or the U.S.

Having completed our tour of the schools, we returned to the town center, where a bunch of people were waiting for us. Word had now definitely gotten out, and we spent the next six hours talking to families, writing down their relatives' names and taking photos. People were much more open and confident here in their own setting than they are in Oxnard. One older woman looked me in the eye and spoke to me at length in Mixteco. Cata told me afterward that she was thanking me for coming, bringing news, and taking their images back to their children.

I asked two people how the president of their pueblo was selected. Neither knew. They said they didn't vote, although Cata thinks there is a vote which the people just don't know about. We also asked a number of women about their feelings regarding birth control. All said they would be eager to have away to prevent having more babies, but that services weren't available. They said the one clinic was there just to vaccinate the kids, a process which involved many hours of waiting around on the given day. There is no prenatal care, and babies are delivered at home by local midwives or parteras. The closest medical care is in Juxtlahuaca. Several women told us of their babies dying on the way when they had complications such as breech delivery.

At about 7:30 p.m., our "Mom" came and practically dragged us home to eat. We had a wonderful plate of beans and tortillas. We finally had a chance to take photos of this great family who had taken care of us, and to share some of their stories. People continued to show up at the house to talk to us. Even after we had gotten into bed at 9:30, an elderly gentleman arrived. He apologized, but had been working up on the mountain all day, and had just gotten home and found out we had been looking for him. His son had asked for us to bring back his birth certificate (we

brought back four in all),so this man agreed to meet us at 4:30 the next morning when our bus would leave.

Sure enough, our gentleman was waiting for us at 4:30 a.m.,birth certificate in hand. I took a picture of the church (I had forgotten to take any scenery shots, and the church had lights), we said our goodbyes and loaded the maximum number of people possible into a large van. Thursday and Friday are “Market Days” in Juxtlahuaca, so many people would be going to buy their goods. Along this route, we passed some of the villages of other people we knew. There seemed to be considerable variation between pueblos in how well off they seemed to be—the number of animals and fields, the type of housing, etc. Cata and the taxi driver talked about a pueblo in the area which was very wealthy,with a hotel and an elevator.

We stopped in the town of San Francisco Higos. It is tiny—just a few blocks long. Most of the people of this village had emigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s, and had been able to obtain legal residency in the 1987 amnesty through their employers. Eventually, they were able to obtain legal residency for their children, as well. While still poor, they are clearly doing a lot better than the people of San Martín Peras. People are able to travel back and forth legally (and therefore much less expensively). The “Agente” and his assistant were very friendly, showed us around their new common building including a “meeting room.” They had space to put a clinic, but explained that the town could not afford to support a nurse to staff it. They said they received no support from the Mexican government. We visited the school here, as well. When we asked who had relatives in Oxnard, they all raised their hands. They giggled as I taught them a few words of English and spoke my best six phrases of Mixteco.

We had a terrific cup of hot chocolate in the beautiful out-door kitchen of a lovely woman who is the mother of one of my patients. She had a pretty little garden with some flowers, corn and squash, and a lemon tree. She also had a flush toilet (with a seat!). She is a widow with just one child left at home, and several working in the U.S.

Back in Juxtlahuaca, we found the mother of one of our community members, thanks to the local postman who happened to be riding by on his bicycle. (There are addresses in this town, but not house numbers, and lots of people don’t know the names of the streets.) This woman’s husband is also in the U.S., and she hadn’t heard from either one of them in months. It was a very emotional meeting. We spent the night at an inexpensive hotel right near the Zocalo. It was really noisy, but the shower water was hot and a bed felt great.

The next morning, we were up early again, to catch the bus back to Oaxaca. We amused ourselves with topics ranging from the conquest of Mexico and the role of the Catholic church to views on gay marriages. Cata told me many stories of her family life. One that impressed me deeply involved her grandmother at the river, reciting to the various gods of rain, corn, sun, etc. The prayers were remarkably similar to those of native Americans, talking about how they planned to respect and protect the earth, to use only what they needed, and to live in harmony with other creatures.

Back in the U.S., we repeated the process of finding families, giving photos and messages and talking about our trip. I see this community with new eyes. How there is really no option but to marry and leave by age fifteen. To ride in buses, trucks or walk for weeks to months to reach an area where they can find jobs. To risk the expensive and extremely dangerous border crossing to look for a place called “Oxnard” where there may be seasonal jobs picking strawberries. To endure hard-ships and humiliations unimaginable to people born in the United States. To live in

crowded shacks and eat only beans so that there will be some money to send to families back in Oaxaca. To dream of some day reuniting with family and community.

Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project was formed to try to fill the gap created by the relocation so many Mixtec workers to the Oxnard area. It is an attempt to build on a tradition of communal ownership and community service (el téquio) in recreating a community here in the U.S. This community strives to instill pride and joyousness in the Mixtec culture and language. It provides material and educational assistance to hundreds of people trying to survive in a new culture. And most importantly, it creates a community network of communication and cooperation which can help insure the survival and success of the Mixtec people.

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