

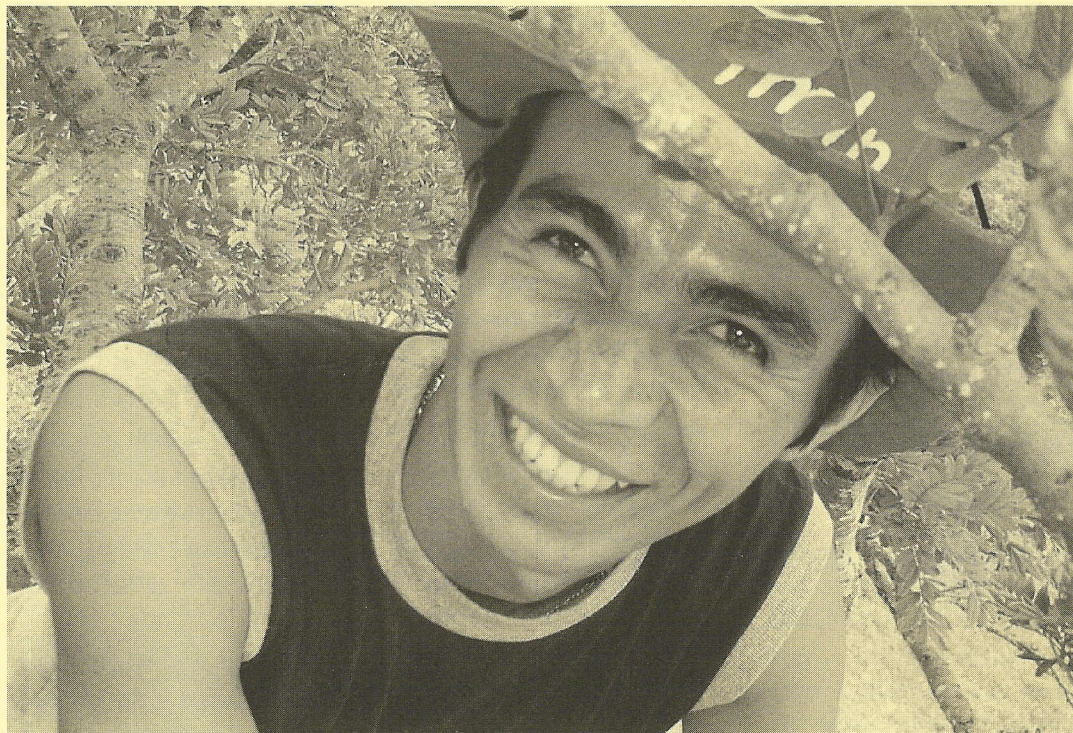
## First IP Community Leader Scholarship Awarded To Young Salvadoran Leaders

By Hannah Flamm

Noel is the kind of person IP was created to support, and his personal story makes our mission clear. As the first recipient of the Interna-

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tional Partners Community Leader Scholarship, Noel de Jesus Iraheta Vasquez, 23, will finally be able to finish high school this year. After that, he wants to attend university. Noel has been supporting his family of 5 since the age of 12 when "my father left and forgot about us." As a teenager, Noel worked in the fields earning \$60 a month and



*Noel de Jesus Iraheta Vasquez*

managed to stay in school until ninth grade. Eventually, he had to quit because it was too expensive and his family needed him to work. In 2000, with the support of OEF, a Salvadoran non-profit organization, he and his friend Elba (see next article) started a community preschool where he has been earning \$80 a month.

Noel has a contagious energy, is loved by our trip delegates, and is adored by the children in the preschool. He is hard working, talented, and a joy to be with.

He grew up questioning the Salvadoran "American Dream" of working in the United States and sending money home. Even though it was not enough to feed his family, the only work available was swinging a machete for \$3 a day in mountainous rows of corn and sugar cane—always hot and thirsty, with exhausted arms and an empty stomach. He wondered why families can't stay together rather than leave El Salvador.

Frustrated by politics in which their desperately poor

compañeros trade their votes for bribes of tin sheets to repair the roofs of their houses, Noel and Elba organized their neighbors and formed their community associa-

*continued on page 2*



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## First IP Scholarship awarded *continued from page 1*

tion. This helped them gain strength in dealing with the mayor of San Isidro, who has jurisdiction over Hacienda Vieja in the department of Cabañas. Their vision was that the 30 preschool children—who had to meet on the front porch of Elba's family house—would have a school. With hope, effort, and endurance, they acquired a site from the mayor and city council. The site—a multi-sloping dump located in the center of the village—was assumed to be worthless land. With the encouragement of OEF and IP, Noel and Elba drafted a plan.

The long-awaited dream became a reality in 2004 when Noel, Elba, and the community of Hacienda Vieja hosted an IP service trip delegation and started school construction. Now the preschool is built, furnished, decorated, and functioning. Noel has worked with Elba to lead this effort and has been the major laborer. Though they started with the dream of a preschool, they created the only community building in Hacienda Vieja. Today it is used for the preschool, youth gatherings, community meetings, training workshops from the ministry of health, and evening adult

literacy classes. Noel, also a gifted artist, is painting a mural on the school's outside wall facing the street where people first arrive in the community to say: "Welcome to Hacienda Vieja."

Thanks to their outstanding leadership, Noel and Elba were asked to serve as 2005 IP trip-project leaders in the village of Las Peñas. Noel agreed, "I appreciate the chance to help others the way IP helped us." Although his English is limited, his experience in building and in organizing, as well as his desire to do things right, work hard, and laugh, made the trip better for everyone.

When Paula Beckman and Don Montagna asked Noel and Elba about their personal dreams for the future, they were surprised by the question and requested time to think about it, "We had put away such questions because there were no opportunities. We thought our lives were set." Eventually both decided that what they wanted most was to return to school.

The IP delegates want to help Noel, Elba and others like them make the "American Dream" a possibility—in El Salvador. Delegates ask your help to raise the

necessary scholarship funds. For \$300 a month, Noel can earn his high school diploma in a one year accelerated program and provide a more reasonable living stipend for himself and his family. Next year, he wants to continue in a university program. His interest is in environmental studies because he wants to stop the pollution of water and soil that poisons his community. At the same time, Noel will play on one soccer team, coach another, continue work on the community building, and serve as community leader.

Noel's enthusiasm has already inspired others. His friend, Nelson, who has a hearing impairment, had been Noel's classmate in "Saturday School." To help Nelson keep up in class, they did homework together. To avoid the need for Nelson to drop out when Noel transferred to the accelerated program, Noel suggested that Nelson ask his brother working in the United States to pay Nelson's expenses so that he could also attend the accelerated school. Now both are again studying together. Thanks to your support, Noel's leadership is already opening the circle of opportunity.

# Elba Nohemy Rodriguez Funes

Elba Nohemy Rodriguez Funes, 24, lives with her mother, 2 of her siblings, and 2 of her nephews. Her father abandoned them when Elba was 12. From childhood, Elba and her siblings worked at a small store with their mother. Doing homework kept her up until midnight, and then she would wake up at 4 in the morning to prepare food to sell that day. On weekends, Elba sold clothes that her mother sewed, or she sold fruit and snacks at local soccer games. At 17, when she finished high school, Elba recalls her feelings when she couldn't continue to college saying, "I felt sad to see people my age studying while I already had to work and had many responsibilities."

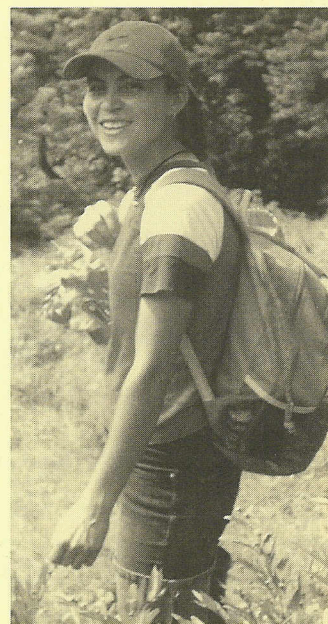
In November 2000, OEF (a Salvadoran non-profit with whom IP partners) hired Elba and Noel to teach preschool. Soon after, Elba participated in a week-long IP teacher training program. For 4 years, between 25 and 45 children, aged 3 to 6, came to school on her family's front porch. Every day, she and Noel set up tables and chairs; every day, they put them away, so her family could use the house. Determined to obtain a more adequate place for the girls and boys, Elba and Noel dreamed of building a school. They sought help from the mayor of nearby San Isidro, who instructed them to start a "community directive" to give people liv-

ing in Hacienda Vieja a political voice. Elba, with Noel, was a primary force creating the plan for a school, getting the mayor to give them a "useless" piece of the land, and then turning a hill (where people burned their trash) into a place for kids and adults to learn and the community to meet and organize. Without Elba the preschool might never have been built. Her outstanding performance at a teacher training session caught the attention of Paula Beckman and Don Montagna, who were impressed by her natural abilities, energy and sense of fun. Elba's personal strength enabled her to organize volunteers and prepare for the 2004 IP building trip without Noel, who had gone to the US to find work. Once the IP delegates arrived, Elba took care that the gringos were laughing, working hard, and eating enough pupusas.

For the summer of 2005 trip, based on her outstanding performance, IP asked her to be a leader in Las Peñas, Chalatenango. As always, she challenged delegates to work hard, make the building the best it could be, and learn what it is like to be Salvadoran. She also challenged herself to befriend people with whom she could not easily communicate and to seize this opportunity to learn about her own country's history and war.

Elba exemplifies the dedicated community leadership that IP seeks to foster. IP delegates decided they wanted to raise money for a second IP Community Leader Scholarship. Her goal is to attend the National University in San Salvador, "the best university in the country and the cheapest." She has been busy preparing for entrance exams, working at the preschool, and taking a computer class in San Isidro. She hopes to start classes when the school year begins in January 2006.

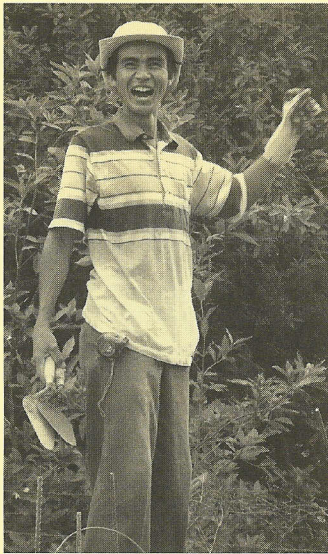
Elba is bursting with excitement and gratitude: "Time kept passing and the desire to study in a university was leaving my head." Her message to IP delegates and friends: "All I can say to you who believe in me is thank you, thank you, a thousand thank yous. It gives me joy to know people like you exist in the world, and it gives me the spirit to fight for something better." Also: "Please put my telephone number in the article so people can call me. 011 503 2304 6471." Elba loves to talk, you will love talking with her, if you habla español, and the minutes add up. Elba has come a long way from selling fruit, and it is her boundless energy and determination that has kept her going along a road not easy to travel.



*"I am a very happy woman filled with dreams and goals. My favorite dream is to study. I feel very proud of myself for everything I have learned and for the ability to teach others. I don't like that men discriminate against me for the fact that I am a woman. I like to read and play soccer. I like to try out and do well at all types of work. I like to be very organized and have everything in its place. I am friendly, responsible, honest, sincere, respectful, punctual, dynamic, caring, strong, a little angry, and impatient. I like to dance to Merengue music. I always want to keep the desire in me to help others."*

# An Immigration Story

In March of 2004, Noel realized that the \$3-4 a day he earned was not enough to keep supporting his mother and siblings. Finding no options in El Salvador, Noel reluctantly made the painful decision to leave his rural community of Hacienda Vieja and risk the illegal trip to the United States in hope of finding work. It was a painful decision and a painful trip. He traveled by bus, foot, boat, tractor-trailer, pick-up truck, and plane from San Salvador to Guatemala, to Mexico, to Arizona, to Los Angeles to Florida.



He sat in a tractor-trailer under empty soda bottles with 72 other people. "When I got out I fell to the ground from the pain in my knees. I gave thanks to God because I had been curled up without eating anything for 17 1/2 hours." The trip continued for another 11-hour truck ride—made even more uncomfortable and fearful because there was less air—followed by a 33-hour bus ride, and a 3-day and 2-night walk in the Arizona desert. Noel's journal describes dodging snakes, sprinting to the nearest shrub to hide

from helicopters, and passing groups of crosses in the desert where others had died—all in search of opportunity in the U.S.

When Noel arrived in the USA, he knew no English. He was soon caught and jailed—unaware of his fate—until he was returned home 3 months later.

IP volunteers are translating into English Noel's journal of the trip. If you know how or where it might be published, please email [Hannah\\_Flamm@yahoo.com](mailto:Hannah_Flamm@yahoo.com).

## NEW! IP Scholarship Fund

There are special individuals who are demonstrating incredible leadership potential in small, isolated communities all over the world. Despite their lack of educational and financial resources, they find ways to make a difference in their communities. Empowering these local leaders been International Partner's special mission. Our delegates have realized that they can truly elicit the best by finding ways to develop the capacities of these exceptional human beings.

In that spirit, delegates from this year's service trip are starting the IP Community Leader Scholarship Fund. The scholarship is for village leaders who have

made a clear commitment to helping their community and who have been unable to complete their education due to economic and/or social circumstances. Criteria for receiving the scholarship include:

- ... Nomination by IP delegates
- ... Demonstrated commitment to community leadership
- ... Motivation to go to school
- ... Personal goals and plan that includes public service
- ... Financial need
- ... Ability of IP to directly monitor progress and expenditures

*The first IP Community Leader Scholarships are awarded to Noel de Jesus Iraheta Vasquez and Elba Nohemy Rodriguez Funes.*



Your donation to the IP Scholarship Fund would be an act of love that will blossom greatly. Just ask the teens and adults who have had the privilege of working alongside these dynamic and deserving young leaders.