



HOOPS in the News

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Ambassadors of the Playground

By Sylvia Moreno / Photos by Sarah L. Voisin

Two vans stuffed with tall, gangly teenagers, oversize suitcases and boxes of basketballs wend sluggishly westward from the Guatemala City airport on a muggy summer night, the riders seeing this new world through the prism of the one they just left.

"This looks like Georgetown," says 17-year-old Max Costa as the van he rides in passes a few blocks of small shops and boutiques.

Moments later, whoops and hollers greet the sight of a Wendy's, one of several fast-food restaurants on the outskirts of the capital.

"This looks like the Adams Morgan part of town," Max announces excitedly, as they pass strip malls punctuated with neon signs and billboards advertising a Burger King and a Domino's Pizza. "That's straight, joe!"

They get to the ancient and picturesque city of Antigua close to midnight, and as they stroll the historic streets, their minds are fixed on things such as finding a burger or a hip-hop disco. They encounter neither.

They are more than 3,000 miles from home -- in body, perhaps, not in spirit. This trip is supposed to show them that there's so much beyond the 'hood, but they're still looking for home.

The ancient colonial arch in Antigua is compared to McDonald's. They look at stunning examples of centuries-old Spanish architecture and Antonio "Biggie" Dupree, 18, asks:

"Is that a church? That's big, dog!" His friends call him Biggie because he looks like one of their idols, the late rapper Notorious B.I.G. -- except Biggie has a baby face and a soft voice.

He walks through a small plaza lined by grand 16th-century ruins -- convents and churches toppled in 1773 by an earthquake that forever changed the face of this former

Central American capital. But looking at the massive stone walls with small, high-set windows, Biggie says, "Imagine what it would be like to be in one of these Guatemala jails."

That night was the first in a three-week journey to the lush highlands of western Guatemala, a country of spectacular beauty and stark oppression, poverty and hunger. Group members came to play hoops, but they had been told they would do much, much more.

These African American teenagers -- nine from the District, two from Montgomery County -- were to see some of the country's most cherished sites, take Spanish classes, conduct daily basketball clinics for Mayan children and repair basketball courts for a poor, mountainside school.

They had come as representatives of Hoops Sagrado (Sacred Hoops), a fledgling nonprofit group whose leader hoped that such an experience would instill leadership skills and a sense of community service in disadvantaged youths through playing and coaching basketball. For the players, it was a free trip, a chance to get out of Washington, to see things, to enjoy themselves. Their leader had a grander mission in mind.

Bryan Weaver founded Hoops Sagrado in 1996 after his first visit to Guatemala, when he was struck by the role that hardscrabble basketball courts played as social centers of indigenous Mayan villages. He returned in 1999, bringing one of the African American kids whom he coached in youth leagues in Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights. Last year, he brought three. He was convinced that African American and Mayan kids could learn valuable lessons from each other. They are unlike racially, culturally and linguistically, but they face the same problems of bigotry, street violence and relegation to the margins of their societies.

Bryan expected members of his group to grow in self-confidence from coaching kids and to realize that they were not alone with their problems -- that others might have even harder lives. And the Mayan youngsters, he figured, would benefit from the court moves his players could teach and be inspired to strive for more in their lives than a sixth-grade education and recycling the meager lives of their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. To help the Mayan kids, **Bryan** also started a scholarship program to help keep girls in school past sixth grade, when free public education ends in most indigenous villages, unlike in the cities, which get enough resources to pay for public education through 12th grade.

He figured that this -- the third summer of the program -- would be pivotal.

He had joined forces with directors of the Shiloh Development Community, a teenage mentoring project in Columbia Heights, and with the addition of the Shiloh group was bringing the largest number of players yet to Guatemala: 11. He had included two girls, hoping that they would serve as role models for the Mayan girls who also would turn out for the basketball clinics.

There were preparatory meetings, with Bryan telling the players about Guatemala's indigenous Mayan community and urging them to heed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s challenge: "The most urgent and pressing question in life is what are you doing for others."

He was focused on lofty ideals and aspirations. But the players -- including one young man who, despite two previous trips with him to Guatemala, was still fighting the lure of the street -- presented the kind of mundane and vexing problems that young people sometimes exhibit: Stubbornness. Laziness. Lack of common sense. Failure to think through the consequences of their

actions. Anger. Indifference to other people and their problems.

The oldest and the veteran of these trips was Sean Thomas, 23, who in his mid-teens was sent to a drug boot camp and was slowly realizing that he needed to break out of Adams Morgan to straighten out his life. He was flashy and street smart but erratic -- just like one of his favorite ballplayers, former Sacramento Kings point guard Jason Williams. Sean wore his Williams jersey in Antigua and tried out the little Spanish he remembered from his two previous summers in Guatemala: *Vamos, chicas*. "Let's go, girls."

The first female Hoops Sagrado volunteer, 16-year-old Carrie Sartin -- a tall, thin Sheryl Swoopes wannabe, walked the cobblestone roads of Antigua that first night, carrying "Mr. Whiskers," a black and white stuffed cat she had brought along. "They have rocks as streets," she said later.

The guys also included Clayton Mitchell, a brash 18-year-old, who walked through Antigua's empty and peaceful central plaza at midnight, pausing for a moment to advise the others: "Enjoy the night. You can't do this in D.C."

Dwayne Crossgill, 18, knew that. An all-around athlete, Dwayne ran track and played football and basketball. He longed for opportunities to get out of the District. He thought that there was more to life than the view from his second-story apartment in Columbia Heights, where he lives with his mother. There, drug dealers stand on stoops and push their wares. Dwayne had heard the occasional gunshot. He had attended more than one friend's funeral.

"Living in D.C., I realize there's a lot of bad in the world, a lot of crime," he said before he left for Guatemala. "It's good to see there's other ways of life."

Bryan eventually found out -- the hard way -- that teenagers who don't know each other don't magically get along and that even the most well-meaning adult counselors can clash. He later realized that his charges were not as prepared as they should have been about the culture and mores of Guatemala, about how to talk, act and dress in a vastly different culture. And he also discovered how hard it can be to persuade a teenager that behavior or dress that is acceptable in Washington could easily be offensive or provocative in a Mayan village.

But those lessons came later.

Bryan had brought with him the autobiography "I, Rigoberta Menchu," and a few days after the group got to Guatemala, he asked Sean to read to the group a paragraph from Chapter 1, in hopes of setting the right tone for the trip. Menchu is a Mayan who grew up not far from where the Hoops Sagrado team was headed.

During Guatemala's 37-year civil war, as she tells the story, members of her family were raped and killed, like hundreds of thousands of Mayan Indians. Menchu, living in exile in Mexico, won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her work in promoting social justice and human rights for Guatemala's indigenous people. The work has been criticized for exaggeration and misstatements, although it has also been widely praised as an accurate portrait of what it was like in Guatemala in those years.

Menchu was Sean's age, 23, when she told the story of her life, a narrative that turned into the book. So Bryan hoped the words would resonate with him, as well as the others as they embarked upon their journey into the Mayan world:

"I'd like to stress it's not only my life. It's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well," Sean read haltingly.

"The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people, too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people."

But that first night, Menchu's world was far removed from these young people, armed with their headphones and gangsta rap and hip-hop CDs. Their T-shirts bore the slogans: "Thug Life" and "Scarface," "Kids and Guns Don't Mix" and "Sexy." And on their feet they wore the equivalent of what could pay for several school scholarships for Mayan children: silver Nike Solo Flights and black patent-toe Air Jordans; leather Reeboks and New Balance cross-trainers.

What they did share with many Mayan children wasn't so obvious: broken homes, families wracked by alcohol or substance abuse, apathy and discrimination.

Daily, the Hoops Sagrado team would travel a road up a mountain to get to the village of Xecam and the basketball clinics. It was a strain, up a steep and gutted road,

marked by hairpin curves and treacherous cliffs.

But the real effort, it turned out, would come from within. The road from Washington to Guatemala and back was marked by tears, turmoil, anger, doubt and misunderstanding.

Dwayne's favorite T-shirt was imprinted with the words of a Swahili slogan that bore the prophecy for this group. "Life has meaning only in the struggles," it read. "Victory or defeat is in the hands of the gods. So let us celebrate the struggles."

There were plenty of struggles ahead.

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Arriving with Baggage

By Sylvia Moreno, Washington Post Staff Writer

On a cool, misty Monday afternoon, the Hoops Sagrado group finally arrived in Xecam, climbing a narrow, rocky road on a rickety bus into the mountains of Guatemala's western highlands. The bus, packed with produce and people coming home from the market in Quetzaltenango, dropped them off about a quarter-mile from the village center, where they would conduct their basketball clinics. They set out along a dirt path that cut through tall, green stalks of corn.

Their trek through a sketchy fog that hovered low on the verdant mountain was an easy one compared with the span of emotion and countryside they had traversed to get there. Now, after some of the predictably awkward -- sometimes painful -- time they had spent getting used to each other, they searched for the school where they would spend their next 17 days with Mayan children.

They had traveled many miles over unfamiliar terrain, through a country and culture that were alien to them; this road was one they would become accustomed to. They would travel to Xecam every afternoon and head back by dusk to Quetzaltenango, locally known by its Mayan name, Xela, where they stayed with local families at night and attended Spanish classes in the morning.

This first day in Xecam, all wore their bright-red Hoops Sagrado T-shirts, which depicted Don Quixote handing Sancho Panza a basketball. The shirts said, "Una gente, una lucha" (One people, one struggle). But the players hardly seemed to be from the same planet as the locals they passed.

Tiny Mayan women, baskets on their heads and babies strapped across their backs, paused to stare. These visitors were huge -- several well over 6 feet tall and some as heavy as 250 pounds. They had black skin, and the female players wore tight capri pants. They spoke loudly, and their hair quickly became a source of fascination.

"Que es eso?" -- What is that? -- Mayan

children asked over and over as they fingered thick, loose dreadlocks. Or, "Como hizo esto?" -- How did you make this? -- they asked as they tugged at tight rows of braids.

When the group arrived at the Xecam school, teachers and children greeted their Washington visitors warmly and serenaded them with the national anthems of Guatemala and the United States. As they took the court, whatever barriers existed melted away. Here, the kids communicated through basketball.

Sean Thomas, 23, stood in front of his pint-size charges and pointed to his eyes as a signal to watch him demonstrate side-to-side and front-to-back defensive moves. Next, he had them run wind sprints.

Carrie Sartin, 16, who plays for the women's basketball team at Cardozo High School, dribbled up and back, and her little girls, in their traditional ankle-length Mayan skirts and brightly embroidered blouses, ran as fast as they could behind her, not always successful in keeping their new basketballs under control.

Ray Williams, 17, of Ashton, set his boys in two lines facing each other and yelled one of the few words he remembered from high school Spanish: "Mira! Mira!" -- Look! Look! -- as he demonstrated a chest pass, then a bounce pass.

For the Mayan children, this was certainly not work, and it was anything but typical after-school play. It was a luxury. Their school has no computers or cafeteria, and the building didn't get bathrooms until last year. Sixty percent of the children who start at the Xecam school don't make it to sixth grade; they drop out to work. Of those who stay, perhaps only 10 percent go to junior high because free public education in rural villages in Guatemala ends with primary school. The children have never had a structured play period or physical education teacher. This planned leisure, for them, was an exotic experience.

School and play are forced out of the lives of many Mayan families by the struggle to survive. Children as young as 7 are put to work by families whose incomes average 800 quetzales, about \$ 100, a month. That, to feed seven to 14 people.

Those children who work are like third-grader Israel Colop Yacabalquej, who spends his afternoons climbing nearby mountains, machete in hand to cut tree branches for firewood. The scrawny, 50-pound 10-year-old carries half or more of his body weight in wood by tying it with rope to a mecapal, a band of cloth strapped around his head, which takes the brunt of the heavy load. But his father gave him a two-week reprieve from the mountain work, and he joyfully attended the basketball clinics, becoming a devotee of Sean's.

The afternoon basketball clinics also served as a respite for 10-year-old Domingo Estrada Salanic. He had just returned to school after missing two weeks to help build his family's new house. The impoverished Estrada family was lucky enough to win a lottery for a cinder-block house subsidized by Habitat for Humanity. But there was a sweat-equity requirement; someone from the family had to help Habitat carpenters and masons build the house.

Because Domingo's parents, like many adults in Xecam, are alcoholics, the task fell to the children. Domingo served as the bricklayer's assistant, while his 18-year-old brother worked to help the family, which includes five other children, begin paying off the \$ 1,500 cost of the house.

The success of the basketball clinics was a hopeful sign in a journey that had been beset by attitude problems among the teenagers, contrasting leadership styles from the adults and long meetings to sort out behavior.

The problems had begun before the group arrived in Guatemala. When the group was making a tight flight connection in Houston, Clayton Mitchell, 18, of the District, had loudly threatened to start kicking people

who were blocking the aisle on the airplane.

That led to the first of what would be many group meetings to address attitudes. At that first meeting, Takisha Williams, one of the sponsors, got to the point.

“All the cursing. . . . That doesn’t represent this group and what we came to do,” she said. Then she let Clayton and the rest know what her expectations were:

“You’re representing your whole group. You’re representing your race. You’re representing Washington, D.C. You’re representing Adams Morgan,” she said. “We want to leave nothing but positive examples here.”

Warren Reece, co-director with Takisha of the teenage mentoring project Shiloh Development Community, said: “This is supposed to be about building communities and bridges and relationships with people who are a lot less fortunate than us. But we can’t help others if we can’t help ourselves.”

Clayton was unrepentant, saying he was brought up to say what is on his mind. “I don’t have no cut cards,” he said. Others in the group didn’t like the reprimand either, retreating into their headphones, shrugging off spectacular panoramas as their bus chugged toward Quetzaltenango.

The first few straighten-up-your-attitude meetings went nowhere and sometimes seemed to harden the kids’ indifference to the purpose of the trip. Finally, though, Bryan Weaver, founder of Hoops Sagrado, who likes to play the nice guy and finds it hard to confront his kids about misbehavior, and Warren, who has no problem going head-to-head with his kids, came up with an assignment.

They called the exercise “Sing for Your Supper,” an attempt to get the kids to concentrate on their goals -- and on their surroundings, too -- and to get them to share their aspirations with each other. By the time they arrived in Panajachel, on their way to Quetzaltenango, Bryan and Warren were holding their breath to see whether their plan would work.

In a tiny, open-air restaurant where a three-course supper costs 25 quetzales, less than \$ 3.25, these tough young men who refer to each other as “dog,” “nigga” and “Joe,” bared their souls and revealed some of their innermost wounds and fears.

Sean, at 23 the oldest of the Hoops Sagrado volunteers, sat at one end of a long, narrow table and started off. He was the first in the Hoops Sagrado cultural exchange project.

This was his third trip to Guatemala and, still, he was struggling to get his life together.

He had often talked about his days as a crack-cocaine dealer in the District; at 13, he was sentenced to 4 1/2 years in a juvenile boot camp in Texas. Sean recited the gangsta rap song “Time Taker,” the same piece, he said, he recited at his mother’s funeral in 1995.

It’s all the same and I can’t change time

An example of a young nigga trapped and his brain’s dying.

He dedicated this trip to his friend Bai Secka, who expressed interest in May in going to Guatemala just to get out of the ‘hood for a while. Within days, Secka was gunned down in a drive-by shooting while standing near 17th and Euclid streets NW in the heart of Adams Morgan.

“I ain’t never got a chance to really tell my man goodbye,” said Sean, who graduated from Dunbar High School in 1997 at age 20 and has five children and an occasional short-lived job.

Dwayne Crossgill, 18, spoke in slow, earnest tones, and the group grew even more somber. “My biggest fear is I won’t succeed and disappoint my mother,” he said. “Sometimes its hard for me to do certain things because I’m always thinking about what’ll happen if I don’t do well. But I’m going to continue to try.”

Dwayne’s mother has pinned her American dream on him. She is Jamaican, a single mother with back-to-back hotel chambermaid jobs to support the two of them.

All eyes then turned to Naeem Hargrove, 16.

Naeem, prone to mumbling in half-sentences, brought everyone to tears, reciting a poem he had written as the sun rose over Lake Atitlan.

It spoke of humiliation:

Even though the teachers say I wasn’t gonna make it, even after years and years of hard work . . . my life was still going.

It told of the pain of not meeting his father until he was 12 and the shame he felt for not being a good athlete. He spoke of his mother’s fear that the ‘hood would suck him in and about being invisible to society:

“Even though I walk the fine line of life, I still must keep my head up.

That wasn’t the only time the kids and the counselors cried in the restaurant or reached

out to hug others that night. Bad-boy Clayton sobbed as he talked about his mother’s death in 1999. Ray, 17, read from a poem he had written that day:

I understand one person can make a difference, and I’m trying to make an immeasurable impact in this one-time life sentence.

I know I’m not another name on an insignificant list.

Their meals of pan-fried chicken or sauteed beef were cold by the time they stopped talking. But the warmth generated by this soul-baring session seemed worth it.

The intimacy, though, did not last. The trip lurched from one meeting to another, and the sessions continued when the group got to Xecam, despite the success of the basketball clinics. There was too much staying out in clubs, too much sleeping through Spanish classes.

“We gotta pull this together,” Bryan pleaded at one meeting.

By the end of the second week in Quetzaltenango, he saw a crisis in the making. The group had been invited to lunch at the home of a family in Xecam. It was a gesture of appreciation to Bryan and Hoops Sagrado for funding small scholarships that allowed nine Mayan girls to continue into seventh grade. The families had no money to buy a thank-you gift, but they did grow corn and beans. They were eager to sacrifice some of their precious food.

Bryan was worried because the players had complained about the local food and didn’t show much interest in Mayan culture. They tended to return to their music when they weren’t on the court with the kids. He called another meeting:

“I would rather someone pass on the opportunity than go and do something disrespectful. . . . I don’t want to be in the position of feeling like I have to apologize for the behavior of someone who was invited into their house,” he told the group.

Warren warned: “You’re not in D.C. How you act is a direct representation of how they see your people. You’re carrying on. . . . You have no regard for them. You’re acting like gangsters . . . negative stereotypes. There’s got to be something else you’re excited about except music.”

All the players went to the lunch. On the bus, Bryan and Warren hoped their words had penetrated.

Friction Follows Warm Welcome

By Sylvia Moreno, Washington Post Staff Writer

The lunch -- small, plump tamales of cornmeal, each wrapped in a cornstalk leaf, and a salty stew of homegrown fava beans -- was served by the Xecam villagers.

Nine Mayan women, whose daughters receive small Hoops Sagrado scholarships that enable them to stay in school after sixth grade, had gathered at the house of Andrea Colop at 7 that morning. Each tamal had to be hand-molded out of cornmeal, and the wood stove inside had to be stoked to keep the stew simmering. Comida de campo, country food, one of the scholarship girls called it.

Outside the three-room, tin-roofed house, small fires burned, heating water for coffee. Outdoor fires for cooking are common here; there are no gas or electric stoves. There is no lavatory either, but the women -- a rainbow in their traditional multihued long skirts, aprons and embroidered blouses -- put out a bowl of warm water for their visitors to rinse their hands before eating.

They had all contributed bowls, cups and flatware from their homes to Dona Andrea because this was such a large group. And they mustered enough money to add meat to the bean stew -- a treat reserved for fiestas and other special occasions. Few families in Xecam can afford meat or chicken.

Neither the women nor their daughters ate in front of the guests from Washington. They were there to wait on them.

Before the visitors could eat, Candida Belinda Cochojil Garcia, a 14-year-old scholarship recipient, asked for a moment of silence. Overcome, she broke down in tears as she said grace in Spanish.

"Thank you, God, for allowing us to be together with our friends. Thank you, dear God, for this very special day. Bless all the food . . . and our loving mothers. Bless us, dear Father."

The teenagers representing Hoops Sagrado sat packed around a long wooden table, listening solemnly and eyeing the

stew suspiciously. But they had gotten their orders from the adults before coming to the lunch. No rejecting the food. No horseplay. No public displays of affection. No CD players. No tuning out.

For more than an hour, they sat quietly, and most ate the stew and drank the sweetened coffee. Then they went outside to watch the scholarship girls and one of their mothers perform Mayan dances in their honor. The group applauded warmly. The participants might feel invisible back home in Washington, but here, they were treated like royalty.

The girls gave each Hoops Sagrado member the best present they had to offer: freshly picked apples and plums from the trees outside Dona Andrea's house. The mothers even managed to cajole some of the boys into learning a little Mayan two-step.

The mood had been unusually quiet. Contributing to that had been an announcement by Warren Reece before leaving for the lunch: He said he was on the verge of sending Max Costa home. Max had been chronically late for Spanish class, dozing through some lessons, and he was flagging at the basketball clinics. "I don't see Max making any effort," Warren said, adding that Max would have to earn the chance to stay with Hoops Sagrado or be put on a plane home.

The combination of threat and entreaty did the trick. Max was goaded into action and within days had worked his way clear of being sent home.

But the girls, Carrie Sartin and LaShawn Merryweather, left a week early at their own insistence.

Carrie, a power forward on the Cardozo High School girls basketball team, came to Central America to play and teach. Bryan Weaver, Hoops Sagrado's founder, had been especially interested in getting girls to come as examples to the Mayan girls who crowded the basketball clinics. "Basketball's my life," Carrie said. "That's what I want to do

when I grow up, hopefully."

LaShawn had tagged along. She's Carrie's "road dog" -- best friend. The trip was free to the students, and besides, LaShawn reasoned, it would look good on her resumé when she applied to college. She found an atlas and located Guatemala. An experience of a lifetime, LaShawn thought.

But a week before the trip ended, the two were on a plane back to Washington, at their insistence. The adults had their concerns: One of the girls got involved with one of the boys, and neither girl paid enough attention to their Spanish lessons and both skipped some scheduled trips and basketball games.

The girls also had their complaints. But what drove them to leave was their encounter with a foreign and conservative macho culture that they were unwilling to adjust to and that they found threatening and insulting.

It started one night when they and some of the guys were hanging out at a corner liquor store that doubles as a saloon, mostly for men. Wearing tight, skimpy tops and short-shorts into such a place can send the wrong message to locals, who are used to seeing women in ankle-length skirts and high-necked blouses.

As the kids walked out of the saloon, a man patted LaShawn on the rear. She turned and slapped him and punched him in the stomach. The boys, just ahead of her, turned back, fueling a faceoff. There was plenty of menacing, but no punches were thrown. However, Guatemalan police, called by the bar owner and patrons, stopped four of the boys later that night and, brandishing assault weapons, demanded to see their passports.

Two nights later, the girls and a couple of the guys were stopped and asked for their passports again. Carrie and LaShawn were angry and scared. And they weren't ready to see that they might have been sending the wrong message in a world that is different from theirs. What they saw, they said, was a case of sexual assault. And they were angry

at the adults for seeing the incident in the saloon as anything else.

The adults called yet another meeting.

The girls were unmoved.

“I don’t want to be here,” Carrie said. “I want to be out of here.”

“Me, too,” LaShawn said. “What can we do about this? Nothing.”

For two weeks, Bryan, Warren, Takisha Williams and other counselors had urged them to remember where they were and the purpose of their mission. They were in a different culture, and they needed to bear in mind the history of where they were.

Guatemala is a country that ended 36 years of civil war only five years ago with a peace accord, Bryan told them. The country has two forms of justice and a history of racism and oppression against the majority indigenous population. The police didn’t need excuses to stop the kids. Just being who they are -- black and tall, often talking loudly and walking in a group and sometimes dressed in a way that locals might find provocative -- was enough to make them stand out in Guatemala, the adults said.

On this chilly night, the group gathered in a park gazebo for the meeting. But the girls refused to be drawn into the discussion and angrily turned their backs on the rest of the circle. Clayton Mitchell, who had taken their side, at first hung his head sullenly. The counselors urged the entire group to examine its actions and figure out what part each member might be playing to draw police attention and how each could change that. This time, though, the counselors didn’t have to do all the talking. Some of the teenagers spoke up, too.

“You think there’s a bubble around you,” Ray Williams said to the girls and Clayton.

But Clayton repeated what he and a few of the others had said before: “Why do I have to give up where I came from and what I love? Why do I have to give up rap?” he asked.

“Nobody said stop doing something . . . but start doing something,” Ray said.

“I ain’t no Guatemalan,” Clayton replied. “I do not eat tacos off the street.”

Sean Thomas tried to bring the conversation back to Bryan’s admonition. “As long as you are here, you are a part of this country.”

The girls said they wanted no more of the

trip; they wanted out as soon as possible. They shrugged off counselors who wanted them to discuss the situation. So the adults escorted them to the airport two days later.

Counselor Sasha Samberg-Champion acknowledged: “We didn’t prepare well for this, because we didn’t anticipate people not being interested in things or these behavioral problems.”

Then the counselors took a deep breath. One week left.

Mixing Lessons with Love

By Sylvia Moreno, Washington Post Staff Writer

The last week was not untroubled, and some conflict erupted between the Adams Morgan kids and the kids whom Warren Reece had brought. But the last of the confrontational meetings melted into a surprising spirit of cooperation in the last three days in Xecam. The basketball clinics were winding down, and the group began the last phase of the Hoops Sagrado project: sprucing up the basketball court and replacing the backboards.

The hard manual work and some off-court time with the Mayan kids seemed to turn the mood upbeat. The boys hauled buckets of red, black and yellow paint up to the school, along with hoops, nets and wooden backboards. They swept the dusty concrete of the outdoor court, then painted the baselines and box lines black, and filled in the keys with bright red. The backboards were painted yellow, then mounted on the poles, and the rims were attached.

When the village kids, many of whom had been attending the clinics, were let out of school at 1 p.m., they gathered in gaggles here and there around the court, watching the painting or yelling "Amigo! Amigo!" at the boys to get their attention.

Clayton Mitchell asked 10-year-old Israel Colop Yacabalquej, one of the most enthusiastic kids at the clinics, to lie on the ground and stretch his arms and legs as if he were running. The resulting outline looked like something out of "Homicide," with its requisite murder-victim-fell-here crime scene. Then Biggie Dupree, Max Costa and Clayton painted a yellow jersey, black shorts, socks and sneakers on the body and an Afro on the head. Now it was Israel -- or any other Xecam child -- playing ball.

On the opposite side of the court, one of the teachers sketched the outline of Guatemala's long-tailed national bird, the quetzal. This was no ordinary green quetzal, the bird's natural color. Lacking green paint, the Hoops Sagrado team painted it a bright canary yellow.

Max, Clayton, Biggie and Dwayne Crossgill outlined the block letters X-E-C-A-M in black on two sides of the court and then filled them in with red. Warren suggested painting a huge red and black basketball in the center of the court.

Standing outside his classroom, which opens onto the basketball court, kindergarten teacher Angel Vasquez watched from the sidelines as the Hoops Sagrado members got down on their knees to paint.

Vasquez had been to a few of the afternoon basketball clinics the week before, watching the teenagers take their little charges through practice layups and cross-over and behind-the-back dribbling drills. The Washington group had even adapted the schoolyard tag game Duck, Duck, Goose into a dribbling exercise.

All of this had given the children of Xecam an opportunity to learn a sport and to participate in organized recreation. But in the long term, the cultural exchange means so much more, Vasquez said.

"There may be many people who say blacks and whites are different, but maybe the children will come to understand that we are all human beings," he said. "These children probably think the Washington teenagers are from another world. But through this friendship, they can realize we are all the same."

Before they left Xecam, the youths went into the classrooms for a final encounter with the children. Until two years ago, the school consisted of only three crumbling classrooms, mainly because Xecam has been marginalized by the central government, as are many of the indigenous villages in Guatemala. The village got a two-story school building two years ago with the aid of the Netherlands, which donated \$ 16,350 toward its construction. The school is a rustic collection of concrete rooms filled with battered wooden desks and chairs -- no insulation, no heat, no air conditioning, no lights and no real playground -- but it's a school.

The children warmly greeted the teenagers as they walked into their classrooms. "Buenos dias!" (Good morning), they said. "Pase adelante." (Please come in.) The boys, in turn, taught a little English. They counted. They recited the ABCs and parts of the body. For two weeks, they had been the students at language school in Quetzaltenango, and now they enjoyed the other side of the desk.

"Como se dice pelo?" Naem Hargrove asked a class of first-graders as he rubbed his head.

"Hair," he said.

"Hair!" they shouted in unison.

Although Biggie didn't speak much Spanish during the trip, he made up for it. "Sientate, por favor! Sientate!" (Sit down, please! Sit down!), he said over and over as his kindergartners jumped out of their desks and threw paper airplanes around the room -- the airplanes he and Darren Bradley had just taught them to make.

"No mas! No mas! No mas!" he pleaded. (No more!)

Clayton, who was team teaching with Ray Williams, began his vocabulary lesson with one of his favorite words: "dog." That's what he and his friends call each other. Too hard to explain perro in that context. On to the next word.

On the blackboard, Clayton wrote, "Cat."

"Cat es gato," Ray said.

Sean Thomas -- who learned to read in his mid-teens when he was doing time at a Texas boot camp on a drug-dealing charge -- hit several classrooms, teaching the alphabet, numbers and even simple addition in English. He ended his classes with a bit of sign language he picked up from a music video. "I love you," he said with his fingers. "I love you," the children mimicked back.

That was Sean at his best -- engaged with children on the court or in the classroom, far from Adams Morgan, his destructive anger and the lure of the street. Bryan Weaver calls

the 'hood Sean's greatest vice and often says he would like to leave Sean working at the school in Xecam for about six months.

"You've got to take this back to the United States," Bryan told him during the trip. "You're missing your calling, and the noise consumes you."

The teachers and students gave the Hoops Sagrado team a send-off befitting celebrities, with speeches, songs, folk dances and gifts of embroidered woven textiles and local fruit.

"It doesn't matter when you can come back; the doors of the school are always open to you," said fourth-grade teacher Jose Rolando Salanic Perez. "The doors to Xecam are always open to you."

At last, the teenagers' hearts were also open to the people of Xecam.

"It's their sweetness and their patience . . .," Max said. "But especially their love. They're all smart kids; I can see that. And they have courage, as far as not having much."

For more than two weeks, the poor children of Xecam had made these boys feel loved and important and blessed in many ways. The children come from a Mayan culture that demands they labor in the fields or in textile factories from a very young age. In this two-week respite of basketball clinics, the children mobbed their Washington visitors daily with affection, holding their hands, asking for hugs or peppering them with questions about where they were from or why they were so tall.

If only, Sean fantasized, he could hit the lottery big-time. He would then take care of the children of Xecam.

"I'm crying every day on the inside for them. When we about to leave, kids run up and give me a hug, say adios. And they keep doing it and keep doing it. If I could, I would take them home," he said.

"If I won Powerball for \$ 150 million, I would give half of it to that school to get them a PE teacher, an official basketball court, a new school, new clothes for the kids," Sean said. "Why is it that I got to come a thousand miles from home to feel appreciated?"

Bryan and the other adult counselors had hoped Guatemala would be a life-changing experience for the Hoops Sagrado kids. They would find out later whether it had stuck.

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Returning Home to New Realizations

By Sylvia Moreno, Washington Post Staff Writer

The Hoops Sagrado contingent landed in Washington on a hot and muggy night, grumpy from a long day of travel and missed connections but happy and relieved to be home. They were, now, off the roller coaster of their Guatemala adventure. The ride had been fun, but it had been difficult and challenging. And it felt weird to be the objects of constant curiosity because of their height or the color of their skin or the texture of their hair.

They had gotten angry and they had argued vehemently, but they had laughed together, too. They had made some sacrifices, but they had been rewarded.

Bryan Weaver created the Hoops Sagrado project in 1999 with Tito Morales Sam, the co-founder of a language school in Quetzaltenango called Centro Maya de Idiomas. The school teaches Spanish and the native language of the region, Maya Quiche. It was at Centro Maya that Bryan took an immersion Spanish course in 1996 and got to know Morales, dubbing him "Mayan Jordan" for his indigenous roots and his moves on the basketball court.

Morales's passion is devising projects to improve the educational opportunities for indigenous children who, as he did, have to fight institutional racism and endemic poverty to get ahead. To help achieve that goal, Morales persuaded Bryan to establish the modest Hoops Sagrado scholarship program that helped nine Xecam girls go to junior high school this year.

Bryan and his board raised money from individuals and companies, winning a grant from the Ben & Jerry's Foundation and getting athletic shoes from Fleet Feet in Adams Morgan and basketball equipment from the Atlanta Hawks and the Washington Wizards, among others, to give to the children of Xecam.

Morales pushed the idea because he is convinced that many visitors to the western highlands of Guatemala will be touched by the conditions they see and be moved to get

involved with the indigenous community -- as Bryan was. But Morales is practical, too.

Speaking of the Hoops Sagrado teenagers before they returned to Washington, Morales said: "I think the most important thing they can take with them is the experience they have with the children at the school and their families. One way or the other, they will leave with a different spirit, a changed spirit, even if the changes won't be rapid."

Already, there has been some evidence.

Naeem Hargrove called one of his Hispanic friends in Adams Morgan, where he lives, to try out some newly learned words; he is taking Spanish I this year. Herbert Scott plans to propose to the staff of his high school, the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, an educational and cultural exchange trip for students and teachers to Guatemala.

Ray Williams, who comes from a multiracial background, looked back on the trip and said: "You gain a part of yourself when you visit a different place. Even if I don't have Hispanic in me, I feel a part of Guatemala.

"The fact they opened up their hearts to us the way they did. They didn't even know us and they respected us," he said. "The way they treated us -- that was priceless."

Such an appreciation was Bryan's goal. "I hope we've started to open our hearts to this culture so we understand what this country is all about," he said the night of their last dinner together in Guatemala, at a Chinese restaurant in Quetzaltenango.

Bryan had predicted from the outset that the Washington kids were likely to get much more from the children of Xecam -- who showered them with affection and treated them with respect -- than the other way around.

"This is a poor mountain village, but it's like they're rich out here," Max Costa

said a couple of days before the group left Guatemala.

For teenagers whose happiness or status often depends on wearing pricey sneakers or the right designer label, it was humbling to see smiling children wearing tattered clothes and shoes with the toes cut out or the backs slashed open to accommodate growing feet.

The experience made the Aug. 1 debut of Nike's \$160 Air Flightposite III seem much less important. "I saw the shoes in November of last year on the computer, and I thought, 'I have to have them,' " Dwayne Crossgill, 18, said. "I'm sort of glad I was in Guatemala when they came out."

After seeing and working with the children of Xecam, he said: "I definitely realize I need to take advantage of opportunities I'm afforded at home. I want to make sure I don't do something stupid because I'm sure a lot of these kids would love to change places with me. And I know if they had the opportunity, they'd work hard for it -- harder than me. So that should keep me focused."

Antonio "Biggie" Dupree also said that he came to realize during the trip that happiness is relative. "All I got to think about is the kids down here and how they're living."

Sean Thomas, urged repeatedly by Hoops Sagrado counselors to stop hanging out in Adams Morgan and get a full-time job, came back to Washington trying to refocus his energy. He applied for a year-long on-the-job training program offered by Americorps.

In a poem he titled "Still I Rise," he wrote the story of his life while he was in Guatemala:

"The life of A Thug want to change But
Tha streets of D.C. is All I know Lord please
help me on the wrong path want to get off
don't know how. . . . on my way to Guatemala
to try to Grab hold of my life. . . ."

But Americorps didn't accept him and told him to reapply in several months. Bryan urged him not to be discouraged, but Sean saw it as one more piece in a puzzle of rejection and failure. He has been drifting in the 'hood since then.

The young women have not been in contact with the group since they left Guatemala.

Clayton Mitchell, 18, said he saw that his behavior -- what he calls "playing with people" -- may have unintended effects on those around him. "I'm getting better," he said. "I hope it continues."

It was hard to be called lazy -- as Max was by Warren Reece, one of the trip's sponsors, who threatened to send him back early for slacking off -- but he said he thinks he now understands the value of "putting 100 percent into whatever I do."

"I want everything to fall in my lap," he said a few days before the group left Guatemala.

"I don't want to go to school. I need to learn to work hard so I won't be on the street. I'm in the comfort zone, basically. I need to step out of the comfort zone, and I did here."

Takisha Williams, one of the sponsors, hopes that such sentiments will last and that the kids returned with a greater appreciation for having a sense of purpose in life. "You can't just float through," she told them more than once in Guatemala.

Warren said he hoped the kids understood that his criticism of their behavior was made in their best interests.

"I want to cultivate the uniqueness in all of them so they become critical thinkers . . . so they can grow and blossom into beautiful flowers," he said. "They're all special people, and some of them need more help than others. The issue becomes: Are you willing to accept the help that you need?"

Despite moments of conflict and tension, Bryan believes the trip to Guatemala was beneficial to all the kids -- from the affection and respect they received from the teachers and children of Xecam to the personal growth he saw in them all.

This, Bryan said, is particularly important for African American kids, who may be more quickly mistrusted or disrespected.

"Here's a group of Americans who go down, and these kids pour their hearts out

to them, and you can't help but be touched," Bryan said.

"If this experience gives them a sort of place to buoy from or to judge the world beyond their neighborhood, then this trip has been a monumental success."