



An Ignatian Partnership

» OUR PURPOSE

Belize 2020 is a non-profit volunteer organization focused on improving the quality of life in Belize by supporting Jesuit ministries in that country. Our initial emphasis is on education which we believe is the most enduring solution to the problems of drug-gang violence, unemployment, forced immigration and family instability.

SLU Graduates First Education Fellowship Recipients

Among the hundreds of graduates declared “sons and daughters of Saint Louis University forever” during the school’s Spring 2017 commencement were two women with big plans to improve education in Belize. Melissa Mendez Valladares and Rosita Rose Mes earned graduate degrees from SLU’s School of Education this May. A partner in the Belize 2020 effort, SLU provides two full-tuition fellowships per year to qualified educators seeking graduate degrees in special education, early-childhood education, educational leadership, and other areas of serious need in Belize. Mendez and Mes are the first to receive the fellowships. Their living arrangements and expenses during their two years of study in St. Louis were largely covered through donated furnishings, and other Belize 2020 fundraising activities.

Mendez and Mes are now back in Belize and ready to apply what they learned both in and outside the classroom. Here’s what they had to say about their SLU education and their plans to make a difference their communities:

PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.

MM: I was born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. I came to Belize in 2008 for the first time and decided to stay and live here. I now live in Belize City. My husband and I are both educators and we love traveling. For me, it is fascinating to learn about new cultures and how a person’s culture influences their thoughts and views.

RM: I am the second child born to a family of eight. I grew up in a small village in the southern district of Belize where I enjoyed and still love outdoor activities such as hiking and fishing. Growing up, I dreamed of becoming an educated person and being able to travel places. I fell in love with environmental science and pursued my associate degree in natural resources management. However, my dad, who was an educator, inspired me to change career direction to education and I went on to complete my undergraduate studies in primary education.



Graduate: Melissa Dilieth Méndez Valladares
Degree earned: Doctorate in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in early childhood education

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Trauma Counseling Program Stretches to Meet Demand

“Everyday.” That’s what the little girl said when asked if she feared whether another gang shooting would happen. This child is a student at St. Martin De Porres in Belize City.

She’s not alone. More than 75 percent of the St. Martin’s students in standards 3 through 6 (equivalent to U.S. elementary grades 5 through 8) who participated in a screening for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had experienced a traumatic event in their young lives. The most common traumatic events cited by students in the study were gang violence, community violence, bereavement, domestic violence, physical abuse, and witnessing a dead body.

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WHAT WAS YOUR JOB BEFORE ATTENDING SLU?

MM: Since 2012, I have been working as a teacher educator at St. John's College Junior College, a semi-private Jesuit institution equivalent to a community college in the United States. I am an instructor in the primary and early childhood programs of the Education and Theology Department where our aim is to train current and prospective teachers so that they will be more effective and efficient in the classroom.

RM: For the last four years, I have been a teaching vice principal at Our Lady of Fatima Roman Catholic School, an elementary school in the Cayo District. I started there as an assistant teacher and have taught there for a total of 11 years.

DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCES WHILE AT SLU. WHAT STANDS OUT?

MM: SLU gave me one of the most rewarding experiences as a student, not only academically, but also emotionally. Although it was my first time living in the United States, I never felt lonely. I met so many wonderful people and made good friends who became my extended family. The teachers at the Education School were exceptional and I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to meet and work with them.

RM: While attending SLU, I had opportunities to visit medical facilities to observe children with varying

abilities and discuss the impact on learning. I also had the chance to teach at different public and private elementary schools in St. Louis. There, I practiced applying the knowledge I gained, and observed teachers modeling different teaching strategies and their impact on students. One of my favorite experiences was the practicum experience. I was fortunate to be placed with a teacher who unselfishly dedicated her time to include me in as many activities as possible. I got to participate in RTI (response to intervention) and IEP

(individual education plan) meetings, resource room teaching, Special Olympics, and much more.

HOW DO YOU PLAN TO APPLY YOUR EDUCATION AND DEGREE IN BELIZE?

MM: Now that have gained the knowledge in early childhood, it is my responsibility to assist Belize as much as I can. At the moment, I am assisting our

Ministry of Education in the upgrading of the associate's program in early childhood education. In August of this year, the Ministry of Education is aiming at upgrading the preschool curriculum and I am hoping I will have the opportunity to assist in the process as well. At St. John's, I have started providing more rigorous and coherent courses for our student-teachers.

While doing my doctoral project at SLU, one of the challenges I found was the lack of literature in early childhood education in Belize. That difficulty made me realize that it is necessary to start writing and doing research. We are also in need of a preschool model to begin implementing teaching practices that are exclusively applicable to Belize and its culture.

RM: My experiences at SLU complemented what my courses and very supportive teachers and colleagues taught me. During this time, I also became a member of the Council for Exceptional Children, attending conferences, and learning from others in the same field. These are experiences and valuable tools that I need, and they will influence the goals I set for myself and career. They also will serve as a journey to reflect on and use to gather ideas as I venture back into the classroom this September. In gratitude, it is my hope to practice what I have learned and to share with other teachers the strategies that I have explored throughout the two years at SLU.

WHAT IS YOUR ULTIMATE CAREER GOAL?

MM: This is a difficult question to answer. My time at SLU, has given me a wider perspective on things, particularly in early childhood. My mind always wanders trying to figure out a way to accomplish so many projects and ideas, but all encompass early childhood and how I could help Belize to make the necessary changes; therefore, I think my ultimate goal is to help mold the young children in this beautiful country into productive citizens.

RM: My goal is to become a learning coach so I can impact more teachers, parents, and children.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

MM: Thank you to the Belize 2020 effort in the U.S. Without its assistance and continuous support, this dream could not have become a reality. Thank you to all the people who directly or indirectly gave me the opportunity to participate in such an amazing program to improve my professional skills and assist Belize.

RM: I can conclusively say that I had an amazing learning experience at Saint Louis University. I am thankful for all the support I got from Belize 2020 and SLU for the two wonderful years. ●



Graduate: Rosita Rose Mes
Degree earned: Master's degree in special education with an emphasis in learning disabilities

Donor Profile: John and Joan Vatterott

What is it like to interview John and Joan Vatterott? Think Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn in “The Philadelphia Story.” They share witty banter and tell amusing, insightful stories about each other. They smile often, laugh warmly, and flirt like a couple of 18-year-olds. That’s roughly how old John Vatterott and Joan Bayot were when they were “set up” by mutual friends. John was home for the holidays while attending Campion Jesuit High School, an all-boys boarding school in Prairie du Chien, Wis. The school has since closed, but the Vatterotts are still going strong! They’ve been married 50 years and are blessed with six children and 15 grandchildren.

It was at Campion Jesuit High that John first encountered the Jesuits, and his admiration for them continues. “The Jesuits get things done!” says John. “They take the long view and address the root cause of problems, and serve those most in need.”

One of the stories Joan likes to share is how each time John returns from a retreat at White House Jesuit Retreat in St. Louis, she asks him, “Okay, what is it that God said to you this time?” John recounts how during one retreat what God said led him to sell his business. John had started Urban Technical Centers, Inc. in 1969, providing training in the fields of business, technical, medical, and the trades. It expanded rapidly and eventually became known as Vatterott College.

John sold the business in 2003 and became more active in philanthropy.

Today, the Vatterotts support several charitable causes, many of which focus on breaking the cycle of poverty through education. In addition to Belize 2020, a few examples include Boys Hope Girls Hope, Loyola Academy St. Louis where John serves on the board, and the Guadalupe Center in Naples, Fla. As John explains, “I see our philanthropy as planting seeds. Joan and I do what

we can do to help others, but recognize this work can be difficult at times.”

John and Joan are co-founders of Belize 2020 and have invested considerable time and treasure in the effort, including programs to improve the lives of those living in and around St. Martin de Porres Parish in Belize City.

Fr. Matt Ruhl, SJ, pastor of St. Martin’s, has known John and Joan for seven years. “The Vatterott family is a gift from God!” he says. “They care deeply, act justly, and give freely so that we may assist families who have a multitude of problems. The parishioners at St. Martin’s are rich in faith and poor in economic opportunities. Many of our young people struggle with school and need special programming if they are to have any hope of succeeding in high school and college. John and Joan helped us establish Project HEAL to address these very issues and I am forever grateful to them.”



Project HEAL provides educational and counseling services to students and their families whose academic success may be threatened by trauma or other psychological impediments. In addition to donating the seed money, the Vatterotts have recruited more benefactors to keep the program sustainable.

You might think John and Joan have reached a point in their lives when they would slow down, but not so. On this day, they must wrap up the interview so they can go to work! They’re headed to Cedar Creek Conference Center, which was once the Vatterott farm. It’s now a destination site for meetings, weddings, and weekend getaways located on 130 scenic acres near New Haven, Mo., and John and Joan spend a considerable amount of time working there.

For the Vatterotts, it’s all about balance — faith, family, friends, work, philanthropy. It all goes together to make for a meaningful life and a fun ride! ●

“The Jesuits get things done! They take the long view and address the root cause of problems, and serve those most in need.”

–John Vatterott



Feeding Bodies and Minds: Gifts Boost School Feeding Program

THREE RECENT GIFTS are helping fuel a student feeding program at St. Martin De Porres primary school. Students at St. Martin's, which is situated in one of Belize City's poorest neighborhoods, face many challenges including hunger. Cash donations totaling US\$14,000 and a gift of a major new kitchen appliance will help sustain the seven-year old program that feeds nearly 100 students each day.

Sadly, hunger is one the most prominent obstacles hindering a child's learning process. On empty stomachs, kids don't have the energy to focus, engage, learn, and grow. They may fall asleep in school or lack the energy to pay attention to an entire day of classes. And children from families struggling with hunger may be more likely to repeat a grade in elementary school, experience developmental impairments in areas like language and motor skills, and have more social and behavioral problems.*

The students participating in St. Martin's feeding program receive a warm snack at morning recess and a hot meal at

lunch. The program provides well-balanced, nutritious meals that include fruits and vegetables, supplying the kids the healthy calories they need to carry out their school activities. Giving the feeding program a near-term boost are three generous gifts:

- US\$12,500 donation from the Rotary Club of West University in Houston, Tex. The club's gift will fund ingredients for meals and infrastructure upgrades to the kitchen and eating area. Club members visited St. Martin's late last year
- US\$1,500 anonymous donation from a local business in Belize City
- A brand new deep freezer provided by Courts, an appliance and furniture retailer in Belize City.

The gifts are an example of Belize 2020's vision in action — uniting people, businesses, and partners in Belize and the United States to build thriving societies committed to equality, compassion, and justice. ●

* Source: *The Borgen Project*

Swift Hall at the Finish Line

Swift Hall, the new multi-purpose space at St. Martin's, is ready to go! External and internal walls have been plastered and painted, sport court put in place, ceiling fans and lighting installed, bathrooms completed, and hardwood entrance doors mounted. The facility will be christened officially this fall.

Swift Hall is a place to engage the community's youth and hold parish functions, including weddings. The facility initially was designed as an open-air space with partial walls on two sides. After further consideration, full walls featuring windows and ventilation louvers will allow the space to be used in all weather conditions while providing air flow. The structure was funded completely through generous cash and in-kind gifts from donors and businesses in Belize and the United States.

A new round of critical fundraising is about to begin to pay for youth enrichment programs, equipment, and ongoing maintenance and operation of the building. The fundraising target for these efforts is US\$200,000. ●





TRAUMA COUNSELING CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

St. Martin's has served the south side of Belize City for more than 40 years. Today, the neighborhood is one of the most violent areas in all of Belize. Students diagnosed with PTSD can suffer from a wide range of ailments, including trouble sleeping, physical illness, disruptive behavior, delayed language ability, decreased memory, and decreased attention span.

The school's Project HEAL program provides professional counseling services to nearly 70 students, trying to tackle issues of grief and loss, anger management, and PTSD. The counseling primarily employs play therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy methods.

The results are encouraging. Students have been willing to participate in therapy and disciplinary incidents have declined. In addition, the school can more clearly identify whether a child's basic needs are being met at home and supplement where it can.

Thanks to a grant from the John and Charlene O'Shea Family Foundation of Houston, Project HEAL has been able to make counseling available to a greater number of children. Additional funding is needed to address growing demand and to allow for more thorough assessments, improved case management, access to counseling for additional children, and increased accessibility to psychiatric care when necessary. ●



The Project HEAL play room provides a friendly and welcoming environment for children receiving counseling services.

AREAS OF IMMEDIATE NEED

Belize 2020 is grateful for all support in our effort to link the wide-ranging needs of the Belizean people with educational and human resources that nurture spiritual, physical, academic, and economic health. The areas of most immediate need include:

- Counseling services, music and art, extended day and extended year programs for students
- Day care and preschool programs, which provide much needed early childhood learning opportunities
- Health and well-being assessments
- Youth enrichment programs
- Scholarships

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