

Land, freedom and dignity

By Andrew Jensen

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A dozen pickup trucks roll through the town, swaying on uneven streets and covered with dirty gringos.

The pickups have metal bars enclosing their boxes, and many of us are perched atop these to get a better view of the Mexican town, Altamirano, and its people, who have come out of their houses to watch and wave to the caravan. This scene, a line of trucks with grimy outsiders clinging precariously to their tops and sides, waving to townspeople who grin and return the greeting, calls to mind the arrival of a liberating army.

But the appearance is misleading. The place we are going has already been liberated. Since 1994 it has been the territory of a union of Mayan fighters and dreamers who call themselves the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Commonly known by the Spanish abbreviation EZLN, they take their name from Emiliano Zapata, a Mexican revolutionary of the 1910s who fought to get land for landless peasants.

On the first day of 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect, the Zapatistas came out of the jungle with guns and caught the Mexican army by surprise. They seized control of most of Chiapas, their country's southernmost, poorest, and most heavily indigenous province.

The EZLN eventually settled into an unfriendly standoff with the Mexican government, losing control of the cities of Chiapas but still holding much of the countryside. There the Zapatistas struggle to achieve the simple 11-point platform that they announced on that first of January: "work, land, housing, food, health, education, autonomy, liberty, democracy, justice and peace."

The Mexican army allows the Zapatistas to work toward these demands, in effect, to replace the government in much of Chiapas, partially because of the great outpouring of support their struggle has attracted both from within Mexico and from around the world. To thank and to educate their sympathizers and supporters, the

Zapatistas occasionally invite them to come to Chiapas for a gathering they call an *encuentro*, Spanish for “encounter.”

At the *encuentro* I met people from Chiapas, India, Oregon, Chihuahua, Spain, France, New York City, Denmark, Mexico City, England, Austria, Italy and Guadalajara. I met George Naylor, a tall, gray-haired farmer of corn and soybeans from Churdan, Iowa, who walks with an easy rolling gait and chooses his words slowly. Naylor, 59, is president of the National Family Farm Coalition, which lobbies for family agriculture and against corporate agribusiness.

Asked what he’d learned at the *encuentro*, Naylor summed up the reason for the Zapatista uprising, saying, “A regular society that’s dominated by the market economy has never taken into account the health and welfare of the indigenous people, so it’s necessary for them to set up their own institutions to get land to farm.”

The Zapatistas have set up institutions to do more than farm the land. They run schools where their children are taught not only in Spanish but also in the indigenous Mayan languages that they speak in their homes. For history lessons, the children’s grandparents sometimes come in to tell how hard life was in the bad old days before the uprising, when they had to leave their homes to work for low wages on distant plantations.

The Zapatistas also give medical care to their people, mixing traditional indigenous herbal remedies inherited from their ancestors with what modern medicine they can afford.

I’ve come to Chiapas in the hope of volunteering with community health promoters who practice medicine in poverty with total respect for their patients. I’ll be here until mid-April of 2008.

These sorts of services are very admirable to José Garcia Lopez, 52, from the city of Comitán, Chiapas. He is president of a Chiapan organization called Education for Peace, which works for the development of Chiapan families. Garcia Lopez said that the most impressive thing about the Zapatistas is their unity, the coordination with which they undertake collective works like the construction of schools and clinics. He said that for him the Zapatistas are a source of hope.

They also give hope to Clelia Aubague, a genius and anarchist from Guadalajara, Mexico, who belongs to an organization that fights for the freedom of political prisoners in Guadalajara and is called the M-28 Collective. Aubague, 24, said the Zapatistas inspire her because they show that another, better world is possible. The Zapatistas are totally poor and isolated, a movement in one little part of Mexico, but they are constructing a world with dignity for all, she said.

In listening to the Zapatistas' presentations about their work and in talking with their sympathizers from around the world, I heard the Spanish word for dignity over and over again. Mayans in Chiapas haven't always been allowed to have dignity. Until the 1950s, Chiapan law required Indians to step aside into the gutter when a white person approached on the sidewalk. But now in liberated territory, indigenous people have a dignity that's easy to see and inspiring to witness.

According to Pablo Nava, 23, this dignity is the best example of *zapatismo*, the sometimes-unclear ideology that guides the work of the EZLN. Nava is a fifth-year student of sociology in Mexico City at UNAM, the second oldest university in the Western Hemisphere and the largest in Latin America. For his undergraduate thesis Nava is comparing the grand political rhetoric of the Zapatistas with their daily administrative practice. He's found the two to be quite similar.

The soldiers of the EZLN are regular members of their communities, not professional soldiers. They receive no salary, only their uniforms, weapons and food, Nava said. The different parts of Zapatista territory are administered by bodies called good government juntas. Their members are democratically elected from the communities and also receive no salary, he said. Overall, Nava concluded that the Zapatistas have lived up to the famous slogan with which they first burst on the scene 13 years ago: "Everything for everyone and nothing for ourselves."

A graduate of Unity High School and New York University, Andrew Jensen is taking a year off before medical school to volunteer with the Chiapas Support Committee. This organization works in solidarity with the autonomous Zapatista municipality of San Manuel, and donations to it can be sent to P.O. Box 3421, Oakland, CA 94609.

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