

Youth Building Democracy: September 2010 CCR Youth Assembly

Since the end of the summer delegation season, I have continued to deepen my understanding of and appreciation for SHARE's work. I have had several opportunities to visit some of SHARE's counterparts, and see their processes of organizing. I particularly enjoyed attending a regional youth assembly in Arcatao, Chalatenango, organized by the CCR, one of CRIPDES' regional offices. Over 200 youth ages fifteen to thirty filled the community center with clapping, laughter, and encouragement. Well designed to keep the youth engaged, the assembly included brief talks on the current national reality and the history of organizing in Chalatenango, a skit about migration presented by a local youth theatre group, an academic competition, and *dinámicas* throughout.



Facilitators and presenters often wove in reminders of the roots and reality of organizing in Chalatenango, while maintaining the focus on youth as the light of the present and future. The Assembly opened with the national anthem and the anthem of unity: *El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido*. A moment of silence followed to remember all of the students who have died and all migrants currently trying to make their way to the United States. Milton Monge, a representative of the local government in Arcatao, began his brief address stressing the need for doctors, nurses, future mayors and legislators, engineers, priests, nuns, and agronomists. At the same time he called on the youth to remember all those that deserved to be present at the assembly, but continue disappeared since the time of the war. Similarly, at the close of her brief analysis on the current moment in El Salvador, María Ofelia Navarrete, Vice Governor of Chalatenango, spoke of her daughter who died during the 1980s. Her daughter wanted very badly to finish sixth grade, but was not able to. María encouraged the students to study hard not so much because of their scholarships, but for those who were not able to go to school.

In their skit entitled *American Dream: Emigration*, local youth depicted various Salvadoran individuals and families talking in their every day Salvadoran slang, making the hard decision of what to do following the loss of a job and the loss of the bean crop. In one family a friend suggested that the father go to “The North.” His wife and daughter begged him to stay, but he maintained his resolve to leave, find a job, and send them money. Eventually a group of eight migrants formed. Each shared his or her dream - “I’ll buy the newest model of car.” “You’ll see me in the movies soon.” “I’ll be rich, because they say they throw away money there.” Their coyote only shook his head and said, “You’re daydreaming, the lot of you.” Along the way they jumped on to a train, crossed a river, ran out of food, and ran afoul of *la migra*. At the end just three made it across the border and went their separate ways.



The youth particularly enjoyed the academic competition. Current CCR Youth Coordinator Lucio Cruz Anaya divided the youth into four teams based on the regions they hail from. Each team chose a representative to answer questions on their behalf. One young leader had prepared five questions

in six different subjects: science, English, math, history, language arts, and organizing work. Each team could switch representatives between subjects. Correct answers won ten points, while incorrect answers deducted ten. Each team cheered on their representative with deafening shouts and whistles as they vied to raise their hands first and answer the questions. Silence reigned only at the moments when youth ventured their answers.



One youth answered all the questions from the math section and a self-conscious grin spread across his face.

In the afternoon came my favorite part: elections for three candidates to serve as the new CCR Youth Coordinator for the next two years. Various youth stood up to nominate each other, pointing out Idalia's various leadership qualities, or how hard César had worked as part of his community council. Each time an individual

was nominated, everyone would turn to see what his or her reply would be. Idalia declared, "I accept because I like to work with youth, I get along well with everyone, and I consider myself a leader." César responded, "If the assembly chooses me, I would be happy to serve." Loud shouts and clapping bounced off the plain concrete walls. However, when Alex declared, "It is an honor to be nominated, but I am currently very dedicated to a project in my community, and will not have the necessary time to give," everyone cried, "Awwww."

Once the youth had nominated six individuals from amongst themselves, everyone had a chance to vote. As an impartial individual I had the privilege to serve as part of the electoral committee and helped tally the votes. At the end, three highly motivated youth, César, Idalia, and Salvador, graciously accepted their election as candidates. In late October the final round of voting will be held, with the opportunity for all community members to participate.

During the return ride packed into the back of a pick-up, I asked one young woman if she liked the assembly and the way that the voting was facilitated. She said, "Yes, because everyone has a chance to share his or her opinion." A true example of democracy. The assembly beautifully illustrated the value, love, and investment that the CCR and the communities of Chalaténango place on their young people.

